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ON THE WEB

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In Middle Age, the Suburbs of Long Island Show Wear

By Bruce Lambert

Long Island, where post-World War II suburbia was born, is in a midlife crisis and battling some disturbing social and economic trends that provide a window into issues that suburbs around the nation may face, according to a 15-month study sponsored by a nonprofit group.

Average pay from Long Island employers has dropped in recent years, little land is left to develop, taxes are high, cars are multiplying faster than people, commuting times are longer and people are being priced out of the housing market, the report said. And an increasing minority population is coinciding with persistent segregation.

Perhaps most striking is that a region long synonymous with families and children is losing part of its younger generation, and the median age of residents is steadily rising. In the 1990's, the number of people age 18 to 34 shrank by 143,184, or 20 percent, in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, the census showed.

That age group also declined nationwide, reflecting the "baby bust" that followed the baby boom. But the island's drop was five times the national decrease of 4 percent.

The report, titled Long Island Index 2004: Coming Together for Long Island's Future, analyzes the region's strengths and problems and sets goals for improvement. The Rauch Foundation of Garden City sponsored the study in a joint project with an array of government, civic, business and labor groups. Similar efforts are under way in Boston, Chicago and Silicon Valley.

Long Island, where Levittown sprang from potato fields as an instant community, is now "the nation's first mature suburb," the report said. "Long Island is a case study in how do we reinvent the suburbs," said the study's director, Carrie Meek Gallagher. "Anecdotally, similar dynamics are happening in housing, the economy and transportation around Boston. It's almost post-suburbia. What do we do now?"

The foundation's president, Dr. Nancy Rauch Douzinas, said, "We're hoping this will be a real tool for action." County Executives Thomas R. Suozzi of Nassau and Steve Levy of Suffolk are to speak at the report's presentation today.

With 2.8 million people - more than the populations in 19 states - 1 million jobs and a \$112 billion annual economy, Long Island remains a premier suburb. Its assets include highly rated schools, health care, parks, beaches and shopping and an educated work force, high employment, low crime and access to New York City.

But the report found "a growing disparity by income, race and ethnicity that is clear in current housing, educational and health indicators."

The study called the "brain drain" on the island alarming. "The region is exporting its most valuable product—its talented young people," the report said.

A survey of young adults found that 53 percent were considering moving out, citing the high cost of living, especially soaring housing prices and burdensome taxes. As the young have left and Levittown-era pioneers have lingered into retirement, the island's median age has steadily risen. Now 29 percent of the population is older than 50.

The sizzling real estate market may be a bonanza for sellers, but a third of Long Islanders spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, the report said.

In 1999 the median home price was about 2.5 times the median annual income. By last year, the median price had jumped to four times the median income in Suffolk and nearly 4.5 in Nassau.

While the median home price, at \$363,700, is comparable to those in other New York suburbs, the report said the scarcity of apartments resulted in "some of the highest rents in the metropolitan region."

As for new housing, government and developers will have to be inventive because "there is very little undeveloped land left on Long Island that is not protected parkland," the report said. About 70 percent of the island is developed—nearly 90 percent in Nassau. By contrast, the report said that suburbs north of the city and in northern New Jersey are about 40 percent developed.

Despite the fabled luxury of the Gold Coast and the elite Hamptons, the report said that 154,000 Long Islanders, or 5.5 percent, live below the poverty line, and many others are coping with dwindling income.

From 1990 to 2003, the island lost 29,000 technology manufacturing jobs as most of the remaining aerospace industry - once the local economic engine - vanished. Still, there was a net gain of 80,500 jobs, led by an expansion of 34,000 jobs in health care.

The catch was that the new jobs generally paid less. Average pay on Long Island peaked in 2000 at \$42,875, and during the recession, it gradually slipped 6 percent to \$40,329 last year.

The Long Island paycheck premium is also shrinking, the report said. In 1993 Long Island workers earned an average of \$39,385 a year, compared with the national average of \$34,272, a difference of \$5,113, or about 15 percent. Last year the local average was \$40,329, while the national average was \$38,636, a difference of only about 5 percent.

Demographics are taking on new hues. The number of nonwhite residents increased from 16 percent of the population in 1990 to 24 percent in 2000. Hispanics are now the largest minority, making up 10 percent of the population, up from 6 percent in 1990. Next are blacks at 8 percent.

But the races mostly remain in separate neighborhoods. "Long Island is one of the most racially segregated suburban regions in the nation," the report said.

Immigrants are changing the island, where 196,255 of them moved between 1995 and 2002, the study said. Domestic migration in those years was led by 122,000 people from Queens and Brooklyn.

Mass transportation is limited, and, as any local resident can attest, traffic is fierce. Ninety-four percent of households have at least one car; two-thirds have two or more. "From 1980 to 2000, the number of motor vehicles grew by 19 percent, more than three times the rate of population growth," the report said.

Commutes are longer, too. In the 1990's, the number of workers commuting less than 30 minutes to work declined by nearly 50,000, the census showed. The number of people with longer commutes increased, especially those whose commutes took more than 90 minutes.

The government that oversees Long Island is large, cumbersome and costly, the report found. "Jurisdictional fragmentation" characterizes the hodgepodge of two counties, 13 towns, two cities, 95 villages, 128 school systems and hundreds of other special districts for libraries, fire departments and other services, the report said.

