

# Philadelphia

## Is King of Prussia the New Promised Land?

*Dear millennials: Would you ever in a million years live in a place like this? King of Prussia and the quest to make the suburbs hip.*

By [Robert Huber](#) | March 4, 2017

**ONE RECENT AFTERNOON**, I take a short drive west, out the Schuylkill, to a place I have never been, despite a quarter century of living in Philadelphia. I'm headed to King of Prussia.

That tells you right off that I really have no interest in malls, given that I've avoided one of America's biggest indoor shopping sprees for so long. But I'm not going to the mall. I'm in search of something else, which is King of Prussia itself. The place. There's something brand-new happening there.

For a long time, KOP *was* the mall, first and foremost, risen from farmland at the confluence of four major highways and continuously expanding, from the '60s onward. (Just this past summer, the mall's two main sections, the Plaza and the Court, were joined up, with 39 new retailers and restaurants added.) Along with the mall, a business park grew gigantic, and housing developments popped up with appropriately large lawns. KOP was a sort of hyper-suburb, and it still is: Millions come every year to shop, from all over the world, and almost 60,000 arrive every day to work. Only about a third that many actually *live* there, in eight and a half square miles. For a long time, KOP has been a small community with serious traffic problems. The traffic will continue to be bad. But King of Prussia is about to change.

A downtown is being built there, and it's almost finished. It has a Main Street, and a few side streets. It has stores and restaurants, a big-ass LA Fitness and a world-class Wegmans. It sports wide sidewalks and street parking, and — the most important piece — it will be ringed by new apartment houses, condos and townhouses. It will have live music. A farmers' market will be set up on some Sundays, and there's plenty of outdoor space simply for sitting, for sipping a drink on a summer evening. It doesn't have dirt or crime, and there aren't any plans for it to acquire either.

The new Town Center is the heart of the Village at Valley Forge, a 138-acre site, once a golf course, where some 2,500 residential units are going up, along with office buildings and maybe a hotel. But the Center doesn't yet have what downtowns require, which is people — at least, not in abundance — because it isn't fully open for business yet, on the afternoon when I visit. A few restaurants, including the Brazilian steakhouse Fogo de Chão and Paladar, are serving dinner, and Indigo 301, the high-end apartment house at the end of Main Street, is about to welcome its first tenants. But today I sit in a lawn chair on a large rectangle of grass outside a Davio's restaurant, alone.

Which makes me feel as if I've plopped into the middle of a just-completed housing development, because housing developments have long been built like this, as planned communities that go up all at once, and then, suddenly, the paint is fresh all around and the road is newly paved and the planted shrubs and tethered trees are far too small. Voilà! People move in, and we've got ... suburbia. But a city? Can a downtown be designed and built all at once, and then truly *function* as a downtown?

We're about to find out. Not long ago, Eric Goldstein, who was hired by KOP's business community six years ago to get the word out on what a terrific place it was becoming, called his wife from the new Town Center.

"I just did something I have never done before in King of Prussia," he told her.

She wondered, naturally, just what that might be.

"Parallel-parked," Eric said.

For decades in King of Prussia, the mall might not have been a place with a soul, but at least it drew the hordes in to spend their money. This is different. *This* is a place where people will come naturally, to shop and eat and drink and, especially, to be with each other — a gathering place. That's the goal, at any rate, which sets up the challenge: For this to really become the downtown that King of Prussia has never had, young adults need to buy in. Millennials are now the wave of any community's future, and the generally accepted idea that their generation — the hipsters pushing into their mid-30s who've been driving Fishtown and Northern Liberties and other Philly neighborhoods where gritty reality and authenticity reign — will never happily leave the big city could be a problem. If King of Prussia is going to work as a *place* — as something of an *urban* place — millennials will have to get on board.

