

All of New Jersey can benefit from homes that are affordable.

Here's how

3-minute read

Barbara Dunn and Gail Levinson

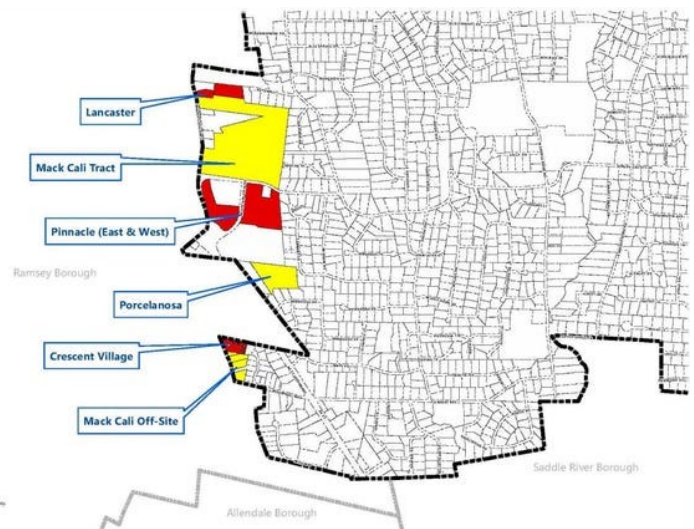
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We are lifelong residents of Bergen County who have married and raised our children in communities with good schools and healthy living. We believe a more inclusive community – open to diversity in race, ethnicity and socio-economic level – is good for everyone who lives there. So, we have chosen to work for decades as advocates with Habitat for Humanity and other groups working to provide affordable homes in New Jersey.

Our state is struggling with a critical shortage of such housing. For many hardworking families – including people who work long days and nights as teachers, health care providers, and in other essential professions – the prospect of owning even a modest starter home is increasingly out of reach. This is not just unfair to these families; it undercuts New Jersey's economic growth as people and employers flee to other states where housing for workers is more available.



Fortunately, a series of New Jersey Supreme Court decisions known collectively as the Mount Laurel Doctrine requires municipalities to provide their fair share of housing at an affordable cost. But the success of this framework is predicated on strong enforcement by the courts and state government – which hasn't always been the case.

From the mid-1990s until 2015, the Council on Affordable Housing, a state agency, refused to enforce the Mount Laurel Doctrine – leading to enormous gaps in starter homes and affordable rental housing supply that we're still working to close.

Since our state supreme court restored judicial oversight in 2015, however, the rate of new housing produced at affordable prices has nearly doubled. Much of this new housing is close to public transportation and redevelops older office parks or shopping centers that are no longer viable. Commitment to balanced, diverse housing that's affordable to all income households is about correcting past injustices and exclusions and building more vibrant and connected communities.

Some towns have claimed that the current system denies them a voice in what's done in their communities – but the system is designed to do the opposite. Towns are encouraged to engage in the process and create their own housing plans that realistically zone for their fair share of affordable housing. Towns only lose their ability to be in control of the process when they refuse to find *any* place to create affordable housing. Most towns do, indeed, cooperate with the process – and get to be in the driver's seat in deciding the housing plan that works best for their communities.

As New Jersey prepares for the fourth round of Mount Laurel obligations review in 2025 – each municipality must develop an updated plan for how to provide homes that are affordable to all types of workers and residents, from families and seniors to veterans and people with disabilities. So, it's more critical than ever for policymakers to safeguard and strengthen the Mount Laurel framework.

Unfortunately, some outspoken politicians – who, ironically enough, never seem to oppose higher density luxury housing developments – are attempting to weaken

the Mount Laurel Doctrine's enforcement mechanisms. Others have proposed delaying the Fourth Round all the way until 2028, which would be a disastrous setback for working families in New Jersey, at the worst possible time.

We have seen the benefits of the Mount Laurel Doctrine firsthand. Having a safe and affordable home is tied to improved health outcomes, access to a good education, and building intergenerational wealth. Housing shortages, on the other hand, hurt everyone in our state – shrinking our labor supply and handicapping our economic growth.

Making housing affordable doesn't just improve the lives of the people who live in it. It's also an investment in the future of New Jersey.

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