At dusk, men in business casual and women in little black dresses are sipping wine and chatting over the beat of a cover band that transforms raucous rock anthems into tasteful ballads. It’s the grand opening of The Standard, a 280-unit, four-story luxury apartment complex on James Island across the Ashley River from Charleston, South Carolina. The Standard boasts a yoga studio, an outdoor saltwater pool, and an open-air courtyard for parties like this one on a mild evening in November.

Lindsey Martin, who works remotely for a New York-based executive-search firm, moved from Manhattan to The Standard in October. “We’re just a few miles from everything—from the beach and downtown,” says Martin. “And we have a good mix of young professionals here who like to do things together.” She likes living in a big apartment complex on a leafy sea island that’s a $7 Uber ride from downtown Charleston’s nightlife. “It’s the best of both worlds.”

Although much of James Island is part of the city of Charleston, its development style is decidedly suburban. The Standard site is within city limits on six acres of a 22-acre, formerly wooded parcel along four-lane Maybank Highway, which intersects with Folly Road, the island’s major commercial artery. In addition to The Standard’s 280 units, a second apartment complex with 320 units and an assisted-living facility with 160 units are in the planning pipeline for the rest of the Maybank parcel.

Not everyone is pleased with the new development, however. The island’s already crowded road and bridge infrastructure can’t accommodate added traffic from many hundreds of residents in a new high-density development, says Susan Miliken, founder of Save James Island, a grassroots advocacy group. “We think it’s outrageous, and it’s a bad plan for James Island,” she says.

Local activists are fighting density in suburban
Lindsey Martin, a resident of The Standard, likes living in a big apartment complex on a leafy sea island that’s a $7 Uber ride from downtown Charleston’s nightlife. “We’re just a few miles from everything—from the beach and downtown. And we have a good mix of young professionals here who like to do things together. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Some James Island residents say that The Standard, four stories tall with 280 units, doesn’t fit with their island’s green, suburban vibe—which feels a world apart from Charleston despite being within the city limits.

places like James Island that for reasons of history or geography have sustained a small-town or low-key atmosphere, even though they aren’t far from urban cores. Many growing cities and metro areas want to fill in these suburban areas with walkable, mixed use developments. Their goal is to make public transit far more efficient, provide affordable housing and shopping alternatives, and appeal to influxes of young workers.

The Charleston metro’s population, now estimated at 700,000, is forecast to grow to one million by the year 2028. This boom would drive up housing costs that are already too high, business leaders say. Now the region needs “higher density development where appropriate to help manage growth, decrease traffic, and provide more affordable housing options,” notes an October 2015 report by the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce and the Charleston Regional Development Alliance.

Densifying some suburban areas could reduce pressures of sprawl at the metro edges and slow losses of rural land to development. If metro areas could be planned regionally, then perhaps suburban residents might see the wisdom of increasing density and improving transit in their communities.

Local activists, however, aren’t buying it. “We understand the problem of sprawl,” says Milliken. “We understand that the city wants to take cars off the road. But that goal is not being achieved. We have these multistory complexes without any financial support or future funding for public transit.” She rejects the notion of accepting quality-of-life sacrifices that in her view would have questionable benefits for the city.

For generations, South Carolina’s wide and fertile sea islands were accessible only by boat. In 1899, James Island’s first permanent bridge was built to the mainland. After World War II, developers purchased remnants of the island’s antebellum plantations and built tract-home subdivisions. Some wealthy families constructed mansions along its waterways with grand views, and the city of Charleston annexed large stretches of the island in the 1960s.

Still, the island remained a quiet bedroom community with a single drawbridge across the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, which continues to open for recreational craft and barge traffic several times a day. Development accelerated in 1993 when a new bridge, the James Island Connector, provided the first direct commuter link to Charleston’s peninsular downtown.

The island of 35 square miles is now divided among three jurisdictions: the city of Charleston, unincorporated Charleston County, and the town of James Island, which was incorporated in 1992 after a long annexation battle with the city.

James Island still has tracts of developable land in its farther reaches where narrow roads wind through dense woods. Many locals wish they could keep those places untouched. Still, that seems unlikely considering the metro area’s population boom.

“James Island may want to remain suburban, but it is right over the bridge to Charleston, one of the world’s great cities, and people are going to want to live there,” says Mike Schwarz, a partner with Woodfield Investments, LLC, the real estate company that developed The Standard. “The choice is put in these higher densities [in key areas], or have development spread all over the island.”
Battles over density in the suburbs are nothing new. Prosperous suburbanites have long used “zoning ordinances, environmental regulations, and other means to resist continued change, to control the appearance and character of their neighborhoods, and to stop densities from rising,” notes historian Robert Bruegmann in his 2006 book, *Sprawl: A Compact History*.

