

LONG ISLAND

LI's modest population growth could address high taxes, affordable housing



The new Alston Station Square apartments off Mill Road at the Ronkonkoma Hub, are seen on Saturday, May 9, 2020. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

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Long Island's population growth, to some observers, signals that much work needs to be done to lessen residents' tax burden, making it more attractive for people to remain on the Island rather than leave for less expensive communities.

Others saw the increase, however modest, as promising — a sign that while the Island's population no longer grows at the leaps and bounds pace of the post-World War II years, expansion was still possible.

The 2020 census data released last week showing Long Island's 3.1% growth between 2010 and 2020, and the race and ethnic composition of its local communities, offered policymakers signposts to address issues ranging from taxes, to housing needs to education to health care, to inequities in a region with a growing minority population, some local leaders said.

Looking at the 10.2% decline of the Island's non-Hispanic white population between 2010 and 2020 — the loss of nearly 200,000 people — John Cameron, chair of the Long Island Regional Planning Council, said the region's high tax burden was likely a factor. Whites remain a plurality on the Island, however, even as the minority population constituted 40.2% of the Island's 2.9 million people, according to the 2020 census.

"I'm not surprised by the decline of the white population in both counties," said Cameron, who is also founder of Cameron Engineering and Associates. "It's an exodus. The major factor there is the tax burden, and it's not getting any better."

Cameron recalled a report the planning council released in 2010. It concluded, he said, that the "biggest impediments to Long Island's sustainability was the lack of rental housing and an unsustainable tax burden. While the tax cap imposed by the governor and the state muted that" he said it wasn't enough. "People see the handwriting on the wall."

Cameron feared the state's tax policy fuels an exodus of "high wage earners," retirees and young workers. What's needed, in his view, are public-private investments.

"We need to grow the economy, produce jobs and produce tax revenue. The spending is still going up, we need to control that, but we need to grow the tax base," Cameron said, through "public-private partnerships to stimulate private investment. That's the key."

The head of the Island's largest business group, the Long Island Association, saw reason to be hopeful in the Island's population gain. Nassau County's population increased 4.2% — or 56,242 — to 1,395,774; and Suffolk County's increased 2.2% — 32,570 — to 1,525,920 residents.

Matthew Cohen, the new president and chief executive of the LIA, said in an email: "Regarding the growth rate of 3.1%, it is a kind of ceiling effect. The Long Island economy is already large and strong, so it is harder to push for a higher growth rate." He added: "Thus, we think these numbers bode well for our future since we already have such a mature and diversified economy."

Cohen noted the Island "still has challenges with affordability and high taxes and we need to do more to increase access to and affordability of things like child care and housing. That is critical to retaining young people and keep growing our future population." As for the Island's growing minority population, he said, "And the more diverse we are, the stronger we are as a region."

For Jeffrey Kraut, executive vice president for strategy and analytics at Northwell Health, New York's largest private employer and health care provider, based in New Hyde Park, said officials were pouring over 2020 census population and race and ethnicity data, viewing it as treasure trove of information that helps guide them to where services are needed.

The data released last week confirmed what officials at Northwell projected, he said. "We modeled a modest increase" in the Island's population total for 2020, that Kraut said was in the 3% to 4% range. "The decline of Long Island's population seems to have been reversed," he added, alluding to population estimates earlier in the decade.

"We are looking at where growth is occurring," down to the ZIP code and census tract areas. "We're trying to figure out where there are gaps in access, or whether there is a demand for health care ... We're really interested in seeing what's happening locally."

Kraut added he agreed with those who say that while the Island's population is growing more racially and ethnically diverse, there continued to be a need to reduce inequities that some minorities face, in health care access, for instance.

"We're going to look at diversity and the issue of health equity, that's how this data is critically important for us. We saw it in vaccination planning and we still see it in the work of our work equity task force."

Kraut said Northwell was involved in census outreach last year, distributing census informational flyers throughout its health care system. He said many physicians at Northwell led the effort.

"We all understood the advantage to our region of an accurate count and the impact of an undercount," the latter leading to a loss of federal funding for social safety net programs, he said.