



## Agents of change

*By Jeremy Harrell*

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Talk to Paul Tonna for long enough, and a theme emerges.

He says Long Island is “fractured,” “fragmented,” “broken.” The preceding generations created a balkanized Island divided into nearly 1,000 governments and taxing authorities, while a transportation network built for cars has isolated one town from the next.

History is starting to catch up with us. The roadways are jammed, unable to cope with the mountain of tires that cruise the pavement each day, and governments can’t seem to cooperate.

Suburbia, at least as it’s conceived on Long Island, is something close to dead, and now residents are experiencing the five stages of grief, says Tonna, who once led the Suffolk County Legislature when he wasn’t running a health-care company or teaching religion and philosophy. It starts out as a denial that anything’s wrong, and then turns to anger as voters get mad about rising property taxes. Next comes bargaining, prompting people to make small deals to forestall the bigger problem.

By Tonna’s reckoning, Long Island is somewhere in the fourth stage, depression, heading toward the fifth stage, acceptance.

“We’re moving down a road where we’re hitting critical mass, where Long Island has to make a decision,” Tonna says. “We need to be at the point where people accept reality and say they’re ready for a change.”

### **Index evolution**

Tonna’s isn’t a voice in the wilderness. The Rauch Foundation came to nearly the same conclusion a few years ago and in 2002 launched the Long Island Index, a statistical depiction of Tonna’s angst. In developing the Long Island

Index, the Rauch Foundation had sought assistance from a California economist, Doug Henton, who founded the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, a national network of civic associations that have formed around the country to bring about regional change.

Drew Bogner, president of Molloy College, serves on the Index's board, and with help from the Rauch Foundation, undertook a feasibility study to determine whether Molloy should launch a leadership institute, similar to those that belong to the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, to cure some of the Island's growing ills.

The Index was conceived to be an objective snapshot of the Island's condition, "a catalyst for action rather than an actor," says Carrie Meek-Gallagher, the Index's project director. The numbers alone won't move policy; they need the help of people willing to put weight behind the numbers and to change the Island's trajectory. The institute, in other words, could serve as that force.

"You arm people with that information and you put them in an environment to get them to work together – that's how you move that inertia," says Bogner, who worked in tandem with Ed Thompson, the college's vice president, on developing the plan.

So earlier this month, Molloy launched the Eneergeia Partnership: The Academy for Regional Stewardship at Molloy College, to educate the region's leaders and prepare them to create the Big Change. Perhaps not surprisingly, Molloy tapped Tonna to be the partnership's executive director.

This kind of interconnectedness, drawing together Molloy, the Rauch Foundation and a local politician, is exactly what Long Island could benefit from, Tonna says. Relying on his vast well of contacts, Tonna helped assemble a board of directors for the partnership that brings together leaders from high finance, religion, labor, publishing, academia, government and not-for-profits.

Ralph Ranghelli, business manager of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1049, has seen – and served on – plenty of business committees in which he says "everybody's well intentioned but progress is really slow." Eneergeia, however, given the "breadth of the people on board," feels different to him, which is what prompted Ranghelli to join the advisory board of directors.

"I think the potential is really great," he says. "I don't want to see our Island be less than what it has to the potential to be."

The Eneergeia Partnership is also a school, and the leaders recruited an equally broad first crop of students. The 30-plus member class, scheduled to graduate in 2008, includes bankers, a Newsday columnist, construction and real-estate executives, union leaders and not-for-profit activists.

Tonna is a big fan of Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller "The Tipping Point," and he borrows some of its key terms when talking about the partnership. (Tonna gave the partnership its name, too; "energeia" is the word Aristotle used to describe the action that turns potential energy into actuality.) Tonna, a "connector" who unites seemingly unconnected parties, believes in Gladwell's "rule of the few," which says that a handful of thoughtful actors can start revolutions.

"The traditional model has always been hierarchical," Tonna says. "The stewardship idea is about building bridges between networks that already exist. That's how you create a movement."

### **'Sins of our fathers'**

Bi-monthly classes start next month at a retreat in Cold Spring Harbor, where students and the board will be briefed on the new Long Island Index, slated for publication on Jan. 26. Tonna and Molloy envision a group that will take on affordable housing, the environment, energy, homelessness, transportation, health care and more. All of these problems, Tonna says, arise from a broken system that no longer serves people.

"We're now experiencing the sins of our fathers in terms of planning," Tonna says.

Other cities have embraced regional stewardship. Henton, of the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, estimates that there are some 50 groups around the country; Atlanta has had a program for 20 years while Orlando's has graduated more than 1,000 people, Henton says.

Atlanta's organization, the Atlanta Regional Commission, plays an instrumental role in topics as various as air quality and aging, and the commission is helping to nurture a regional transportation board to relieve the traffic-plagued region.

By linking up in a common cause, these diverse people, who might not otherwise work with each other, can build unlikely coalitions. And these are also leaders who frequently end up in positions to make important decisions.

"Lo and behold, they become mayors," Henton says. "They stay in touch and work on issues. These leaders have a vision that's broader than their jurisdiction. These relationships cross boundaries."

It's a reason that Nadia Marin-Molina, the executive director of the Workplace Project in Hempstead, has signed on for the inaugural class. Her organization advocates for immigrant workers and their families, and she says she wants to broaden her vision beyond her own "small segment of the community," and perhaps get other classmates to do the same.

“But it’s not about any one issue as about the larger picture,” Marin-Molina says. Affordable housing, for instance, is a universal issue on Long Island, one that affects a variety of perspectives, she says.

If the Energeia Partnership is going to change the world, or at least that part of it that’s on Long Island, it won’t happen overnight. “Real change happens in small steps, many of them taking place one right after another,” Bogner says.

But Tonna believes the partnership, through an evolving board of directors, new classes of students and a growing group of alumni, will slowly create a critical mass, a tipping point, if you will, that will bring about the big changes that must occur. “I can’t see the trends that are taking place lasting for another five years,” Tonna says.

“We’re preparing for that time when people say they’re ready for change,” he continued. “Within five years, you’ll have hundreds of people. That’s how you build a movement, and nobody’s doing it. We don’t need hundreds of leaders on Long Island. We need thousands.”

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