

Smart Growth vs. Suburban Sprawl on Long Island

By Andrea Tsoukalas

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Tsoukalas

Smart growth development is vital to Long Island's continued prosperity and growth because it offers an environmentally friendly solution to the region's shortage in housing and lack of open space. Smart growth discourages traditional exclusionary subdivisions of land and instead encourages the redevelopment of downtown areas with mixed-use compact buildings and affordable housing achieved through flexible zoning regulations and regional long-term planning.

Smart growth is a planning concept which promotes transit-oriented development in denser revitalized downtown areas. The objective is to safeguard what little open space is left while still accommodating the need for affordable housing and an active downtown area for young professionals and empty nesters whose needs are not met by traditional suburban planning.

Suburban sprawl is the term used to define Long Island's current planning and zoning scheme. Today's zoning regulations throughout this region aim to segregate residential districts from commercial districts and to promote the development of single-family residences on oversized lots. County planners are moving away from this low-density planning scheme because it has not and cannot address the region's changing housing and lifestyle needs.

Notwithstanding this need, Levittown and the coveted Gold Coast estates—the two ends of the suburban sprawl spectrum on Long Island—are here to stay and will remain largely undisturbed by the smart growth trend. Instead, target locations for smart growth are main street corridors and downtown areas as well as greyfields (strip malls and industrial centers) and brownfields (environmentally contaminated sites) that have existing infrastructure and proximity to mass transit to accommodate mixed-use compact development.

For example, the once frowned-upon apartment housing over retail or office space is now considered a positive downtown planning scheme that is integral in revitalizing stores in downtown areas. This type of mixed-used development promotes "walkable" communities that are less dependent on automobiles. It also offers the convenience and energy of downtown living with amenities such as entertainment (movie theaters), restaurants, lounges, and pubs as well as retail uses for everyday needs such as a dry cleaner, drug store, deli, post office and hair and nail salon. The appeal is an urban lifestyle in a suburban setting.

To implement this type of smart growth development, changes in policy and zoning regulations must be made by state and local governments. The first catalyst toward this change was New York State's creation of a Smart Growth Cabinet, which was responsible for several zoning changes in the Long Island region. Some of the smart growth objectives that were achieved through this cabinet include the implementation of mixed-use zoning regulations in Main Street areas, transfer of development rights policies, sewer credits for smart growth affordable housing development, and funding for Long Island's infrastructure.

The state legislature recently enacted new legislation known as the Long Island Workforce Housing Program to promote affordable housing for the island's workforce. The law provides a 10% density bonus as an incentive to developers to provide affordable housing. Another program that was recently launched by the Department of State is the Brownfields Smart Growth Spotlight Communities Initiative. The program provides a roadmap for local and state governments to redevelop these blighted areas, create new jobs, and protect the environment through Smart Growth initiatives.

On the local grassroots level, municipalities must be open-minded in their approach and be willing to adopt flexible zoning regulations that allow for this new type of development. One option is to adopt incentive zoning legislation, which can offer a density bonus to a developer that agrees to give back to the community in the form of public amenities, open space, infrastructure, streetscape improvements or cash in lieu that could be used toward these ends.

Another option is to create special districts for locations that are suited for this type of development and adopt new zoning regulations that allow for mixed-use buildings and denser housing such as townhouses, apartments, and row housing. New zoning regulations must also promote vertical growth to achieve the smart growth objective of preserving open space while providing multiple housing units on relatively small lot areas. By increasing the maximum permitted height and floor area in these downtown areas, development can include multi-story apartment and condominium buildings, office buildings—and mixed retail, office and residential buildings, all being served by the same downtown area.

Finally, developers, architects, engineers, land use and municipal attorneys, elected officials, civic leaders and local businesses must work together to develop a plan that meets the specific needs of their community. It is this collaborative effort that will make smart growth successful in the Long Island region and regions nationwide.

Andrea Tsoukalas is an associate at Forchelli, Curto, Crowe, Deegan, Schwartz, Mineo & Cohn, LLP, based in Mineola, NY. She concentrates her practice in the areas of zoning, land use, environmental and municipal law matters and civil litigation.

COUNSELORS AT LAW
**Forchelli, Curto, Crowe, Deegan,
Schwartz, Mineo & Cohn, LLP**
FORCHELLILAW.COM

ANDREA TSOUKALAS, ESQ.

Forchelli, Curto, Crowe, Deegan,
Schwartz, Mineo & Cohn, LLP
330 Old Country Road, Mineola, New York 11501
(516) 248-1700 • atsoukalas@ForchelliLaw.com
www.ForchelliLaw.com