I notice that the grass in front of Davio's, where I'm sitting, is quite beautiful. Outdoor movies will be shown here; people will be able to watch while lying on a blanket, let their kids run around. The grass, in fact, is perfect — there must be a New Age underground sprinkler system. I lean down to pluck at it, but when I grab on, instead of ripping away, the grass rises in a wave, a mat — when I let go, it slaps back down. It's fake. Astroturf.

Will fake cut it here?

Certainly, King of Prussia is changing — from the recent mall expansion to the new Village to a comeback of the antiquated business park northwest of the mall. But plopping a fully planned and realized Main Street into a suburb ruled for half a century by that mall — it's a risky bet. It's not just a matter of drawing more shoppers or diners, or even new residents; it's a roll of the dice that King of Prussia, of all places, will become what suburbs have never been: cool.

**IT'S NOT REALLY NEW**, this idea. The term "edge city" was coined a couple of decades ago to define places like Cherry Hill and Willow Grove — urban centers that grew beyond the bounds of a major city and more or less functioned *as* small cities, only in spread-out form. King of Prussia qualified as an edge city, though Joel Garreau, the writer who coined the term, wondered in 1996, "Is King of Prussia going to be a civilized place? If I thought that this was the final version, I'd slash my throat." The mall and business park were booming back then, but so was traffic, and KOP lacked any semblance of a *there* there; the heart of it was most definitely the mall.

Meanwhile, real suburban downtowns — with a tight weave of mixed uses, with sidewalks meant to be walked on — did start springing up on the West Coast, around Washington, D.C., and in other areas, as baby boomers grew weary of the remoteness of the big-lawn-distant-neighbor way of living. It never happened around Philly, though, because our local economy wasn't generally robust enough to support something like Tysons Corner or Reston, two Virginia downtowns successfully created not far from D.C. We weren't behind that curve — for us, it didn't exist at all.

Which didn't sit well with Dennis Maloomian, a small, genial, mustachioed 66-year-old developer of Armenian descent, based in Berwyn. He's been on something of a 20-year vendetta to shake up the status quo in King of Prussia.

For the longest time, practically the only land in KOP that wasn't developed was that 138-acre golf course a stone's throw from the mall. Many developers had tried to get control of it, and the court-appointed trustees of the family that owned the land were willing to sell, but nobody could get enough family votes. Finally, in the late '90s, Maloomian got family approval, but there was another, more daunting problem: the township itself. The property had to be rezoned to be developed; Maloomian went to 18 meetings over 18 months, faithfully showing up every 30 days to plead his case. He submitted a plan for residences and retail that would be built inside a redone golf course, thereby creating a buffer zone. He sat at the kitchen tables of KOP residents not just reluctant for more development but dead set against it. He didn't sway anybody.

Maloomian pleaded in court that his rights as a property owner were being violated, given the development that already circled his parcel of land on all sides. He lost. He appealed and lost again. It wasn't looking good.

But something else was going on, almost simultaneously. Fifteen years ago, Maloomian was trying to develop the Garden State Park racetrack into ... well, into something. Cherry Hill's then-mayor, Susan Bass Levin, shot down all of his ideas, but she couldn't seem to tell him why. Maloomian says he kept pressing her: "*What, Susan? What is it that you want me to build?*"

"I want you to build the downtown that Cherry Hill never had," she finally told him.

With that, everything changed — though not in Cherry Hill. Maloomian never could make a go of developing there, and he ended up selling. But Mayor Levin had given him an idea just as his King of Prussia case was headed to the state Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor in 2003. Suddenly he had the right to build on the golf course. Yet there was still a problem: He had submitted two plans in the court cases, and his victory allowed him to build either one, but neither was really something he *wanted* to build — they were boilerplate mixes of residences and retail, created simply to win the *right* to build.

As Maloomian explains all this over a drink one Friday evening at Winnie's on Main Street in Manayunk, I ask the obvious question: "Didn't you ever just want to stop banging your head against the wall and move on?"

He merely smiles and says, "With other properties, yes. But not with this one."

