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State We're In Column by Michele S. Byers, Executive Director

If we can make it better here, we'll make it better anywhere

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Although Frank Sinatra sang about New York, not New Jersey, it's not hard to make the leap across the Hudson River. New Jersey's crowded highways, industrial landscapes, and congested cities and suburbs also have a reputation as being tough places to live. Even those of us who love New Jersey have to concede there's a bit of truth to it all... but does it have to be this way?

Consider an alternate view offered by Rutherford H. Platt. In his book *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st-Century City*, Platt pulled together essays and case studies on how we can make urban living healthier, safer, fairer and better for the environment.

Raising our quality of life is really about forging a better life for all of us. Four of every five Americans, or 80 percent, now live in metropolitan areas, compared to just 33 percent in 1960. Half of us live the so-called suburban 'American Dream'. Ironically, the sense of community in many of these suburbs has decreased. The miles that once separated us from our neighbors have been replaced with psychological barriers that are much harder to overcome. The *Humane Metropolis* suggests strategies for improving community in urban and suburban settings.

Here are some examples: Respect nature, don't fight it. The book cites Portland, Oregon as an example of a city that contained sprawl through planning and compact urban design, protected prime forest and farms, and solved problems in innovative ways that respect the environment. Today, Portland enjoys stable housing prices, increased public transportation use and healthy streams, wildlife habitat, and parks that lend a unique and desirable character to the region.

As Portland's example demonstrates, urban parks can create a more humane metropolis. Urban parks contribute economic and health benefits to surrounding communities.

Platt's book builds on a foundation laid by William H. (Holly) Whyte, the sociologist and journalist whose thinking fostered today's smart growth movement. Whyte's work offers architects and planners definitive guidance on what works and what doesn't in urban settings, because it is based on his pioneering use of direct observation to describe and measure the substance and dynamics of urban life.

By offering its own direct observations on real-world strategies to improve our cities, *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st-Century City* fits well into Whyte's legacy. It is worthy reading for anyone concerned with making our cities and suburbs better places to live... and shouldn't that be all of us?

If you would like more information about conserving New Jersey's precious land and natural resources, I invite you to contact me at info@njconservation.org, or visit NJCF's website at www.njconservation.org.

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