

**If We Don't Start Getting It Right,  
We Won't Get It at All**

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

The Town of North Hempstead has just given us a lesson on how not to bring affordable housing to Long Island.

In voting to permit homeowners to rent to unrelated tenants, the town board acted with excellent intentions. They would give seniors and young people a place to live. Offer a lifeline to homeowners struggling with high housing costs. Address Long Island's "brain drain"—the region's most critical problem.

But the board acted without properly considering residents' concerns. On September 16, people packed a town meeting and demanded, successfully, that the law be rescinded. They criticized accessory apartments, but they also criticized the process. Some said they support the goal of affordable housing, but this was not the way to go about it.

On that point, I think everyone, including the board itself, now agrees.

So, what do we need to do it right? Several things.

**Information.** Citizens must be brought in at the start of the process, not the end. And they need to see the big picture. When Riverhead proposed accessory apartments, they did so as part of a comprehensive update to the master plan and with much community involvement. That proposal won public support.

**Regional approach.** The affordable housing crisis requires Island-wide planning and action, and that hasn't happened. Accessory apartments are the fastest way to make a dent in the housing crisis, but if we expect individual towns and communities to do their part, they need to see that there's a whole.

**Focus on downtowns.** Affordable housing in downtowns—townhouses, condos, and apartments—bring people close to shops and services, creating vibrant social and economic centers. That's why they call it smart growth.

**A role for accessory apartments.** We can't ignore them; they make too much sense. No new road-building, or sewer lines, or loss of open space. No one community hit with a big spike in housing.

**Facts not fears.** Much of the criticism of accessory apartments is based on what people *think* will happen, not what actually does happen. Take the fear of rising infrastructure costs and higher taxes. The reality is, accessory apartments have far less impact than the sprawling, single-family development we are used to.

Same with school costs. Most renters are retirees, empty-nesters, and young people in their first jobs—not parents of schoolchildren. Statistics show that single-unit housing brings in ten times as many children as rentals.

**An end to us-vs.-them.** Our region and our communities are not in conflict: we share a single fate. Long Island cannot prosper by decimating our communities. Nor will any community thrive if our region declines.

**Action.** Every day we fail to come together as a region to address this need, it gets harder for an individual town or village to make progress. Places like Riverhead and Patchogue have been shining exceptions.

In consequence of the failure in North Hempstead, more young men and women will leave Long Island. More strapped homeowners will put their houses up for sale. More employers will think about moving out.

We can't afford this, people.

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