In the driver's seat now, Maloomian went to KOP officials and told them he wanted to build the plan that he had developed for Cherry Hill. The one that would create a suburban downtown, with apartments and offices and townhouses.

That made township officials nervous. Once, when sidewalks were proposed in a KOP neighborhood, a petition arrived in the planning office from a group of residents who were concerned that sidewalks would lead to robberies, rape and murder; this was not an entirely unusual attitude in KOP. Maloomian kept pushing; he wanted to fly the township planners and supervisors to California to show them a mixed-use suburban downtown in Santa Ana, but the best they would agree to was a day trip near Washington, D.C., where they would look at a few downtowns built from scratch.

Rob Loeper, the township planner then and now, remembers that it was late on a December day in 2004, the light growing dim, when they reached their last stop: Reston, where offices and retail had been clustered on a couple streets. The KOP officials walked past an ice-skating rink where people were enjoying themselves. Shoppers and diners were about. The close-knit buildings enclosed them and seemed almost ... homey. "I could see the effect in their eyes," Maloomian remembers. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

It would take until 2006, but Maloomian and the township were able to hammer out an agreement allowing him to create his mixed-use village.

Then another problem popped up: the crash of 2008. Maloomian had to scale back, simplify his plans, wait for the economy to recover. He is very good at waiting.

In 2011, Wegmans came in as the anchor, the first thing built in the Village at Valley Forge. That was the beginning. Now, a small town has risen, with a dozen stores and 11 restaurants. Offices are still being built. The Town Center will be ringed by a couple of thousand apartments and townhouses.

Recently, Maloomian and his daughter, Allison, walked around the Town Center. Father and daughter were wistful recalling the day when he first got control of the golf course and they rode around it in a cart. “She was seven years old and got to drive it standing up,” Maloomian remembers.

He smiles. One leg of his project is almost done, and Allison is 27 now.

**FOR A LONG TIME**, the mall itself has had a built-in advantage: Since Center City Philadelphia can’t sustain high-end stores such as Bloomingdale’s and Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus, they became mall anchors. With a huge population at hand and no real competition from the city it serves, the mall — and its four miles of storefronts — will go right on pulling in shoppers from all over the world. But by the turn of the century, the business park northwest of the mall had become a different story. With some 60 commercial and industrial companies tucked into 676 acres, fed by the same four major highways as the mall, the business park was in trouble. It had gotten old.

For decades, the park didn’t evolve. Its oak trees had gotten massive, but the office and industrial buildings stayed long and low-slung and generally ugly, as per architectural standards circa 1970, and many had decayed badly. By 2000, places with newer digs, like Conshohocken and Exton and Plymouth Meeting, were poaching tenants. “The feeling at that point was that we were built out,” Rob Loeper says. “That we were finished.” The value of commercial real estate flat-lined in KOP for the next decade. The vacancy rate in the best offices of the park — the A buildings — hit 20 percent; that’s double what’s healthy.

In 2009, a handful of office-building owners went to the township complaining: They couldn’t find tenants, or buyers so that they could get out. What was once the flagship business park in the region — and was still the biggest suburban employer, in both office and industrial jobs — had stalled to the point of slow ruin.

Enter Eric Goldstein. Goldstein, a landscape architect by training, is really a development enthusiast at heart, and he was hired by KOP’s business community to change things. His official duties are a heady laundry list — marketing and communication, tax policy, land use and zoning issues, transportation, physical improvements. But his real assignment, Eric says, “was to grow property values. The end.”

It was an interesting mandate, given that Goldstein had no particular authority to make that happen.

He went to work landscaping KOP’s Route 202 median, pulling out thousands of feet of concrete and replacing it with long, soft grasses — a visual message both to his new employers and to thousands driving by daily. But his most important initiative from day one, and still his most important job, was getting word out that KOP is a terrific place.

