

A Long Island Briefing

What Every Long Islander Should Know About Home Rule

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

Governmentally speaking, Long Island is a mess.

We have 236 municipal corporations, which includes: two counties, 13 towns, two cities, 95 villages and 124 school districts. Throw in fire districts, water districts, libraries and such, and you get 898 government entities.

It's more than a mess; it's a problem. It may be our region's biggest problem, because it hinders us from solving all the others.

Just name an issue. Taxes. Housing costs. Lack of affordable housing. Educational inequality. Segregation. Traffic. Take any problem and study it, and you discover that our fragmented government structure: (a) Helped create it and (b) Now stands in the way of solving it.

You could do this with any of these issues, but housing probably makes the clearest example.

We know the problem: sprawl. We kept building big houses on big lots spread across the Island according to no real plan. Now there's little land left to build on . . . the houses we have are too expensive . . . and people are forced to move away, breaking up families and robbing our industries of essential talent.

We know this. We know that there are better models of growth, that we need more townhouses and apartments, located in village centers and revitalized downtowns.

We know it, and yet the McMansions keep going up, and affordable housing keeps not being built. Why don't we do what we know we need to do?

There are reasons why. One is economic: developers make more money building big houses than small ones. But the other is governmental. "Home rule" puts power over

zoning in the hands of towns and villages. And these local entities have a strong financial motive to bar more housing.

That's because new residents commonly pay less in taxes than the cost of the public services they receive, especially when it comes to schooling. Allow more people into the community, the reasoning goes, and government costs will go up. And that means raising property taxes, which are already sky high.

The zoning boards' attitude is understandable, but disastrous for a region that is perishing for lack of affordable homes.

What is to be done?

Eliminating home rule is not likely to happen anytime soon. A more viable approach is to address the financial dilemma. Localities resist residential development because they pay the tab. What if the state or county shouldered the cost of new residents? This could be done, through a variety of proposed tax reforms.

Such proposals are workable, but face a different hurdle. There is no authority currently constituted that can effectively move them forward.

If potholes don't get repaired, or a popular school program gets cut, there are people we can call to account. But addressing regional problems is no one's job.

Other regions have non-governmental leadership alliances—leaders representing the full spectrum of interests—that effectively advance the regional agenda. Long Island has no such entity . . . and desperately needs one.

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.