

A Long Island Briefing

What Every Long Islander Should Know About Our High-Tech Future

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

This past month I saw an outstanding presentation concerning Long Island's future. It took place at a roundtable dinner attended by leaders of Long Island research institutions and high-tech industry. I wish every Long Islander had been there.

The presentation was by Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association. (RPA is a grantee of the Rauch Foundation, and it has conducted research for the Long Island Index.) The presentation focused on fostering high-tech growth on the Island.

Most people have the sense that high tech is important to today's economy. A study by the Milken Institute tells us how important. The study compared growth among U.S. regions in the 1990s. It found that 65% of a region's relative growth depends on the strength of its high-tech sector.

That points clearly to where our region needs to go. But the Milken study went on to suggest what is needed to get there. It identified the key factors that foster high-tech development. Traditional considerations such as a region's infrastructure and regulatory environment play important roles, as you would expect. But today a new factor has taken center stage: quality of life.

That's because today's high-tech firms are so dependent on human resources. Talented and educated employees are what make these firms fly. So now as never before regions are focused on making themselves into places where people will want to live. Much of the impetus comes from regional alliances: coalitions of businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and other stakeholders who come together to move the region forward.

Silicon Valley, for example, has been working to increase affordable housing and improve transportation. In the past seven years they have succeeded in tripling the average density of new development. The Greater Washington Initiative in the D.C. area is focused on traffic and the high cost of living. Sound familiar?

Many—in fact most—of these regional groups have based their efforts upon “visioning” programs. Visioning brings the public into thinking about and planning a region's future. Typically, a visioning program offers scenarios for growth. Since housing development affects transportation affects taxes affects business, computer modeling is used to show the impact of various growth strategies. Think of a real-life Sim City. What will the Island look like 25 years from now if we build more affordable housing? Expand our highway system? Continue on the course we are on?

The advantages of visioning are, well, easy-to-see. It makes public decisions truly public, by laying out choices and giving everyone a say. And building upon public consensus makes it easier to turn plans into action.

Coordinated regional planning is what has been missing in Long Island's development, and what we need to build a better future. “Vision” seems like an excellent watchword for a new year.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation and the 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.