Goldstein didn’t let the current problems get in the way of his message. “You just tell people what you want them to think of King of Prussia,” he says over coffee at Wegmans. “Vibrant, dynamic, stimulating — those words are constantly repeated. If you read recent stories on KOP, that’s what they all say.” Over a decade ago, Goldstein had a similar role working for University City. “We said it was clean and safe. It wasn’t clean or safe, but we were working on it. Eventually, the story will become true.”

Once, at a community-development conference, after Goldstein had unabashedly described his method of cheerleading, an audience member said, “All you do, then, is lie.”

“Yeah,” Goldstein says now, smiling, in mock answer. “I guess.”

He takes me on a driving tour of the business park. In truth, Eric has done a good bit more than cheerlead, installing KOP signage on the borders (“It’s not actually a town,” he says. “It’s a designated census tract”), setting up shuttle-bus service from adjacent rail stations to the business park, trying to get the state to install ramps off the Turnpike into KOP. And most significant: Goldstein helped rewrite the zoning of the business park to enable apartments and townhouses to go in there, which took three years of Tuesday meetings with township officials.

Idling through the vast business park is a trip into a time warp. There are some empty buildings, with the weird tropical-looking vegetation that abandoned parking lots always accrue, but Goldstein regales me with stories about a pharma company that recently moved in, and 258 new luxury apartments: “The fact that you can now live and work in this business park is beyond exciting to me — we’re converting commuters to residents.”

For a moment, I wonder if Eric is simply working *me*, too.

Of course he is. But I begin to understand what Goldstein really offers, and why the business community in King of Prussia lauds his work: He meets anyone coming to KOP at the door, so to speak. It’s what prospective business owners coming to the City of Philadelphia have long complained is missing; not only do they have to negotiate the myriad and confusing rules of business conduct themselves, but there’s no simple path *in*. There’s no greeting. There’s no message that it can *work* here. Or as Goldstein puts it: “People want to invest money in a place that has a future, and if you can’t sell them on that future, you’ll get crushed.”

The business park is at a tipping point of renovation, of coming back — the A buildings are less than 10 percent vacant now — and that, coupled with a great deal of new retail on 202 and in the Village, along with the ever-growing mall, has created a general feeling of movement in KOP.

In September, Hayden, a Conshohocken investment firm, sold an office building on South Warner Road in KOP for \$28.2 million; the firm bought it at auction four years ago for \$11 million, put \$3.5 million into it, and thus made a tidy profit of \$13.7 million.

“The growth all around it really helped,” Hayden’s CEO told the *Philadelphia Business Journal*. Eric Goldstein may have been ballyhooing King of Prussia before the fact of its comeback, but one thing begets another, and who’s to say what comes first? According to the *Business Journal*, in fact, the commercial real estate market in King of Prussia is now officially “hot.”

In the end, the numbers don’t lie.

**ONE NIGHT IN** King of Prussia’s Town Center, I stop a guy in the parking lot as he’s on his way into LA Fitness to ask him what he thinks of what’s been built here.

“It’s incredible,” he says, as his eyes sweep around. He says a friend told him to try this gym: “I grew up in West Norristown, and I came and saw *this*” — he takes in Davio’s and Fogo de Chão and Indigo 301. “If I were younger, I could imagine living *there*.” He’s in his mid-40s, and settled in Conshohocken. “I used to come here, and it was a *mall*.” He shakes his head and goes in for his workout, a convert to the new KOP.

But what about city-loving millennials — can *they* wrap their futures around this? Will they eat and shop and hang out and even want to *live* in this suburbiest of suburbs, King of Prussia?

It's been repeated ad infinitum that hipsters are so attached to their gritty urban enclaves that they'll never leave, so we tend to assume it's true. The experience of living in, say, Northern Liberties or South Philly, with their cheek-to-jowl mixes of races and styles and incomes, can't be replicated simply because some builder decides to create a new city in the suburban beyond.