But more density is coming to suburbs because younger people aren’t as interested in the suburbia of their parents. They are delaying marriage and childbirth and seeking out walkable neighborhoods with access to transit. They are less concerned with finding good schools and having large backyards than their older counterparts were at the same age, notes a 2015 study by the Demographics Research Group at the University of Virginia. Housing demand and rents, meanwhile, continue to escalate in many metro areas that attract educated millennials.

Well-off professionals who live in historic downtowns and glossy suburbs are often wary of proposed high-density developments in their midst. And these density clashes are intensifying in metro areas, including San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Seattle; Chicago; and Washington, D.C. Perth and Melbourne in Australia have seen similar challenges.

“You see this tension in the San Francisco area where wealthier people want to protect their neighborhoods while other people are calling for lower housing costs and more construction because housing demand is so high,” says Luke J. Juday, a research analyst who authored the University of Virginia study.

The San Francisco Bay Area Renters’ Federation is using an unusual measure to pressure the tony suburb of Lafayette, east of Oakland, to build more rental housing. Last September Lafayette’s city council severely downsized a 315-unit apartment complex proposal to 44 single-family homes, and the developer agreed to the downsizing.

Now the renters’ group is launching an effort called Sue the Suburbs, and the first target appears to be Lafayette. A lawsuit, which has yet to be filed, would argue that the Lafayette council’s decision violates California’s Housing Accountability Act, which stipulates that jurisdictions are not allowed to reject housing development proposals that meet existing zoning requirements.

Sonja Trauss, who founded SF BARF in 2014, says that many developers prefer striking deals with localities instead of fighting zoning cases in court. A suit, she hopes, would lead to tighter enforcement of the law and additional housing opportunities in communities throughout California.

Over the past few decades, Trauss argues, the NIMBY movement has “opposed creation of any new housing capacity” and protects existing home values at the expense of a younger generation that can’t afford rising housing prices. She is helping to organize a new movement called San Francisco Yes In My Backyard, which had its first party congress in December. Activists in Austin, Texas, and New York City have also embraced the YIMBY movement.

**An ordinance that fell short**

A petition signed by 1,100 James Island residents was delivered in early November 2015 to the Charleston city council, calling for a revisit of the 2011 “gathering-place” ordinance that steered The Standard and other building projects there.

This ordinance was intended to encourage the development of a few mixed-use districts in suburban areas of the city at major intersections or along commercial streets. The districts would have higher density housing, shopping or office space, new public-transit options, and signalized crosswalks for busy intersections. Each district would include connective infrastructure as a grid-like street system that links directly to surrounding neighborhoods. District residents would be able to walk, bike, or use buses for some daily trips instead of driving cars.

But instead of becoming a mixed-use district, the Maybank gathering place where The Standard is located will be almost exclusively residential.

“The city offered all these different uses in the ordinance, thinking that developers would take advantage of those uses,” says Hank Hofford, a principal of Bennett Hofford Construction Company, which is developing the assisted-living center in the James Island gathering place. “The city did not have enough controls to incorporate all the different uses that they wanted to include. The market timing and borrowing were right for high-density apartments [and not commercial uses.] The city instead should have required a formula such as 20 to 30 percent that would be commercial.” (The assisted-living center was far along in the city’s planning pipeline and would not be affected by potential changes to the gathering-place ordinance.)

Short-term market forces alone shouldn’t define the island’s development, says Kathleen Wilson, a Charleston city council member and James Island resident who is leading opposition to the Maybank project. “Apartment complexes are very hot right now. Financing for apartments is available for developers, and in the scope of development it is quick and easy and lucrative. But that should not take place at the expense of island residents.”

Even Mike Schwarz, whose company developed The Standard, was surprised that a second apartment complex was being planned for the Maybank district. “More apartments were not what the city promised James Island residents who are already dealing with traffic and lack of infrastructure. The gathering place’s objective was to provide a little walkable village that includes commercial uses as well as residential units.

But community activists scoff at the notion that residents of luxury apartments would walk locally for many errands or use public transit.

“The idea to stop sprawl and concentrate people so they can walk to work or to the library—that’s nirvana pie-in-the-sky,” says Margaret Fabri, a James Island-based attorney.

Close-in suburban areas, however, need nodes of density to accommodate rapid population growth and transit, according to Jacob Lindsey, Charleston’s planning director.

“If you want transit, you need to have a walkable district with total overall density of 30 units per acre,” he says. That is the density of the Maybank district. The typical density in a James Island residential area is three to four units an acre.

Transit, though, remains spotty at best at the Maybank gathering place. A Charleston Regional Area Transit Authority bus to downtown Charleston stops near The Standard five times a day, but only between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

“In an ideal world, you would plan higher density and transit at the same time,” says Lindsey. “But we have a transit system that is underfunded and moves slowly in terms of process. We are working with CARTA at this location to find innovative solutions such
as microtransit or on-demand transit services, which are privately provided and may help us move faster and more nimbly."

