

Envisioning, executing regional plans for Long Island

BY ERIC ALEXANDER

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In the past 10 years, many Long Island residents have been taking the reins of planning from developers and municipal planners and mapping the future of their own communities. More than 10,000 residents in nearly 30 communities have engaged civic and business leaders and many new voices to shape some innovative and practical plans.

More than anything else, the trigger for this era of collaboration has been the awareness of residents, political leaders and developers alike that Long Island's existing land-use system is just plain broken. Lack of affordable housing, the high cost of living, loss of open space, continued sprawling development, the dearth of sewer and transit infrastructure and quality-of-life issues are all now part of the discussion.

While in the past, many citizens followed the anti-everything mantra of a popular rock band - "I like you better when you go away" - visioning processes have been conducted to plan the future of local communities and have brought out supporters for all forms of projects and initiatives.

No one said creating new town centers, reclaiming sprawling commercial corridors or filling in existing downtowns would be easy. Once a vision has been articulated, countless barriers appear: arcane zoning regulations, bureaucrats who embrace and celebrate the status quo, builders who repeatedly offer sprawling developments, beleaguered municipal officials with frozen feet. Community members may worry about negative impacts on their school districts (often without justification).

And some regional planners and academics - even those who have embraced the concepts of "smart growth" and community planning - haven't discovered the best ways to help toward those ends and at times work at cross purposes. This lack of communication is one of the growing pains of attempting some very difficult tasks.

The good news is that there are many low-profile but high-impact projects that are advancing. These plans are not the subject of glitzy stories or big headlines, but they're part of a punch list of goals and objectives of communities across Long Island. And they're setting the table for the much larger vision efforts that will soon follow.

For example, in Middle Island/Coram, Brookhaven Councilwoman Connie Kepert was able to approve nearly 300 units of workforce housing, a new park and road design, and to preserve hundreds of acres of open space.

The Village of Farmingdale has completed two traffic calming projects, a new pocket park and a renovated village park; approved two workforce housing projects, five new business openings; and is considering two major upcoming mixed-use projects.

In Bay Shore, a marina and waterfront park were infused with \$4 million worth of improvements, including new bulkheading, boardwalks, pump-out stations, a sprinkler park, an ice rink and a related initiative for workforce housing.

In addition, communities like the Villages of Patchogue, Mineola, Westbury and Freeport are seeing many of their projects built after having completed public planning processes.

Mundane but meaningful results from these plans include: Lake Ronkonkoma's monthly community cleanups and preservation of historic properties, Mastic Beach's increased police presence and code enforcement, Rocky Point's anticipated sewer district, and Gordon Heights' action on its concentrations of sex offenders and support for its local fire department. These communities are implementing small and large tasks at their own pace with the resources they can marshal. And these plans have inspired more than 70 smart-growth projects that are being planned, approved or built across Long Island.

Regional planners can help advance these visioning efforts by researching the economic and tax impacts of new plans and conducting school district analyses to buttress the recommendations. They can also engage in strategic lobbying with federal officials to implement sewer and transportation infrastructure and ensure that county actions don't conflict with the goals and objectives of visioning plans.

Robin Garr, author of "Reinvesting in America" wrote that "changing people's lives is labor-intensive work. You can't rush 1,000 people through a program in a week and expect them to walk out with jobs and lives that are whole. It's necessary to work one on one with people, respecting their intelligence and capabilities and at the same time being as tough as you need to be."

Similarly, the transformation of Long Island's suburban communities to meet the needs of our changing population is going to take time and a whole lot of effort. Community members should participate in initiatives, educate themselves and help implement changes. Regional leaders should follow.

Let's all get to work.

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