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Westchester

Riversprawl

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Gaze at length at the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School, and you may find in their luminous details the ineffable glory of the natural world. You will also find a near total absence of condominiums. Call us crazy, but we feel certain the two phenomena are connected somehow.

It would still be very hard to confuse the Hudson Valley with suburban Phoenix. But that yawning aesthetic gap is closing. As a recent article in *The Times* by Lisa W. Foderaro explained, the region seems to be emerging straight from the industrial age into the age of sprawl. The sites of old factories are being filled in by ambitious housing developments, many of them megasized luxury complexes executed in the bland architectural style familiar to anyone who has spent time in a chain hotel. High-density residential development is threatening to choke the river banks like plaque on an artery.

The revival of life and commerce along the Hudson is good news, of course, and a riverfront housing boom is clearly preferable to a glut of smokestack industries. But thoughtless development poses its own set of perils. The river is a public treasure, and the gifts it offers to those who live beside it and visit it are worthy of jealous protection. That means keeping the river accessible to everyone, and giving people something worth looking at.

Part of the problem is simply aesthetic. No amount of developer marketing or concocted whimsy - one development is named "Ichabod's Landing" - can hide the creepy similarities that many of these projects share with their bulky brethren across the country, from the outskirts of Las Vegas to the edge of Queens. The buildings, devoid of idiosyncrasy or distinctive features, seem to have been hatched from some enormous photocopier.

But the challenge is also one of scale. Many of these projects are huge. In Sleepy Hollow, for example, a project for an abandoned General Motors plant calls for 1,250 housing units. A developer in Kingston wants to put 2,182 apartments and town houses on the site of a cement factory. The environmental group Scenic Hudson estimates that about 15,000 housing units are planned or already being built along the river.

Scenic Hudson's Web site (scenichudson.org) provides a startling view of this big picture. The group has assembled aerial photographs of projects from Kingston down to Yonkers. Taking a virtual flight down the river, as images of bulldozed bluffs and ever-bulkier condominium complexes accumulate and blur together, can be highly unnerving.

Conservationist groups are careful to say that they do not oppose all such development along the river. But they share, as we do, a strong preference for mixed-use development that respects the natural environment and the area's architectural context while preserving public access.

The boom is a response to the pressing demand for housing and communities' hunger for economic development and tax revenue. But problems arise from the patchwork approach to growth in a region where hundreds of local communities control land-use decisions. Managing a housing boom of this scale requires smart guidance from a body with a regional perspective.

For that job there is the Hudson Valley Greenway Council, a state-created agency that has done much in the last decade and a half to promote the ideals of sensible planning and sensitive development. Scenic Hudson has suggested that Gov. George E. Pataki could polish his environmentalist credentials in his last year in office by doubling the council's professional staff and sharply increasing state financing to preserve green space and to support smart waterfront projects.

We second the motion. Rescuing the riverbank from polluting factories only to seal it off again with endless acres of ill-planned luxury housing would be the hollowest of victories.