

What Every Long Islander Should Know: “What We’ve Got and What We’ve Not”

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

The turn of the new year is a time for taking stock: for counting our blessings, and addressing our need for improvement. Here, based on data from the Long Island Index, is a partial inventory of our regional strengths and weaknesses.

What we have that’s working for us.

- Location, location, location. Twenty-five percent of the public says that the best thing about living on Long Island is access to beaches. Access to New York City comes in second.
- People. Long Islanders’ education and resourcefulness power our economy and enrich our culture.
- Outstanding schools, colleges, hospitals, parks, libraries, and police and firefighting services.
- Beautiful, safe neighborhoods with lovely houses. (But see below!)

What we have too much of.

- One: taxes. Two: traffic. These also according to our poll.
- Segregation. By race, class, and age. And inequality in meeting such basic needs as healthcare and education.
- Environmental degradation. We use too much energy, and pollute our air and water too much.
- Lovely houses. Yes, they’re beautiful, but they’re crowding out other needs.
- Government. Our hundreds of separate entities add layers of bureaucracy and impair our ability to achieve regional goals.

What we have in short supply.

- Land. Sprawl has reached the end of our island. We need a new way to grow.
- Economic growth. Our economy has grown slowly. Long Islanders’ incomes are now barely higher than the average American’s, while our costs are higher.
- Young people. They’re leaving in staggering numbers, largely because of another lack: affordable housing.

Looking over this list, what stands out for me is the way these items interrelate. Lack of affordable housing drives young people away, which strangles economic growth. Big-lot housing eats up the last of our land, sending prices soaring. Sprawling homes also add to taxes and traffic.

At the center is sprawl. Which leads me to an additional lack: Long Island’s dearth of high-density town centers.

Elsewhere in the tri-state area, leafy suburbs mingle with town centers that offer a variety of housing options. Today blossoming mixed-use downtowns are revitalizing regions all across America.

Long Island has downtowns, too: over 100 of them. Some of these are flourishing as more and more people discover their advantages. Young people often choose townhouses, condominiums, and apartments out of necessity, until they can afford their dream houses. Large numbers of seniors and empty-nesters are looking to move the opposite way, downsizing from single-family homes for the sake of economy and easy maintenance. They also prefer the convenience of town life, where shopping, recreation, and companionship are all in easy reach.

Wider housing options benefit the entire region, stanching the loss of our people. Downtown development can also reduce highway congestion, ease pressure on open space, and lower the cost of government services. Importantly, vibrant downtowns work to enhance, not diminish, their surrounding communities.

Yet many Long Island downtowns are languishing. What a waste! Think of what they could be. Then add a new category to our Long Island inventory: **What we have that we are not taking advantage of.**

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation and convener of the Long Island Index.