

What Every Long Islander Should Know: “Going Nowhere”

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

A truck-rail freight facility in Brentwood, proposed by the State Department of Transportation (DOT), would take more than 5,000 trucks off Long Island’s roads each day, cutting travel delays, lowering emissions, improving air quality, and reducing shipping costs. But the project is in trouble and may never come to fruition.

Many people see it as a perfect example of Long Island’s inability to get things done.

As often happens, the project was attacked by the local communities most directly affected. But before we blame it all on narrow-minded NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard), let’s consider. For one thing, we are talking about a lot of trucks in a small area. Bringing lots of noise, burning barrels of gas, and spewing tons of emissions. Right in the middle of a special groundwater protection area.

Furthermore, blaming local communities gets us nowhere. People will try to protect their interests—that’s not going to change. What needs to change—if we want regional progress to start succeeding—is the way agencies handle these big projects.

When they figure the cost of a project, agencies must include the cost of winning acceptance for it. Local residents are entitled to sound, substantive answers to their questions or objections, not just rejoinders—even though that takes extra time and effort.

Acceptance may also cost money. When local residents asked for a dedicated road to carry truck traffic between the Long Island Expressway and the rail yard, officials replied that this would be too expensive.

But wait a moment. We are asking the locality, in effect, to sacrifice for the greater good of the region. But, if the project is so important, it ought to be worth the extra costs of mitigation and incentivization. The Long Island Power Authority offers

community benefits packages to municipalities where power plants are located. The New Jersey Department of Transportation has incentives for smart growth.

Besides addressing local concerns, agencies need to address the wider audience better. The truck-rail project offers region-wide benefits. DOT should have reached out across the Island. By instead confining their focus to the area surrounding the facility, DOT set itself up to hear mostly from opponents.

Similarly, the rail yard idea works in tandem with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s plan to add a third track on the main line of the Long Island Railroad. Both projects look better when you view them together. So why didn’t the two agencies present them together?

Lack of coordinated planning has long crippled Long Island’s growth. Consider the Towns of Islip, Babylon, and Smithtown, at whose intersection this area sits. One by one, over the past years, these Towns—each seeking to expand its own tax base—approved huge big-box developments, dumping them into the respective corners of their towns. No entity was there to say for the region, “This makes no sense.”

Long Island’s need to improve freight movement remains, along with other urgent needs. In each case solutions are available, and obstacles could be overcome. They probably won’t be, however, until we learn to pull together.

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.