The raw numbers, though, tell a surprising story of the suburbs' appeal. More millennials are moving *out* of cities and into suburbs than are moving in, according to the U.S. Census. (In 2014, about 1.2 million vacated cities, vs. a million who became urbanistas.) Now we're starting to see different trend stories, telling us that millennials, in fact, are no more attached to city living than any generation before them; they're just slower to grow up, to marry, to have children — to become their parents, in other words — in large part due to the lousy economy they faced just as they emerged from school strangled with debt. But another raw number really might be most telling: 83 million. That's how many Americans were born between 1982 and 2000, and that's a hell of a lot of people to pin with a particular urbanity-beats-all groupthink.

But back to what the guy in the parking lot was enthusing over, in the Town Center — Wegmans, for starters. For a city dweller like me, used to sketchy supermarkets, sheer ubiquity of food in all states of preparedness is astounding. Which plays to a fast, millennial world. And there's something else in Wegmans more startling: A tall food preparer with a wide, bushy beard happens to slip past me at the salad bar, and he's wearing far and away the largest beard mask I have ever seen — it cradles every last hair of that beard. Later, I'll keep seeing that mask in my mind's eye, because it's a sign of how everything in Wegmans — and in fact pretty much everything in the brand-new Town Center — is dressed to the nines, immaculately neat and clean and done up to perfection. Even the authenticity is carefully orchestrated: At B.Good, a restaurant that offers “health-conscious versions” of fast food, such as baked fries, an outdoor patio features a wall made of thinly cut stones piled precisely in a haphazard way, so that some protrude much more than others — a brand-new wall masquerading as an old one. Which is a ruse of the Town Center's 27 buildings as well, developed by a company Dennis Maloomian sold 20 acres to in order to realize his inspiration; all sport their own designs, to create the effect that they didn't go up all at once but were built piecemeal through the years, the way real towns are. (JGB, which built the Town Center, recently put it up for sale, as the company goes through a corporate-level merger.)

There is also the downright spectacular: Indigo 301, that high-end apartment house at the end of Main Street, has first-floor communal activities like pool and ping-pong and lounging; there's a golf simulator (given that the real golf course is history), and a kitchen that tenants can use for big parties, and a huge swimming pool that the building wraps around, so that from a third-floor balcony a renter gazes down into what feels like his own swanky Vegas hotel. (That communal vibe doesn't come cheap, though; one-bedrooms rent for \$1,485.) The adjacent downtown invites more communing. One night I nosh duck tacos at Paladar, the Latin kitchen on Main Street, sitting at the rum bar that opens out onto a patio. Communal, and pretty cool.

I stop another guy outside LA Fitness (which includes a room given over entirely to badminton, a favorite among KOP's expat tech workers). Jim Panella works in sales at Arnold's Office Furniture, based in Bridgeport, and he's come with a buddy to work out and then chow down at Fogo de Chão. Jim is 30 and single, makes north of 100 grand a year, and lives in Northern Liberties — exactly the sort of guy Indigo 301 or some other KOP apartment house needs to attract. Certainly, his job commute would be much quicker from here. Moreover, Jim tells me he really liked the action of city living at first, but now, he kind of stays to himself, holed up in his apartment. So why not move to KOP? *Would* he? Which is a not-so-veiled way of asking: *Is it cool enough?*

“Absolutely,” he says.

But Jim's feeling is that moving to the suburbs would leave him a little too isolated. “I don't want to let go of the city just yet,” he says. Though I come away from talking with Jim, after a long phone conversation a few nights later, struck by how little he worries about what everyone else is doing, about any cool factor.

