

What Every Long Islander Should Know About How Boston Got It Together

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

A few years ago in Boston things got really ugly.

It was all about a referendum to allow local governments to impose a property tax surcharge with the revenue earmarked for affordable housing. The debate moved from passionate to nasty and beyond.

With the smoke still rising over the scorched earth—the referendum was defeated—a few business leaders who had opposed the measure met quietly with pro-referendum housing leaders to see if anything could be salvaged. After a series of meetings, the group agreed to form an ad hoc task force to find a mutually acceptable path to affordable housing.

The group added an urban policy expert from Northeastern University plus the president of the prestigious Boston Foundation. Soon the group realized that to be truly effective it needed to represent the entire spectrum of stakeholders, and everyone from the environmental to the real estate community was brought in. The group then went to work drafting a policy platform that everyone could agree on. You can imagine the back and forth, the persistence, that took.

They did it, though. They hammered out a proposal that created state incentives for local governments to rezone for smart growth. Then as a united front they took their proposal to the government and the public. Four years after the donnybrook, the proposal became law.

Why should this matter to Long Islanders? First, we share with Boston the problem of high housing costs, lack of affordable housing, and the resulting exodus of young people that is hobbling the region's economy.

We share something else, too. Like Long Island, Boston is "famously fractious," a collection of fiercely independent municipalities, dating back four centuries. Bostonians are said to "lack the collaborative gene." How familiar does that sound?

But Boston is turning that around. Besides the housing task force, they've developed:

- A high-level Leadership Forum to inform and involve business leaders in regional issues.
- A Regional Innovation Summit, sponsored by the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, M.I.T., and the U.S. Council of Competitiveness, which brought together leaders from business, government, and education to find ways to forge greater regional collaboration.
- A Business Resource Team that joins state and private, non-profit agencies into a rapid-response team for companies interested in moving to or expanding in the state.

Long story short, as one study puts it, Boston has built, in just a few years' time, "greater cohesion than most observers would have imagined possible."

How were they able to do it? For starters, determination and a sense of urgency. Some Bostonians also credit the city's historical revolutionary spirit. That Northeastern professor who worked on the housing task force, Barry Bluestone, says, "Every metropolitan area must periodically reinvent itself."

How's *our* revolutionary spirit these days? When someone mentions initiatives like these, I sometimes hear Long Islanders say, "That could never happen here."

But I ask, Why not? It was Long Islanders, more than anyone, who invented suburbia. Who better than us to reinvent it?

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, and convener of the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org click on to special analysis.