

DICKENS VILLAGE *versus* TRANSIT VILLAGE

– A Creeping Malaise –

Maplewood, New Jersey is very special place. It is small town America barely 20 miles from Manhattan. The proximity of the two makes it that much more unique. It is a small town with big city values- an incredibly inclusive community encompassing a wide spectrum of socio-economic levels and diverse constellations of household inhabitants. This town is chock full of people who are not merely tolerant, but rather who celebrate the differences among themselves. Many of us chose to set roots and raise our children here. Our now grown children express their gratitude at having been raised in this milieu.

The center of Maplewood is aptly called *The Village* because of its small scale intimacy. Less than half a dozen blocks long, The Village itself has remained remarkably similar to the village it once was at the turn of the last century, while still flanked by and inseparably linked to the 1902 train station. The Village sits on a small two lane winding road- no large, typical suburban thoroughfare running through it. In fact, to access The Village one must navigate narrow residential streets dotted with century old homes. It is a hidden jewel.

The community celebrates together year round, from Halloween, to an old fashioned Fourth of July, to a **Dickens Village** held on the village green, Ricalton Square, each winter. A tradition in Maplewood for more than fifty years, **Dickens Village** is a grouping of diminutive period buildings representing and retelling the story of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Viewing **Dickens Village** is as opening a nested matryoshka doll. It is a miniature village set within our little Village of Maplewood. In effect, **Dickens Village** exemplifies, accentuates, and reflects the small scale intimacy of Maplewood that has continually attracted so many to settle here. **Dickens Village** is a strong symbol of our community.

The **Transit Village Initiative** is a program sponsored by the *New Jersey Department of Transportation* and *New Jersey Transit*. Its goal is to create large scale, mixed use, multi-story, high density development near transit stations to include retail, multi-family housing, services, and more. The **Transit Village Initiative** is appropriate to and has been quite successful for depressed urban areas such as Elizabeth and Jersey City, as well as for ex-urban, sprawling, car dependent areas such as West Windsor. For older, more compact communities such as Maplewood, which has been a walkable, commuter community spanning three centuries, such development is inappropriate and overwhelming to the existing scale and context. For Maplewood to move forward successfully, new development need NOT model the **Transit Village Initiative**.

Maplewood's town officials intend to sell a large parcel of public land in The Village- the Post Office site and adjacent lots. This large, central site in the Village has long been owned by Maplewood Township. In fact, it was the location of Maplewood's first school, built in 1869. This 33,000 square foot parcel includes the land currently occupied by the US Post Office as well as land quite a distance to either side, from Ricalton Square to the Village Coffee Shop.

Three developers (of eight initial developer and architectural firm respondents) are being considered by the overlapping three member Economic Development Committee and five member Township Committee. A final developer selection is expected to be made before this year's end.

The Redevelopment Plan with new zoning specifically created for this site allows for an over-scaled **Transit Village** type building to be erected in the center of The Village. It is projected to include retail, grocery, and 25 apartments. The allowed building could potentially max out the site and dwarf the surrounding area. Although the Township Committee has stated that at this time there is no intention of applying for official **Transit Village** designation, the Redevelopment Plan clearly reflects **Transit Village** goals in size and use.

Maplewood is developing a serious problem, an epidemic of sorts. It is a problem of a creeping malaise. With some exceptions, residents and merchants have not taken a pro-active stance on the Post Office site or other recent projects (*Station House, Maplewood Crossing, Women's Club, PSEG site, etc.*). This is due to a lack of disseminated information and a dearth of communication by town officials. The malaise thus engendered gives the Township Committee and the Economic Development Committee license to make decisions in a vacuum, without proper transparency, communication, or provision of information and process to the populace whose voices they were elected to represent.

This vicious cycle must come to an end.

Still, there are a few who are attempting to make a difference and to open up communication and dialogue in our town. Some are acting individually while others are working with an organization called *Engage Maplewood*. Our township officials have long dedicated themselves to Maplewood. This is admirable and laudable. However, we must demand that our local government reflect who we are as citizens of this very special, unique town. We must be provided with real time factual data used as a basis for the decision making process so that we may in turn provide informed input to our elected representatives.

Our township officials intend to make decisions regarding the Post Office and adjacent sites before the end of this month. After developer selection, options to modify the design will be severely limited.

However you choose to participate and on whatever side of this discussion you find yourself, it is essential that you contact your local governmental representatives NOW and make your voice heard loud and clear. Let's let them know that Maplewood deserves a higher standard.

Dickens Village is a wonderful metaphor for Maplewood

Transit Village is a path to a very different future

So fellow Maplewoodians, which will it be – **Dickens Village** or **Transit Village**?

RESOURCES & ACTION OPTIONS

CONTACT TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS:

Attend and Comment at **Township Committee Meetings:**

First & Third Tuesdays: December 17th, January 7th and 21st, February 4th, etc.

Call and Email: See email addresses below. Full contact information for elected officials is available at: <http://www.twp.maplewood.nj.us/index.aspx?nid=216>

Economic Development



Vic DeLuca
Kathy Leventhal
Gerry Ryan

Township Committee

Vic DeLuca
Kathy Leventhal
Gerry Ryan
India Larrier
Marlon Brownlee

ENGAGE MAPLEWOOD:

More than 430 people have signed a petition requesting greater transparency, communication, and participation in this process. Please sign the petition at www.engage-maplewood.org.

You can also “Like” EngageMaplewood on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/EngageMaplewood>

Email: engage@engage-maplewood.org



EMAIL CAMPAIGN:

Please **Forward** to your own contacts to expand the email circulation.

Be sure to copy to engage@engage-maplewood.org so we can track the response.

Please copy to elected officials: v.deluca@twp.maplewood.nj.us,
k.leventhal@twp.maplewood.nj.us, mbrownlee@twp.maplewood.nj.us,
lLarrier@twp.maplewood.nj.us, g.ryan@twp.maplewood.nj.us

RESOURCES:

Information Regarding **Transit Village Initiative:**

<http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/community/village/>

Information Regarding **Dickens Village:**

<http://maplewoodvillagenj.com/dickens-village-2011/>