

What Every Long Islander Should Know: “Fighting for Our Young”

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

We know we are running low on oil. And now we are hearing that food is also running short. But the United States faces another key shortage as well: young people.

Due mostly to a “baby bust” in the 1970s, the number of 25-34 year olds has been dropping nationwide—eight percent in the years from 1990 to 2006.

That’s bad news for businesses, which depend on young people to fill essential entry-level and mid-level positions. The competition is on nationwide to attract these workers.

And the contest is not just among corporations; it’s also between regions. Forward-thinking regional groups have worked hard to make their regions attractive to the “creative class” of young professionals. Those that have done so, like Seattle and Austin and Nashville, have seen their regions prosper.

In this competition Long Island is losing badly.

Partly we are caught in a tide of migration from the northeast to the south and west. However, even among our immediate neighbors, Long Island lags. From 1990 to 2006, we lost 35% of our 25-34 year olds. Other tri-state suburbs lost only 24%. And New York City lost a mere 9%.

In fact, many of the 80,000 Long Islanders who moved away last year moved not to a different region, but to New York City and other tri-state suburbs.

That sounds wrong. We expect people to move to Long Island from New York, not the other way around. What is going on here?

What do these regions have that we don’t have? One important answer is cities. Historically, New York’s northern and western suburbs grew up around hubs: White Plains, New Brunswick, Stamford.

These city centers fostered a better mix of housing options. On the one hand, our suburban neighbors provide much higher percentages of multi-unit housing and rental units than Long Island, giving young people more places to live.

At the same time, overall population densities are actually lower in these regions than on sprawling Long Island.

These hubs also provide a social and cultural life that is a magnet for young people.

Long Island needs to close our “city-center gap.” And we have towns that could do it. Hicksville, for example, enjoys excellent access to the Long Island Rail Road and major highways—and a relatively low population density. With more housing, office buildings, and enhanced transit, the town could grow into a major employment center and a popular destination for entertainment and recreation.

Building such towns should be one strategy in a war to keep our youth. And we definitely need a strategy.

It is a timely issue, as well as an urgent one. This month, Channel 21, WLIW, will present a three-part series on the topic called “Leaving Long Island.” (I am interviewed on the program.) Public awareness is crucial, but so is action.

Leaders elsewhere are working together to make their regions more inviting to young professionals. Long Island cannot afford to do less.

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.