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COVER EDITORIAL

Why a Long Island Without Racism Would Be Better For Everyone

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Long Islanders spend a lot of time patting themselves on the back for keeping the Island from, in the oft-repeated words of local politicians, "becoming just like Queens." In acceptable Long Island-think, what's Queens-like is urban and that's bad. What's Long Island-like is suburban and safe, relatively wealthy, and white. And that's considered good. In their effort to keep things as they are, however, Long Islanders are strangling their own chance of maturing as an economic center and as a vibrant, viable region. They - let's admit it, we - are narrowing the possibility of keeping our own children on Long Island.

We are bungling any opportunity to address the very real problems of preserving open space, revitalizing depressed downtown areas, curbing overdevelopment, constructing a sane transportation policy, curbing ever-rising taxes - and dealing with racism.

It's racism that's our dirty little secret, the one everybody knows but no one wants to talk about. Sometimes racism is out in public, with racial epithets being scrawled on buildings, with families of color complaining of white neighbors calling them names. There are reports, from time to time, of racially motivated beatings.

That's the tip of the iceberg, the brand of blatant, in-your-face racism that involves few of the Island's residents. But there is also racism of a passive strain. It came to the surface in the nation's first post-war suburb, Levittown, when restrictive covenants barred returning black soldiers from buying homes in what would become the largest housing development in the nation's history.

Since then, it has become more polite, more subtle and even more embedded - and it's abetted by a host of institutions and policies, including local zoning powers, competing levels of governments and boutique school districts, the same circumstances that make dealing with the region's other burgeoning problems so hard.

But there are ways of building prosperous, stable communities that include everyone to the benefit of all. For starters, recognize that the multiple layers of government that make taxes so high also advance racial isolation. Recognize that fragmented leadership curbs progress for everyone - and makes it harder to fight racism.

For the majority of Long Islanders, Long Island is about local control, self-governance and the economic ability to buy in. More, it's about property values. It's about Long Island housing values recently rising the farthest and fastest in the United States. And, like legions of Long Islanders before us, we stand ready to keep it that way. But our fear of anything that changes the status quo - for blacks, Hispanics, whites or any one else - is costing us, all of us, dearly:

We don't want affordable housing because it might, gasp!, reduce housing values and change our stable neighborhoods into unstable ones. But the result - a severe lack of housing for young families, workers, students who wish to be free of their parents' basements and senior citizens who don't want "golden age" housing - is pushing our kids off the Island and discouraging desperately needed technology and other workers from moving in.

We don't want to give up our cars. After all, this is no place for buses. By this policy, however, we separate willing workers who don't drive, from the local businesses that desperately need them. We also pour more cars onto our choked byways.

We want to control zoning, which helps keep people out, but we don't care enough about what is going in. Is it any wonder that strip malls mushroom as downtowns die?

We don't want to give up one iota of local control, be it within a village, a town, a county or a school district. As a result, with so many layers of government, Long Island's property taxes are among the highest in the nation.

Long Island is changing. Nassau and Suffolk had been expected to lose population in the last few decades as the original white suburban pioneers died or retired out of state. Instead, the region is growing, in large part because Hispanics, blacks, Asians and other immigrants are moving in, eager to share in the high quality of life here.

Still, Long Island remains one of the nation's most racially segregated regions. That's no surprise, say experts, including John Powell (who spells his name in lower case), head of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School, because suburban segregation is a byproduct of fragmented governance geared toward maintaining the status quo.

But there's a cost: We are also fragmenting ourselves out of an ability to become a stronger economic engine and falling behind other more racially diverse regions such as Montgomery County, Md., and Fairfax County, Va., which are booming because of regional policies that share the wealth and leave no community isolated from transportation, jobs and a good education.

Is there a solution? Yes. But it will require new-think on Long Island, along with sophistication and collective courage to go beyond the status quo. Some ideas worth consideration date back decades.

Should Long Island consolidate some school districts? Is there a way to equitably share the commercial wealth concentrated in some communities across the entire region? Can we collapse some layers of government - or create a federation that would view zoning and planning matters on a regional rather than restrictive basis? Can we build on the coalition of government, business and private groups investigating ways to get more housing for workers, the young and non-wealthy people on Long Island?

ERASE Racism, an initiative of the Long Island Community Foundation, is tackling the conundrum head-on by asking experts, including Powell, to quantify the cost of institutional racism to the region. Recently, he made separate presentations to a host of Long Islanders, including Thomas Suozzi, Nassau county executive, and Paul Tonna, presiding officer of the Suffolk County legislature. Both came away impressed.

But it will take a broad coalition to reshape the policies that are causing the region to be left behind. The status quo isn't working. It's time instead for courage, for creativity and for change.