He's going to live where he wants to, and I begin to think that in the dangerous game of making generalizations about a generation of 83 million, I've found one that might stick. Kathy Smith, marketing director of the mall, gives me a tour of it one Friday afternoon — my first visit ever — and two things surprise: a lot of sunlight streaming in from skylights, and a lot of places to eat, like the Fat Ham and Sweetgreen, that tilt young and healthy; the mall is no longer simply a place for obsessive shoppers. Though something Kathy says about millennials and shopping seems telling: "They're not brand-conscious." She means that they want what they want — they'll go up or down in brand status to find what suits them, which fits the larger point that's becoming clear: Millennials don't really care so much about what they're *supposed* to want.

One rainy Saturday afternoon, I spend a few hours in the mall's parking lot at a beerfest that Eric Goldstein created as a township fund-raiser, talking to a lot of people like Kristyn Klecko. Twenty-four years old, raised in Lancaster (her Uncle Joe and cousin Dan were NFL players), Kristyn's an environmental consultant who works in Malvern. Her gym is across the street from the mall. She likes to shop at Nordstrom. She lives in Paoli. Would she consider moving to the Village at Valley Forge?

"Sure." It's really not that complicated; Kristyn wants easy access to good shopping and restaurants and bars. And one other thing — how long it would take her to get to work. *The commute*. For Kristyn, KOP would be close enough.

Eric Goldstein, who along with endless enthusiasm has many stories, told me one that nails the absurdity of the idea that millennials are allergic to the 'burbs:

A few months ago, he gave a rug and a sofa to a family friend named Chris; Ed, a buddy of his, came to help. The three of them got talking. Chris and Ed are classic hipsters, tatted-out high-energy guys in their early 30s with a strident attachment to city living. Chris lives in Fishtown, where Ed grew up, and Eric asked them what it's like there. "Yeah, it's drugs and fights and stuff going on," Ed said. "It's great." The edginess, the danger, gets their juices flowing.

Both Chris and Ed live with their girlfriends, Ed in South Philly now. Eric asked them if they plan to get married.

They do. Eric asked whether they plan to have families. They do. Eric wondered where they would live when they have kids.

There was silence. Chris and Ed looked at each other.

"The suburbs," they finally admitted.

**TO A LARGE EXTENT**, King of Prussia's eventual future will turn on whether a train line will be built to connect it to other western suburbs and the city. It's in the planning stages but still a maybe — there are regulatory and financial hoops to go through, and if it does happen, the first train would stop at the business park in KOP at the end of 2023, at the earliest. Trains would feed and relieve the area in a vast and different way, of course; they would be a big game changer.

But to get some final idea of the here-and-now, an answer to whether the Village at Valley Forge really could create a feeling of place, I drive down to Reston, Virginia, one Sunday morning. I want to take a look at the project that touched the decision-makers in King of Prussia one December a decade ago, convincing them that maybe a downtown wouldn't be such a bad thing to build after all.

Reston strikes me, on first glance, as too, well, *clean* — a Disneyland of close-knit apartment houses and stores and restaurants, with wide streets with names like New Freedom and Explorer. It's a high-rise

version of what the Village at Valley Forge may grow into. I'm afraid I'm still the guy who plucked at the grass in front of Davio's in King of Prussia and discovered Astroturf instead.

I wander around, then stop to talk to a couple in their late 20s who live in one of the high-rises, happy campers taking a walk in their tight proximity of live/shop/dine, out of harm's way of Washington. I chat with a smiling middle-aged woman who thought I was drawing in my notebook as I stood staring at a restaurant called Ted's Bulletin, done up like an old-timey newspaper building. I tell her why I'm taking notes — that I'm trying to figure out what this place is and maybe what it's like to live here.

She tells me. Her name is Regina. She's a transplant lured south by friends after her company aged her out, at 58. Which got her out of the bad winters of Fairfield, Connecticut. Regina loves it here, the walkability. It's an easy place for a woman alone to negotiate. And there's so much to do.

But what ... what *is* Reston? It's not exactly a suburb, or a city. What is it, then?

"It's a mall turned inside out," Regina tells me, and we smile over that because it seems just right. A mall turned inside out, a place to enjoy. As we continue chatting in the warm sun.