Together those governments employ 195,000 workers, more than any industry. Their workers' average pay is a fifth higher than the national average for government workers, a cost born by local taxpayers.

"Long Island is at a tipping point, facing serious challenges," Dr. Douzinas said, adding that she was optimistic that solutions would be found.

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ON THE WEB

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Young Adults Call L.I. a Fine Place to Grow Up, and Leave

By Patrick Healy

UNIONDALE, N.Y., Feb. 19—One by one, the children of suburbia are leaving Long Island.

There is the 24-year-old graduate student who moved to Washington State to study anthropology and found that it was cheaper to live in Seattle than Hempstead. There is the sheriff's investigator, Timothy Ortwein, who left and bought his first house, in West Virginia, at age 23. And there is Emil Soskin, 24, a third-year law student who is fed up with strip malls and subdivisions and longs for an apartment in Greenwich Village.

New York's suburbs have long struggled to hold on to young adults, but county officials and demographers say the problem is becoming a crisis. In Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester Counties, 18- to 34-year-olds are leaving the suburbs at some of the fastest rates in the nation, moving upstate, to the South and the West and into New York City.

Long Island, whose Levittown developments are shorthand for postwar suburbia, is a petri dish for the problem, development experts say. The young families and just-marrieds who once flocked here now balk at the soaring housing prices, high taxes and monochrome of suburban life.

"What is the incentive to stay on Long Island?" asked Ilyssa Lindner, a 23-year-old nursing student who lives in Oceanside. "The cost of living out here is absolutely outrageous. You graduate, you're making good money, and you can't afford anything. It's driving younger people off Long Island."

In the past decade, the number of Long Islanders between 18 and 34 years old has dropped 20 percent, a rate five times the national average, according to a recent survey of Long Island's population and economy. New York's northern suburbs saw an 18 percent drop in the same population over that time.

The pattern is gradually reshaping the suburbs, on Long Island in particular, said Carrie Meek Gallagher, who directed the survey, the Long Island Index 2004. As the average age creeps up and birth rates fall, county officials worry that an absence of young workers will cripple the suburbs' growth and economies.

"You're losing the talent; you're going to start losing businesses," Ms. Gallagher said. "It could change the whole face of the island, the whole face of the place in the next 10 years."

Some county experts said they have started to notice ripples of that change. Some companies bus in employees from Brooklyn and Queens, while other major Long Island businesses like Grumman or Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory are struggling to attract talented young engineers, Ms. Gallagher said.

To stem the exodus, county officials said, they have to make Long Island both enticing and affordable – both difficult tasks. The Nassau county executive, Thomas R. Suozzi, said building denser developments and moderately priced housing in downtowns, poorer neighborhoods and old brownfield industrial sites is crucial to keeping younger people on Long Island.

"If we're going to grow, we're going to have to change our rules from when they were set up, in the 40's and 50's," Mr. Suozzi said.

For countless people, the cycle of suburbia has been a predictable loop: Grow up, gripe that there is nothing to do, attend college, move to the city, then move back home to raise a family and skate toward middle age. But conversations this week with a dozen young Long Islanders who have left - or want to - suggest that they have little interest in returning.

Mr. Ortwein, 24, the sheriff's investigator, is one of them. After growing up in Malverne and graduating from Elmira College with a degree in criminal justice, Mr. Ortwein tried to find a job as a police officer so that he could afford to buy a house in Nassau County, where the median home price is \$405,000.

Instead of renting, he got a job with a sheriff's department in Virginia, and he and his wife bought a three-bedroom log cabin nearby, in Jefferson County, W.Va. His property taxes are \$600 per year, compared with Long Islanders's taxes that average \$3,000 to \$4,000.

"I'm the only kid from our high school class who's actually been able to afford a house," Mr. Ortwein said. "We had to give up Long Island to be able to afford something. We're going to stay. The schools are great down here, and it's a great place to raise kids."

According to the Long Island survey, 53 percent of young adults in Nassau and Suffolk Counties are thinking of moving away, while only one-third of people in their 20's and 30's in the northern suburbs and New Jersey said they were considering leaving.

In the survey and interviews, those who want to go say that the cost of living and taxes are too high, that housing is scarce and overpriced, and that the available jobs do not pay enough to support living in the suburbs. Many said they need a car to get around, but do not want to pay high insurance costs and \$1.80 for a gallon of gas.

"The average person 18 to 34 can't afford to live on Long Island," said Jon Teaford, a professor at Purdue University who studies suburban development.

The exodus happens in drips and spurts. Some go away to college and never return, while others go back to live with families in the suburbs after graduating, either to apply to graduate schools, plot their next move or save money on rent while they work.

In the upper-income Suffolk County hamlet of Dix Hills, Shelby Tancer, 25, lives with his parents and commutes to Ozone Park, Queens, to teach first grade.

His friends from high school have all moved, but Mr. Tancer said he hopes to stay. "I thought more people would be around," he said, talking at his parents' home. "The money and the costs are just crazy. You can't be fresh-faced out of college and buy a house or rent a condo. It's tough. It's tough to stay around here."

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