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## 'Little-Box' Government Spurs LI Segregation

By David Rusk

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To the outside world, it's Long Island. To the U.S. Census Bureau, it's the 1,198-square mile, 2.8-million person "Nassau-Suffolk NY Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA)."

But, to anti-sprawl environmentalists and social-justice advocates, it's just a frustrating maze of "little-box" governments - 110 villages, towns and cities, and 127 school districts.

Fragmented government means fragmented societies and competition - rather than collaboration - on important issues. State government must require Long Island's little boxes to act as one big box on issues shaping its future.

Typically, the unspoken agenda of most little-box councils (or most little-box school boards) is "to keep our town (or our schools) just the way they are for people just like us" - whoever "us" happens to be. The result is that Long Island is highly divided by race and ethnicity. For black residents, Long Island is the most segregated suburb in America, based on calculations by the Mumford Center at SUNY, Albany.

Census 2000 confirms this dubious distinction. On a scale of 0 to 100 (100 = total apartheid), Long Island's segregation index was 74. The index measures how unevenly the black population is spread around Long Island neighborhoods.

Other metropolitan areas were more segregated - for example, Detroit (85), Milwaukee (82), Chicago (81) or the New York PMSA itself (the city, Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties, 82). But their high segregation indexes reflected a sharp racial divide between city and suburb.

Long Island was remarkable for the degree to which its black residents had been re-segregated after leaving New York City.

Long Island both lagged the nation's racial progress (among the 100 largest metro areas, the black segregation index averaged 60 in 2000) and dropped behind on other fronts. During the 1990s, Long Island's schools became more economically segregated, condemning more poor children to inferior education.

Long Island has many assets. Nassau County ranks second in household income among all counties. Suffolk County isn't far behind.

But the county governments are relatively powerless, particularly in functions that shape a region's future - land-use controls, economic development programs, housing policy and public schools.

Highly dependent on property taxes, Long Island's 110 local governments compete rather than collaborate over new factories, office parks, strip shopping centers and malls. All seek new, high-income subdivisions and most zone out low- and modest-income housing.

Contrast this picture with two big-box competitors - Fairfax County, Va., and Montgomery County, Md., both suburbs of Washington, D.C. They are, respectively, the United States' highest and fourth- highest income counties. Together, these two counties approach Long Island in land area and population size. But there, comparisons end.

Rather than 110 local governments, Montgomery County has only eight with zoning powers and Fairfax County has none. Rather than 127 school districts, they have unified, countywide systems that rank among the United States' best.

In the 1990s, Fairfax-Montgomery added both jobs (21 percent) and population (17 percent) three times faster than Long Island. Real personal income per capita grew much more robustly (13.5 percent) than Long Island's (8.6 percent).

Countywide land-use planning balances growth with conservation, particularly in Montgomery County, which has permanently protected almost one-third of the county's land as farmland and public parks. (Suffolk protects about 27 percent.)

Most remarkably, unlike Long Island's widespread practice of exclusionary zoning, both counties enacted inclusionary zoning laws requiring builders to include 15 percent affordable housing in new subdivisions.

Complying with Montgomery County's mandate, over 25 years, homebuilders have delivered more than 11,000 Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDUs) scattered within new, middle class subdivisions. The county's public housing authority has bought 1,600 MPDUs and rents another 1,200.

(A similar Long Island-wide inclusionary zoning policy would have yielded 11,800 affordable units for working families and another 5,900 for welfare-to-workfare families. Such a policy would have cut Long Island's economic segregation in half.) Moreover, deliberate diversification of their housing stock has helped, not hindered, economic development in Fairfax and Montgomery.

Barring a constitutional miracle, Long Island won't merge its 110 local governments or 127 school districts to become a big-box region. But a reform-minded New York State Legislature can set new rules requiring cities, towns and villages to work together on common land-use, housing and economic-development policies. And they can enable county governments to guide that process.

And who knows? New York's constitution calls for a vote on holding a constitutional convention every 20 years. The door to modernization swings open in 2017. By then, the once Empire State will have dropped so far behind its big-box competitors that New Yorkers may be prepared to move 18th-century forms of government into the 21st century.

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