



IT IS THE FACE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: THE SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE. IT PRACTICALLY DEFINES SUBURBIA.

But it always had its detractors. And from the start it was built on unsustainable foundations: the automobile, cheap gas, and available land.

For decades, experts have recognized the pitfalls. Traffic. Housing costs. Taxes. Loss of open space. Environmental degradation. Virtually every problem Long Island faces is caused or aggravated by single-family sprawl.

Urgently, too, our lack of affordable housing is sundering families and draining from our region the young talent our economy needs to prosper.

In the face of these threats, there was always a simple answer: single-family housing is what people want.

Now, for hundreds of thousands of Long Islanders, that is no longer true.

introduction

SUBURBIA WAS ONCE THE ULTIMATE IN “MODERN LIVING.”

But times and people change.

Eighty-five percent of Long Islanders live in single-family homes. But today more than one-third of them would prefer something else, such as a condominium, townhouse, or apartment. Of those aged 65 or older, only a minority prefer single-family homes. Empty-nesters are not far behind.

Without children at home, people’s preferences change. Asked to rate their top factors in choosing a home, Long Islanders under 50 chose the traditional suburban features of “Privacy” and “Large house with conveniences.”

But seniors and empty-nesters, by large majorities, favored “Close to downtown” and “Minimal home maintenance.”

A majority of these groups also say they would rather live in a neighborhood where homes are close together and you can walk to local stores than one where homes are spread apart and you drive.

Financial factors may play a part: not only for seniors on fixed income, but also for pre-retirement baby boomers. Our study found evidence that many of these plan to cash in on their present homes and downsize in their retirement. Whether they stay or leave Long Island may depend on what housing options our region has to offer.

Financial considerations also weigh on younger residents. While 18–34 year-olds desire traditional large-lot homes, most cannot afford them. For them, too, the decision to stay or leave may depend on what Long Island can offer them.



Photo by Miller Business Resource Center staff,
Middle Country Library



Photo by Victor Cruz, Town of Patchogue

LOOKING GOOD: DOWNTOWNS OFFER WHAT PEOPLE WANT AND THE REGION NEEDS.

Village centers and downtowns across the Island, many of them enjoying a renaissance, are more than attractive destinations for visitors. Increasingly, they are seen as desirable places to live.

Downtown living puts shopping, recreation, and companionship in easy reach. And it's economical. Townhouses, condos, and apartments keep housing and tax costs in bounds. Proximity to transit facilities lowers transportation costs. Many downtowns also offer substantial employment opportunities.

Downtown development helps the region, too, reducing highway congestion, easing pressure on open space, and lowering the cost of many government services.

Importantly, vibrant downtowns work to enhance, not diminish, their surrounding communities.

Consider Great Neck. In the study that follows—surveying 23 of Long Island's 100-plus downtowns—Great Neck ranked among the highest in population, building height, and number of office buildings. Yet it retains its village character, and anchors one of the Island's most stable and affluent areas.

This is not to say that other villages should imitate Great Neck. Rockville Centre, Mineola, Long Beach, and other vibrant downtowns likewise center strong, successful communities. Our study revealed remarkable and appealing variety between downtowns: in population, income, size, housing units, storefronts, office space, transit, culture, and nightlife. Each place has its own distinctive mix, and no single feature proves critical to success.

The one magic ingredient is people. It is their demand, for shops, recreation, and the rest, that drives the engine of a healthy village. Examples on Long Island, and across the country, show that when population increases, communities thrive—each in its own way.

introduction



OUR EXISTING HOUSING DOES NOT MATCH LONG ISLANDERS’ REAL WANTS. WORSE STILL, NEITHER DOES NEW CONSTRUCTION.

Instead of increasing multi-family housing to meet the new demand, Long Island has done the opposite. The share of building permits issued for multi-family residences has fallen, averaging only 16% over the past three years. Rates in other NY-area suburbs are higher. In Northern New Jersey, the three-year average is 53%—and rising.

What’s Long Island’s problem? Critics blame developers, who make greater profits building big houses. Developers blame local zoning codes. Local governments blame public opposition.

But in fact, the public supports change.

- Solid majorities support inclusionary housing, as well as increased density and more rental apartments in downtown areas.
- 50% support raising building heights in downtowns—a 10-point jump in just three years.
- 56% support state incentives to localities to encourage greater housing density.

Large majorities consider it either “extremely” or “very” important for government to ensure that Long Islanders have access to affordable housing. Clearly, the public is looking for the government to act.

The new pulse of Long Island provides an opportunity for political leaders who would address our region’s urgent need for new housing options. Long Islanders are not locked into a frozen image of suburbia. They know what they want and need, and expect their government to help make it happen.