

What Every Long Islander Should Know: “Seismic Shift”

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

A quiet neighborhood, a nice backyard, a home of your own. For the past half-century, this has been the face of the American dream. But today, for hundreds of thousands of Long Islanders the dream has changed.

That is the finding of a new Long Island Index poll. It reveals a change that has come over us unnoticed, but which promises to remake Long Island's political landscape, and its physical landscape too.

At present, 85% of Long Islanders live in single-family homes. But more than one-third of them would prefer something else, such as a condominium, townhouse, or apartment. The desire is strongest among empty-nesters (aged 50-64) and seniors. In fact, among seniors only a minority prefer single-family homes.

It seems that once their children leave home, people's preferences change. When asked to rate their top factors in choosing a home, those under 50 chose the traditional suburban features: “Privacy” and “Large house with conveniences.” But seniors and empty-nesters, by large majorities, favored “Close to downtown” and “Minimal home maintenance.”

Vibrant downtowns are appealing places. They bring shopping and recreation in easy reach, and offer social opportunities that far-flung suburbs cannot match. That's an attraction for residents young and old.

Downtown housing also offers important benefits to the region. It lowers the cost of government services relative to traditional large-lot development, to minimize taxes. It also reduces highway congestion and helps preserve open space.

Most urgently, multi-unit construction makes housing more affordable, helping to stanch the exodus of young people that threatens the economic and social life of our region.

But instead of Long Island building more of this housing, in recent years the share of building permits for multi-unit residences has actually fallen. Other New York-area suburbs, which have more of this housing to begin with, are building more than we are.

Why? Critics blame developers, who make greater profits building big houses. Developers blame local zoning codes. Local governments blame public opposition.

But in fact, the *Long Island Index* has discovered, the public approves of downtown development.

- 61% support building more homes or apartments closer together in some local downtowns.
- 63% support an increase in rental apartments in downtown shopping areas and near train and bus stations.
- 49% are ready to increase building heights from two to four stories—a 10-point jump in just three years.
- 62% even support building new multi-level parking facilities in downtowns.

Our findings challenge the notion that Long Islanders are locked into a frozen image of suburbia. Plainly, backing for downtown development is strong.

It's time that's in short supply. Staggering under high housing costs, 50% of Long Islanders—and 65% of those aged 18-34—consider it likely that they will leave the region in the next five years.

The opportunity is here to address our region's urgent need for new housing options. Long Islanders are *ready* for change. But they are not waiting for it.

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