

# If you build it they will stay

■ Elected officials agree on the Island's need for housing young workers can afford, but the demand far exceeds the pace of production

One message came through loud and clear in our dialogue with you about Long Island's future: Without more homes and apartments that working families can afford, the brain drain will continue and the future will be bleak. You said it well and often.

The good news is the growing consensus among elected officials that we have to do something. The bad news is the continuing mismatch between the need and the pace of production.

The Long Island Regional Planning Board is studying the size of the need, but the estimates put it in the range of 100,000 units. In any case, it's huge. The response, however, has been a handful of units here and a smidge there.

Every single unit is to be celebrated, but the daunting size of the gap between supply and demand should spur us on to a faster pace.

### Changes in attitude

Here's a quick summary of what has to happen:

- Towns and villages that have not yet done their fair share of next-generation housing have to get off their duffs.
- The major institutions pushing for change, such as the Long Island Association, Suffolk County government, and the Long Island Regional Planning Board, must harmonize their strategies and avoid working at cross-purposes.
- The people who need this housing most, young workers, have to become more informed and more active in pushing for solutions. They should emulate the spirit of the young families of 60 years ago, who showed up in droves at 1947 hearings leading to a change in a Hempstead town ordinance. That made possible the postwar generation's affordable housing triumph: Levittown.
- We have to get past the deeply held fear that more dense patterns of development will urbanize all of Long Island. That fear is rooted too often in racism and fertilized too eagerly by politicians. But increased density, especially in our downtowns, is the economic incentive we need to get developers to build affordable homes and rental units.
- We need wise but expeditious action on the proposals that seem likely to produce the largest numbers of new units, such as Gerald Wolkoff's Heartland Town Square in Brentwood, Levy's mixed-use plan for Yaphank, and the Charles Wang-Scott Rechler megaplan for the Nassau Hub.

### Carrots and sticks

On the question of which legislative approach is best, we have to be careful that today's honest disagreements don't become tomorrow's deadlocks.

One approach is called inclusionary zoning. The Assembly has repeatedly passed a bill that this page supported, aimed at getting towns and villages on



Architectural renderings of proposals for Yaphank Legacy Village and the Villages at Carmans River (inset)

Long Island to act. It would have mandated an affordable housing component of 10 percent in any development of five or more units. In return, builders would get a density bonus, to build more units than the existing zoning allows.

But that bill has gotten nowhere in the Senate, the zealous guardian of the Island's "home rule" culture. Home rule is just a nobbled-up phrase for a grubbier reality: Towns and villages don't like to be told they must do anything.

Yes, our Senate delegation did come up with \$25 million to offer down-payment assistance, nudge developers toward smart-growth development to revitalize downtowns, and fix up existing homes. That was good, but it's not enough.

The key sponsors of the inclusionary zoning bill, Thomas DiNapoli in the Assembly and Michael Balboni in the Senate, have moved on to other jobs. But the Long Island Association, a strong advocate for the workforce housing that its members need for their employees, is pushing for a new suburban workforce housing bill. Like the DiNapoli-Balboni bill, it imposes a mandate that will force underachieving towns and villages to get going, but in addition it adds incentives suggested by municipalities — sugar to help the medicine go down.

At the same time, Levy and his staff have been working for a year with the regional board on a different legislative approach. The bill, the Downstate Suburban Workforce Housing for Economic Sustainability Act, does not have an inclusionary zoning mandate.

Here's what it does: It links housing to economic sustainability; recommends housing goals to local governments; of-

fers economic incentives, such as payments for building permits issued and loans for infrastructure; holds school districts harmless against increased costs associated with affordable housing, and makes additional state land available for housing. It harnesses together seven counties that have this problem: Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Orange and Dutchess.

The LIA fears that this approach won't get the job done, because it is voluntary, not mandatory. Without the

stick of inclusionary zoning, the business group argues, all the incentive carrots won't be enough to get do-nothing municipalities moving. The LIA also fears that Albany opponents of inclusionary zoning will pass the voluntary bill and stop there.

### Both-and, not either-or

The advocates of the downstate counties bill have no quarrel with inclusionary zoning, but they question whether it can be passed and how many units of housing it will actually help create.

Proponents of both approaches must keep talking, both to each other and to state legislators. This page agrees on the need for inclusionary zoning, but the downstate counties bill is also promising. The best result would be passage of both approaches. In any case, given the size of the need, cooperation is more important to progress than competition.

Whatever happens in Albany, we have to push ahead locally. We still need an all-out effort from the not-for-profit groups, such as the Long Island Housing Partnership and the Community Development Corp. of Long Island. They've done excellent work shepherding homes

to completion and advising prospective buyers, and they need to do more. The partnership, in fact, is sponsoring a symposium on housing and economic development Monday at the Crest Hollow Country Club in Woodbury, with many key players attending — a fine kumbaya opportunity.

In addition to the work of the not-for-profits, we need government to make progress toward approval of the most ambitious plans now on the table.

### The big-ticket visions

In Brentwood, at the site of the former Pilgrim Psychiatric Center, Wolkoff wants to build a mixed-use community with about 9,000 units of housing. To get Town of Islip approvals and county sewer hookups, Wolkoff is willing to make about 2,000 of them affordable. The town is correct to scrutinize it closely for traffic and environmental impacts. The plan will likely come down in size, but it will still be a big part of the puzzle.

In Yaphank, Levy proposes to use county land for a mixed-use community with mostly affordable housing. But the two development groups that responded to the county's request for proposals came in at 2,000 and 2,300 units, double what Levy had proposed. The county has hired a consultant to help analyze the proposals, and a decision on the developer won't happen until early 2008. Levy must remain flexible, but he should not let go of the core of his vision for Yaphank affordable housing.

Similarly, the Wang-Rechler proposal is now heading for review by the Town of Hempstead. The town and Nassau County should work hard to get the most possible affordable units.

In short, you were right to express this concern. Now our elected officials must listen and lead. [E]

