

## LI affordable housing answer in our backyards

By Joseph A. Betz/ Guest essay

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The obvious solution to Long Island's affordable housing crisis is to build more housing. Because of high land prices and construction costs, governments tend to incentivize developers with tax breaks, increased density, and rezoning. However, this approach often results in expensive construction, overbuilding, and only a few affordable units. Developers, aiming for high profits, prioritize high-priced housing over truly affordable options.

But successful communities need both old and new homes to maintain affordability and economic dynamism. If we only provide new housing to solve this crisis, it will not work.

Back in the 1950s, Long Island had available land and affordable housing, exemplified by William Levitt's suburban model, meeting the needs of a growing workforce and their expanding families. Available land is less plentiful these days but with an economy now based on technology, media, and high-end services, we still need affordable living spaces for the young professionals who fill these jobs.

Many young people entering the job market face other financial challenges, including telecommuting space, health insurance, and debt repayment. Unlike past generations, they don't expect lifetime jobs with pensions but instead move between positions, often as independent consultants. This shift means affordable housing is more critical than ever for economic mobility.

The lack of it contributes to another trend: Many local children who leave for college don't return. Unlike in 1960, when most stayed and worked on Long Island, today's young professionals see lower living costs and similar amenities elsewhere. The internet has further leveled access to goods and services, reducing the necessity of staying. As a result, Long Island experiences a brain drain, losing talented, highly educated young and ambitious people who fuel economic and cultural vitality.

We see that in our changing demographics. On my North Shore cul-de-sac of 11 homes, six are owned by retirees over 70, including two widows. Three more belong to couples with college-aged or recently graduated children, who are away, leaving only two occupied by families with school-age kids. In the 1960s, these homes were filled with young children, doubling the current density of the neighborhood. Declining school enrollments are evidence of this shift.

So where is Long Island's affordable housing solution? It lies in our own backyards. Instead of relying solely on costly new developments that serve developers more than residents, we should encourage homeowners, particularly retirees and empty nesters, to create accessory apartments or shared living spaces.

This approach would reduce housing costs, increase supply, and provide affordable options for young professionals. It would also help retirees manage inflation and fixed costs, boost local businesses with new customers, and maintain neighborhood character without large-scale development or overbuilding. With proper

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education on what being an accessory apartment landlord entails, homeowners could benefit while contributing to the long-term success of the community.

Resistance will come from expensive neighborhoods that wish to maintain exclusive single-family zoning - ironically, they have the most space for accessory apartments - and from developers who benefit from artificially high prices. However, by embracing housing solutions within existing communities, Long Island can remain competitive, attract fresh talent, and ensure a vibrant and economically resilient future. The question is not whether we can create affordable housing, it's whether we are willing to use the solutions already in our own backyards.

- THIS GUEST ESSAY reflects the views of Joseph A. Betz, architecture professor at Farmingdale State College and former member of the Brookhaven Town Planning Board.

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