

REPORT REAL ESTATE

A surprising solution for city's housing dilemma: the burbs

More multifamily units along rail lines hold key, but politics and red tape in way

BY JOE ANUTA

There's an inconvenient truth tucked into the environmental sustainability plan for New York that Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled last month: The city needs the suburbs to solve its housing problem.

With rents soaring and too few new apartments in the works for the city's growing population, low-rise communities beyond the five boroughs hold vast potential for multifamily housing along the veins of the region's public transit network.

"Addressing housing challenges will require collaborative action," the mayor's OneNYC plan states. It even describes a new unit within the city's planning agency that would work with other local governments on housing issues.

The problem? More than 100 such governments in counties, cities,

towns and villages on Long Island alone wield tight control over the planning of new apartments. Forging a regional agreement with them—much less municipalities in New Jersey and Connecticut that compete with the Empire State for jobs and residents—would be a Nobel-worthy exercise in diplomacy.

"We have our own needs and challenges, and we can't absorb the city's," said Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino after City Planning Commissioner Carl Weisbrod first floated the idea at a March *Crain's* forum.

The vertical wall

Many local governments don't want denser development, and they turn those wishes into law through zoning codes that govern the size and shape of new buildings.

"Whenever you talk about going vertical—anything over three stories—they start talking about 'Queensification,'" said engineering executive John Cameron, who also is chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Council.

And because multiple municipalities along the stops of the Long Is-

land Rail Road have a say in planning decisions, convincing one is no guarantee of getting a large-scale project approved.

"You don't know you like New York until you try to do something outside the city," Lisa Gomez, chief operating officer at L+M Development Partners, said of construction projects on Long Island. "It is a mishmash of overlapping jurisdictions—cities, counties and towns [without] aligned objectives."

But change is afoot. The same inequality that Mr. de Blasio is fighting has spurred a handful of Long Island towns to relax zoning regulations to allow for taller apartment complexes. The pleasant result: new businesses in old downtowns and an influx of residents looking for walkable communities outside Gotham.

"Some of the areas that have been touted as the greatest successes were communities that were having serious financial problems," Mr. Cameron said. "They were willing to take risks."

And many are looking toward successful downtowns such as Rockville Centre, L.I., where Avalon Bay built a large apartment complex.



ROCKVILLE ROCKS: Jessica Ehlen likes the many cafés and bars near her LIRR station in Rockville Centre. "This town is young and hip—it's awesome," she said.

BUCK ENNIS

Jessica Ehlen, a geologist, lives there with her fiancé. Their place is a 10-minute walk to the LIRR, which she rides into Manhattan most weekdays, and dozens of restaurants, bars and cafés are now clustered near her suburban train station.

"It is just too congested in the city for me," she said. "But this town is young and hip—it's awesome."

'Happening organically'

A handful of burbs on Long Island and elsewhere have followed suit. Even de Blasio critic Mr. Astorino held a town-hall meeting in late April to discuss the potential of developing Westchester's downtowns into transit-oriented communities.

"I think this is something that is happening organically," observed Seth Pinsky, a former head of the city's Economic Development Corp.

Now an executive at RXR Realty, Mr. Pinsky is leading a push by his

company to redevelop aging suburban downtowns across the tristate area, and has a pipeline of nearly 1,500 units in the works from Stamford, Conn., to Glen Cove, L.I.

RXR is also the designated master developer in several suburban downtowns with the potential to host thousands more apartments that could offer housing for New Yorkers getting priced out of the city.

But first, Mr. de Blasio and suburban leaders must take a big step in the coming months: actually communicating with one another.

"It is really important that [the de Blasio administration] started this conversation, which is not an easy one to have," said Christopher Jones of the Regional Plan Association. "There may not be a clear endgame in mind, but [the region] has a lot of common problems and common interests, and it is important to start talking about them." ■