

**What Every Long Islander Should Know
About the Once and Future Village**

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

I write this month in praise of a great rite of summer. No, not a day at one of Long Island's glorious beaches, or a community pool. I'm thinking of that leisurely day spent soaking up the ambience of one of the Island's charming villages or towns.

It's something most of us will experience in the weeks ahead. We'll probably go with family or friends. Park the car and just stroll. Check out the street scene. Venture into the shops. Relax over lunch, a sundae, or a cup of tea.

While you're there, take a moment to consider what a treasure these villages are—a regional asset as vital, in their way, as our ocean environment.

At times underappreciated, downtowns are now recognized as crucial to a region's vitality. They give a sense of place. And by providing a place for people to meet, stop, and talk, they help create our sense of community.

"Modern" suburbia made downtowns seem old-fashioned. Suburbia cared nothing for town centers, sprawling every which way, dividing residences from shopping areas from businesses—then re-connecting them all with highways.

But today downtowns are cutting edge. Planners, realizing the folly of sprawl, have rediscovered the benefits of mixed-use town centers. They not only bring prosperity to local merchants, they can also make better use of infrastructure, lower taxes, and reduce automobile use.

Importantly, downtowns are magnets for young professionals, who crave the social and cultural stimulation. This demographic group—known as the "creative class" and much sought after by employers—is critical to a region's economic vitality.

The Long Island Index provides two measures of downtown vibrancy. The first is the vacancy rate, which averages 7.3% Island-wide, roughly equal to the national average. Rates vary widely, though, as low as 3% or less, in such places as Syosset, Locust Valley, Bellmore, and Merrick in Nassau, and Northport, Cold Spring Harbor, and Cutchogue in Suffolk. At the high end, rates in Bayport, Bayshore, and Mastic Beach top 20%.

The Index also measures the ratio of retail businesses (grocery stores, clothiers, restaurants, etc.) to service-oriented businesses (auto repair shops, doctor's offices, banks). The trend in the past two decades has been toward service stores. Generally speaking, however, retail shops tend to promote greater vibrancy.

The key to stimulating downtown development is people. Zoning boards must permit rises in density, usually through townhouses, apartments above stores, and other low-rise housing that preserves a village ambience. Towns must be pedestrian-friendly or all is lost. Municipalities sometimes build anchor attractions to bring people in, but much regeneration takes care of itself. If you get people into a place, entrepreneurs quickly follow with products and services geared to their needs.

We've seen it happen, in places from Long Beach to Huntington to Greenport. These and others like them are more than just pleasant destinations. They are stars in the Long Island firmament, helping to fuel the social and economic life of our region.

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 click on to special analysis.