To critics, the Maybank gathering place is coming together in a disjointed, confusing way. The district still lacks pedestrian and traffic connections to adjacent development, although connections are required by city ordinance. "There are certain elements of the gathering place, such as connectivity, which are really important," says Lindsey. "But I don't think anybody at the city thinks that would happen overnight."

In rapidly growing, sprawling Mount Pleasant, which lies across the Cooper River from downtown Charleston, a mixed use, multifamily district with apartments and commercial space called The Boulevard opened in 2013 on a major thoroughfare. It received blistering criticism from some quarters.

Neighborhood activists complained that the development was out of character with the rest of low-density Mount Pleasant, which since the 1970s has grown from a sleepy coastal town to the fourth-largest municipality in the state.

Some of The Boulevard’s aesthetics were not the best choices for the site, says Katie Zimmerman, a program director with the Coastal Conservation League, a nonprofit organization that works with local planners and community activists on land-use issues. "The Boulevard is almost perfect in its function as a mixed use village center, and that is what is so sad about this," she says.

"Folks can walk wherever they want to go. But it is big and very close to the street, and many people hate it. It could have been staggered so it would not be so imposing. The new urbanists really fight to have development close to the street so that it's inviting to pedestrians. That concept is wonderful, but in practice it's not viewed as wonderful in a place like Mt. Pleasant," Zimmerman adds.

Examples like that certainly don’t help sell locals on density. "People in the Charleston area are assuming that all density is bad because of some poor implementations of density. We need to get out in front of that, and provide the elements, aesthetic and functional, that we want in these places," she says.

The next time a gathering-place development is proposed, planners could provide incentives for developers to enhance transit and connective ingredients for a new district, says Zimmerman. "The city could create almost a concurrency option. If CARTA isn't functional at the site, the developer could be required to come up with a private shuttle. If the city required x amount of signalized pedestrian crosswalks and a grid-like street network connected to adjacent properties, then the developer could increase density by x number of units."

**Now, a moratorium**

About two dozen residents of James Island crowded the gallery of Charleston City Council on November 10, 2015, to vent their frustration over the scale of the gathering place on Maybank Highway.

About a dozen people spoke against the project, most complaining that it would increase traffic. Then Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. addressed the room in his courtly tenor, offering a brief history of what Charleston has tried to achieve on James Island and other suburbanizing areas.

In the early 2000s, Charleston was the first municipality in the state to create a comprehensive plan and a unified ordinance that included an urban growth boundary. Beyond the growth boundary, land use was zoned primarily as agricultural/conservation. Most of these rural areas were annexed into the city in the 1990s. Inside the growth boundary, most land use was zoned at suburban densities. Charleston County also created an urban growth boundary, which nearly mirrored the city's.

“We protected the rural parts of the city with the urban growth boundary," Riley said. "We also recommended that gathering places would allow dense development [in selected places in the city] that would promote live/work [opportunities] and rational infrastructure services. The concept was sound and it is still sound." He acknowledges that the gathering-place ordinance should be improved to “realize its original intent.”

Lindsey, the planning director, told the council that he would create an advisory group to review the gathering-place ordinance and how it could be amended. The council voted unanimously in favor of a moratorium on processing applications and permits for the city's gathering-place zoning until January 27, 2016 (when it was extended until March 11). A second Charleston site zoned as a gathering place in the suburban West Ashley area has already been put on hold.

After the vote, the James Islanders were obviously jubilant as they left the council chamber. They had not yet heard that Atlanta-based Core Property Capital, developer of the second apartment complex at the Maybank site, had already filed an application with the city's Design Review Board the day before—on November 9.

Because the application arrived before the moratorium deadline, that project may still move forward. Any additional application submittals would not be allowed due to the moratorium.

Over four decades, Mayor Riley established an international reputation for leadership in preserving the city's walkable neighborhoods, creating lively public spaces, enhancing historic business districts, and conserving open space. He retired in January 2016 when his 10th term expired.

John Tecklenburg, a businessman, won in a runoff election in November with a “quality-of-life” message addressing voter concerns about gathering-place zoning, increased traffic, and rapid development. Tecklenburg carried James Island's vote in the runoff against Leon Stavrinakis, a state legislator.

That new leadership makes the future of the ordinance—and the status of the second apartment complex at the Maybank site—harder to predict.

CCL's Katie Zimmerman knows what she would like to see on James Island. “People remember how James Island used to be,” she says. “They have this nostalgia about their community when it was rural, but now it is suburban. They say, 'We are proud of our single-family homes, proud that we have beautiful lawns.' Nostalgia is great, and a sense of place is great, but you have to move forward.

"James Island has already changed and will continue to change. When you have an area that is set up only to use your car, you're going to use your car, and you will have traffic problems. It's important to have certain nodes [of density] that are traditionally less intrusive on the roadways. These nodes won't encourage everyone to suddenly get on a bike and never use a car again, but they will certainly take certain trips off the road and help prevent traffic congestion from getting even worse.”

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