



Cranes On Every Corner Of NYC, But Not Much Going Up Across Long Island

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By all accounts, New York City is experiencing a building boom that seems to have left Long Island behind, prompting developers to envy the city's dynamic energy and rue the Island's usual culprits of bureaucratic red tape, zoning board rigidity and nonstop neighborhood opposition.

"The irony is that 50 years ago you couldn't get anything done in New York City, but you could get things done on Long Island—and it is completely reversed today," says Des Ryan, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a business lobbying group. He cited the delays hampering progress at the big-ticket projects such as Pilgrim State Hospital and Kings Park Psychiatric Center.

New Call-to-action

"Those are two glaring examples of bureaucracies that can't get out of their own way," Ryan complains, noting the equal lack of progress holding Calverton in Suffolk and the Cerro Wire property in Nassau, where the only thing that's changed is the billboard by its old entrance.

By contrast, Manhattan has so much ongoing construction there seems to be a crane on every corner. In part that's because the density is so much higher that the only way to build is up, but the developers also benefit from having a central zoning authority to expedite the approval process, and the market is augmented by the city's having a comprehensive mass transportation system to move people around.

“You have a lot happening in Manhattan,” agrees **John Cameron**, founder and managing partner of Cameron Engineering & Associates, LLP, and chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Council. “It’s not just the approval process; it’s the vision and the leadership. We need to change the zoning codes and go vertical.”

According to Michael J. Posillico, president of the Posillico Development Company based in Farmingdale, the ratio of development in New York City and Long Island is around 65-to-35 today, but “Ten years ago it was probably 90-to-10 Long Island to New York City.”

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“I wouldn’t say the market on Long Island is dead,” he adds, but infrastructure funding for highway and bridge repair and construction “has been very weak.”

Compounding the problem with the lack of investment, Posillico explains, is that Long Island’ zoning is “so inconsistent and variable,” as well as inflexible, that there’s little inducement to dig in and build. It’s the opposite situation in the city.

“When a real estate opportunity presents itself,” he continues, “developers can relatively quickly develop a plan, get it approved and build it.”

Many of the major projects in Manhattan, Cameron notes, involve office buildings being converted into hotels, residential condos and apartments. He knows that’s not realistic on Long Island, but it’s time for a change.

“In the city they have lived with vertical for years so they continue to go vertical. Long Island is height-adverse,” Cameron says. “Any time anybody talks about anything over three stories, four stories, five stories, you’re talking Queensification!”

He explains that Long Island will need to spark development in order to grow the tax base to support the increasing cost of government without breaking the bank of the average homeowner. The challenges are the decaying transportation infrastructure, the shortage of sewers in Suffolk, and the lack of undeveloped areas in Nassau in particular, so development opportunities are limited.

“We need to plan this growth so we can accommodate it smartly and won’t adversely affect our resources,” he advises.

But development is not only needed—it’s vital for the island’s future vitality.

“We don’t have enough development taking place on the Island to grow our economy and satisfy the needs that we already have today,” adds Cameron.

Marc Herbst, executive director of the Long Island Contractors’ Association, Inc., a Hauppauge-based lobbying organization of highway and infrastructure professionals, says that business has picked up for larger firms that can diversify and take advantage of the city’s better economic climate. But it’s been hard for the small or midsize companies based on Long Island, because they’re dependent on municipal funding for projects and that has “been a concern.”

“It’s better than it’s been,” says Herbst. “But the jobs are short-term. They’re mostly maintenance efforts, not major construction, and that’s not long-term stability.”

Herbst says he and his LICA colleagues have high hopes for the mega-projects Gov. Andrew Cuomo recently touted in his State of the State address, but “they’re dreams that are down the road—they’re not for the immediate upcoming construction season or two.”

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On the Island, residential needs are going unmet, particularly in the area of affordable rental stock, Cameron observed, and that means employers have problems attracting young workers to live here when they’re just starting out in their careers and can’t afford single-family homes. He’d like to see more growth near the LIRR transit hubs “so we don’t have to put a car on the road for every new person who’s added to the Island.”

It’s not all doom and gloom, says Mitch Pally, chief executive officer of the Long Island Builders Institute, a building industry trade association of Nassau-Suffolk builders, developers and remodelers, based in Islandia.

“The rental market has substantially increased and the numbers are significantly up,” he explains. “Lots of things are happening, but they happen in small ways on Long Island because that’s the way things are going to happen on Long Island these days. We’re not going out to build an affordable housing complex of 5,000 units in one place. But are there 50 units in lots of places going up at the same time? The answer is, ‘Yes.’ ...But if you’re waiting for the home run, it’s not going to happen.”

Posillico does not share that rosy scenario, however.

“I would prefer to work in New Jersey than on Long Island—that’s how bad Long Island is!” he declares.

Deploring the exhausting local planning process and the narrow building codes, Posillico warns that Long Island’s past of building bedroom communities and single-family homes is not a formula for a successful future “because you can’t support all these services with the tax base that we have. We need more density in certain locations.”

One problem, he says, is that “‘heightened density’ are still bad words in many towns, and that’s not true in other parts of the country.”

Another problem, even more invidious, is that Long Island’s fractured zoning and endemic opposition has turned off investors, and without financing, no development is going to happen, explains Posillico.

“It’s really a very difficult environment,” he says. “The money’s going to go where it can get a return. It’s not going to go to places where they flip-flop, they fight you, and they delay you.”

Maybe they used to say that about New York City, too, but not anymore.