

Making the new feel older again

New Urbanists turning to Collingswood.

By Edward Colimore
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

More than 100 years ago, houses sprouted around the Main Street business district in Collingswood. Residents walked to stores and had a close-knit sense of community.

As automobiles made traveling to shopping centers easier, many people moved to suburban developments with half-acre lots and cul-de-sacs.

Now, a group of architects, planners, developers and public officials, hopes to reverse the exodus by recapturing the best of the past and giving it a modern twist. They will be meeting in Collingswood from 6 to 8:30 p.m. today, visiting a town where the ideas are being put into practice.

The participants are members of the New Jersey Chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), a national organization promoting the redevelopment of urban neighborhoods as an alternative to sprawl.

The group will hold a larger annual conference from May 17 to 20 in Philadelphia and will offer tours of Collingswood and Haddonfield, venerable towns that combine smart growth and New Urbanism principles. CNU has 1,200 members across the country.

"We're spinning straw into gold, giving rebirth to old towns," said Collingswood Mayor Jim Maley, a member of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

"When our town was laid out, there was a town center and housing branched out from it," he said. But over time, "people fled the problems of the cities in their cars. Now, we're pushing back the other way because of gasoline prices."

So what makes a place livable enough to attract new residents?

In New Urbanist communities, the answer comes down to the closeness and synergy of housing and retail stores, with some housing units directly over shops.

It involves a mix of single-family homes, townhouses and condominiums, attracting families with a variety of income levels. And it involves details, from the width of streets and sidewalks to the color and variety of building materials.

"It's all about moving away from the strip malls and building neighborhoods that are people-friendly," said Maley.

2008, and the third in the fall of the same year.

"As the availability of developable land in New Jersey reaches drought proportions, it is our responsibility to engage in responsible smart-growth projects that can truly enhance an entire community and spark revitalization on a grander scope," said Steven E. Goldin, chairman and chief executive officer of developer InterCap Holdings of Princeton, who serves as cochair of the state CNU chapter.

"Through our efforts, we're urging developers statewide to embrace the principles of New Urbanism and recognize how they relate to improving our state's landscape."

Goldin said the average person thinks about design and architecture when they think about the buildings. But New Urbanism is as much about the space between the buildings and how the buildings relate to each other as it is about the architecture itself. Public spaces become a distinguishing feature, he said.

New Urbanism really entails traditional neighborhood design. It helps bring back the sense of community, allowing residents to walk to work, shopping and transportation.

"What's old is new again — but new and improved," said Goldin.

The antithesis of New Urbanism is the typical subdivision.

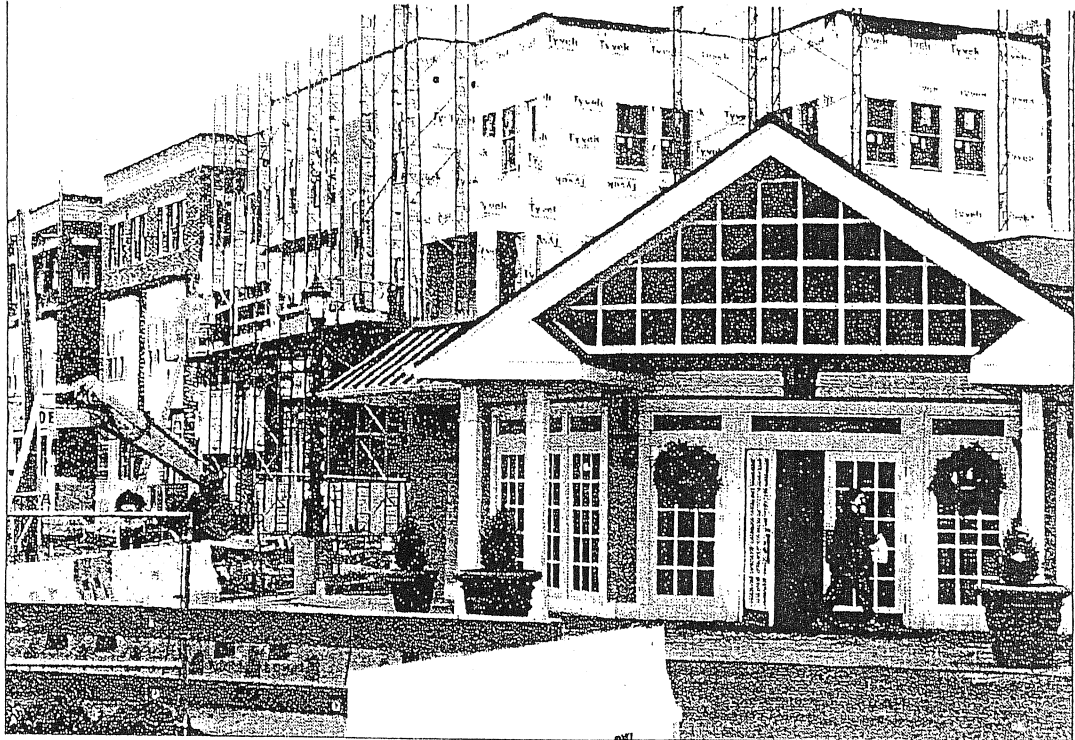
"That's where most people live," Goldin said. "If you want to go to work, you have to drive."

"People love a New Urbanist community, but zoning doesn't allow it — just the same subdivisions, office buildings and shopping centers," Goldin said. "One of our biggest challenges is educating elected officials and their municipal staffs" so that zoning can be changed.

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If You Go

The New Jersey Chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism will hold a public forum from 6 to 8:30 p.m. today at the Collingswood Community Center, 30 Collings Ave. A light supper will be served: \$15 will be charged at the door.



DAVID M WARREN / Inquirer Staff Photographer

The LumberYard Condominiums in downtown Collingswood are an example of returning a Main Street business center to the core of daily living. A statewide planning group will discuss it today.