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The City Is the Future of the Suburbs, and Other Heresies

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The suburbs are dead. People always say that, and if you live in suburbia you expect to hear it, particularly from teenagers who are convinced that growing up there comes at some cost to their souls. Still it is remarkable to hear that dire diagnosis from the leaders of the two counties that make up Long Island, America's emblematic suburb, and home of the original Levittown.

The county executives, Thomas Suozzi of Nassau and Steve Levy of Suffolk, will tell anyone who listens that there is no better place to live. But speaking last week before a group of fellow politicians, businesspeople and academics, the two leaders were just as emphatic in insisting that Long Island's defining trait — a house with one family and two cars, and another house next door, and another, and another — was defunct.

Long Islanders might be doing O.K., but the postwar vision that brought them there, the dream of paving the potato fields, watering the lawn and worshipping the car, was over.

Their supporting evidence was the Long Island Index, an annual survey by a nonprofit foundation that examined Nassau and Suffolk through a host of statistical lenses and found a lot to be grim about, including crushing taxes and a lagging economy. The prime source of malaise, the report asserted, was Long Island's staggering housing costs, which were causing an exodus of young people and keeping employers from moving in.

Mr. Suozzi, Mr. Levy and other speakers argued that Long Island's future was no longer bucolic and sprawling, but dense, urban and vertical. They said that the land of parkways and subdivisions could shake off its blahs only by building up — by filling neglected downtowns with taller buildings, apartments, townhouses, stores and parking garages, and enhancing mass transit.

Mr. Suozzi and Mr. Levy have seen the future, and the future is Westchester County, where the John Cheever suburbs have a newly revived city in the middle, White Plains, with gleaming hotels and condos and enough of the buzz and sheen of gentrification and tax-generation to make any budget-writing politician happy.

But is that what regular Long Islanders really want?

The authors of the Long Island Index found a few joyous nuggets. One is that a significant number of Long Islanders (38 percent) said they could see themselves living someday in a downtown apartment, condo or townhouse, forsaking the old Levittown ideal for something walkable, interesting and, above all, affordable. Half of the respondents could imagine a child or

parent doing so. Sixty-one percent supported building more homes and apartments in some downtowns, and 49 percent said they would favor taller downtown buildings — up to four stories, from two.

From these modest statistics, some optimists have detected a sea change in Long Island attitudes. I'm not so sure.

The two county executives are right to recognize that Long Island, hemmed by sea and Sound, cannot grow outward. They know that an economy needs businesses, businesses need workers and workers need a place to live that isn't their parents' basement and doesn't swallow half their salaries.

This argument has been made over and over, but with no appreciable effect. Long Island is a land of bedrooms, not an incubator of urban-planning concepts, and for every smart-growth PowerPoint or op-ed article favoring townhouses, you will have at least 50 enraged citizens who will show up at a public hearing to denounce it.

Here are some other statistics from the same report that hint at the mountain of Not In My Backyard feeling that pro-density forces will have to wear down if they are going to build anything close to the 200,000 units that some experts say Long Island will need in the next 25 years to solve its housing crisis.

Fifty-nine percent of Long Islanders could never imagine themselves living in an apartment. Asked which type of neighborhood they preferred — one where you could walk to stores or one that required driving — 56 percent said they would rather drive. Meanwhile, only 7 percent agreed that “creating ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods” was the major advantage of building more affordable housing. Asked what the worst disadvantage was, 20 percent said “bringing in the wrong kinds of people.”

The pollsters asked respondents to choose their favorite downtown on Long Island, and the winner wasn't even a downtown. The top vote-getter, at 20 percent, was “the mall.”