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COMMENTS OF THE LONG ISLAND BUILDERS INSTITUTE  
ON THE DRAFT 2010 NASSAU COUNTY MASTER PLAN

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After a thorough reading, the Draft 2010 Nassau County Master Plan is a commendable effort at modern regional planning. Alas, the county's planning agency is only advisory to local zoning authorities. We see the draft plan as a "nudge" to towns, villages and cities within the county to do the right thing. And, as such, it is clearly a "nudge" in the right direction.

The draft plan incorporates most *au courant* planning concepts; walkable communities, mixed-use, higher density downtowns, sustainable development and smart growth. These are unobjectionable to Long Island's building industry and if widely adopted could stimulate building activity and the development of attractive centers to help retain our younger workers and seniors.

The draft plan proposes directing high value jobs to targeted areas, creating new housing choices for seniors and younger families, promoting energy efficiency in the built environment and offers serious recommendations to these ends.

Yet, the draft plan does not address several critical areas of concern. These include assessment reform, government process reform and existing residential neighborhood development issues.

The draft plan also mentions a cumbersome land use approval process, but does not elaborate on expediting land use approvals, except very generally in downtown district development. More focus on improving the process, including the county agency's processes would be useful.

Similarly, the draft plan mentions high cost of doing business and high property taxes, but offers little concrete guidance on reductions. Real property taxes are a key component of both high commercial and residential rental costs and high home ownership costs. Reform of an antiquated and seriously flawed real property tax assessment system is a key recommendation, for without such reform, many of the good things proposed can't happen.

Aside from a quotation from a citizen about Craig's List offerings of only basements for rent at affordable levels, there is no examination of the illegal conversion issue and the potential to create more rental and homeownership opportunities in the existing residential neighborhoods that comprise the largest share of Nassau's land area. The draft plan mentions only preservation of 1/5 of the open space in existing residential neighborhoods and nothing about development of the remainder in ways that further Master Plan goals. Also, infill development within these neighborhoods, or the legal and illegal creation of rentals is not discussed. Perhaps the fashionable focus on downtowns has led to neglect of serious examination of outlying neighborhood issues. Construction in these areas is bread and butter for the building industry, whether or not fashionable. This absence of analysis and recommendation is curious, considering the potential impact on housing opportunities for young families and seniors. The county planning agency's direct review authority is concentrated in these areas. But, no mention is made of recent regulatory changes or their effect.

Upgrading of the existing housing stock underway through demolition and rebuilding is also unmentioned, although it offers significant growth in tax base and improved home ownership opportunity.

Discussion of the need for rental housing for larger families is completely absent from discussion in the draft plan. Are we to suppose the needs of families for three bedroom apartments are adequately met today and within the master plan's horizon. Proposing that at least 10% of all new units be reserved for young workers, seniors and veterans is fine, but an assumption that larger family housing needs are met by homeownership alone is fallacious.

The draft plan also does not focus on the creation of pocket multi-family building along commercial corridors and indeed mentions only in-fill commercial development. Walkability does not always require a downtown. The existence of commercial strips along highways provides significant opportunity for housing creation near essential commercial, health and social services and along bus lines. The existence of only 17,700, three to nine unit buildings, in a 458,577 unit built environment , demonstrates the potential. Projections of a need for 21,000 new units by 2030, argue that multi-family housing outside downtowns should also be encouraged, not neglected in favor of the HUB and downtowns.

The recommendations concerning downtown redevelopment are excellent. Welcome, are recommendations for development of downtown district overlay ordinances. A county planning developed model could be very useful to municipalities addressing the issue and more standardized definitions, design specifications and particularly, shared parking schematics, would also be desirable. The smart growth tools urged for these places are unremarkable in that they follow current planning theory. Good ideas for better downtowns include concentrating density near transit hubs, relying less on lists of uses than quality of construction and use of visuals rather than textual descriptions, smaller lots and reduced setbacks, more as- of- right, and use of stories rather than height in such districts. We believe ½ mile or ten minute walk is better than ¼ mile for defining such areas. Our rationale is that when using a geographic centroid, much of a quarter mile is asphalt lot.

The development of a model ordinance to govern alternative energy installations on existing and new residential units is beneficial to expanding use of these energy standards. Too often, such installations run afoul of height or side-lot set back standards and unspecified aesthetic standards. The wide variation in town, village and city approaches interferes with more universal installation and manufacturing standards. More uniformity could lead to cost reductions.

On balance the Long Island Builders Institute is highly supportive of the draft plan and providing county planning with any resources needed to enhance its technical assistance, and facilitation roles with towns, villages and cities.