

Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down to Business

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Looking skyward

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Things are looking up for Long Island's builders.

In the nation's first suburb, after decades in which high rises were anathema, projects that pierce the sky are seeking and sometimes winning approvals.

Advocates of vertical construction argue there's a shortage of land and affordable housing, a need for apartments and condos and that tall buildings can be erected, in particular in downtowns, without changing the nature of communities.

Critics maintain high-rise projects could cause congestion, could bring more people to an already-crowded area and could easily get out of hand.

But builders are starting to win some battles in part by promising millions in property taxes at a time when residents face soaring rates and by throwing in amenities to sweeten deals.

The Winston, a nine-story building, earlier this month won local approvals in Mineola. The Islandia Village Center, an eight-story residential, hotel and retail development, won approvals in Islandia. And in Glen Cove, the 111-unit, five-story Avalon Bay residential complex was built.

Meanwhile, the Lighthouse Development Group – a partnership between Charles Wang and RexCorp – plans an approximately 30-story luxury residential tower and hotel as part of a mixed-use plan in Hempstead.

"To make Long Island sustainable and competitive, you need to recognize you're going to need more concentrated density and mixed-use projects with height," said Uniondale-based RexCorp chief executive Scott Rechler. "If we don't have that, we're not going to be competitive."

Rechler said he's done about 125 town hall meetings and traffic has been a much bigger issue than height. "Height is not a third-rail aversion," Rechler said. "In my opinion, you need some level of height to be successful in developing for the future."

He added, "Where there's a scarcity of land, you want to have open space. You concentrate the density in specific locations."

Projects are not being simply proposed and disposed of, but winning support from some communities.

"Municipalities are ultimately approving these things," said Eric Alexander, executive director of Northport-based smart-growth planning group Vision Long Island. "And there's community acceptance in certain areas. Not everywhere."

The new look for Long Island, based on these plans, calls for a low-lying suburb with an occasional pinnacle.

"I believe that's what's needed to make the Island grow," said Ed Blumenfeld, president of Syosset-based Blumenfeld Development Group. "We're going to need some vertical development."

Vincent Polimeni, president of Garden City-based Polimeni International, said he got a warm welcome after presenting the plan for the 285-unit Winston condominium complex to the Mineola town board.

"People got up and applauded. I got a standing ovation. The entire board approved it, and they clapped," Polimeni said. "This is the first time this happened in my entire life." The project still must be approved by Garden City, since it's only about 300 feet from that jurisdiction.

The question for many is no longer whether to build up, but where and just how high to go before problems outweigh benefits. "You do it with quality at the right location near public transportation," Polimeni said. "It's got to be done in the right location for the right reasons."

That doesn't mean high rises are getting a high-five all over Long Island. The Town of Smithtown, Alexander said, hasn't welcomed vertical development.

"You just don't have that interest by the community, the development community or municipal leaders," he said. "I think they're happy the way they are."

And plans sometimes get trimmed or transformed. The Islandia project started as a 14-story residential tower, before being cut down to size. RexCorp's proposal for the Glen Cove waterfront started at 16 stories, but is being negotiated down.

"I think the key to density is to make sure there are other amenities and benefits to the community," Alexander said.

Lighthouse plans to set aside \$55 million for transportation that could be used to integrate its project into the community. And the Islandia Village Center includes a public plaza and gazebo as well as additional tax revenue.

Polimeni plans to build a 450-car parking garage nearby and give 50 spaces to the town and additional senior citizen housing.

Developers argue that constructing apartment buildings helps businesses in beleaguered downtowns.

"When they're situated in areas with other businesses, you have an uptick in economic activity for the local businesses," Alexander said. The Glen Cove Chamber of Commerce has claimed that two Avalon communities boosted downtown business by 15 percent.

There is another benefit to residential high rises. "You're capturing people who would otherwise leave," Alexander said, noting one- and two-bedrooms and studios serve very young and older residents.

Polimeni would like to develop taller, mixed-use projects with stores on the ground floor topped by offices and housing. But he sees obstacles.

"You need to do this with baby steps," he said. "They're not going to go for a 15-story building and higher, which is what you'd need."

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