

## NEWS

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## OPINION

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# Don't let TOD be DOA

Transit-oriented development is critical to our future, but too few places are getting it right

Whatever Long Island's future may look like, a major route to get there is development that both uses and improves mass transit. That's the way to make our downtowns vibrant and to ease some of the congestion on our roads.

To reach that goal, to bring new life to the streets around major rail hubs such as Hicksville and Ronkonkoma, we'll have to defeat NIMBY thinking. We'll need more of the attitude symbolized by the YIMBY signs that dominated a crucial public hearing last Tuesday night at Huntington Town Hall.

The hearing was about a proposed transit-oriented development — or TOD — a short walk from the Long Island Rail Road's Huntington station. If it gets built, this 530-unit plan would be a landmark in making TOD, a concept already gaining ground nationwide, come to life here.

## The D-word

The sticking point is density. Current zoning would allow 109 single-family homes — not a mix of 530 rental and for-sale dwellings. Density is vital to create transit-oriented development and to allow the developer to offer a quarter of the units at affordable prices. But on the Island, density is a four-letter word, a perceived threat to the suburban way of life.

Given that suspicion, it wouldn't have been unusual if the hearing had become a heated Not in My Backyard

confrontation. But it didn't. People did express concerns about density and traffic — but civilly. And, of those who chose to speak, a strong majority favored the development proposal by AvalonBay Communities. Many had YIMBY signs — Yes in My Backyard — part of a campaign by the Long Island Progressive Coalition to counteract NIMBYism.

But a calm hearing in one town on one plan is no guarantee that transit-oriented development will spread smoothly throughout the Island, as it needs to do. In fact, it's not even a guarantee that the town board will approve this particular proposal.

But there's reason to be optimistic, because Supervisor Frank Petrone and the developers have done an intelligent job of community outreach. Petrone's approach has been more imaginative and forward-thinking than the one typically used by another supervisor further west: Oyster Bay's John Venditto.

Venditto's attitude has essentially been that it's the developer's job to placate the community — and then come to the town with the proposal. He's hardly alone in that approach, but he has raised it to an art form that he calls the Oyster Bay Way.

AvalonBay ran into that with its plan to build apartments in Oyster Bay. Unlike the Huntington proposal, it wasn't an affordable, transit-oriented development. In any case, it met strong opposition, and Venditto



A proposal for transit-oriented development in Huntington Station, above. Meanwhile, the Town of Oyster Bay demolished its crumbling Hicksville LIRR parking garage, right, 18 months ago. It plans to build another garage.



made it publicly clear that the town wouldn't even hear the application.

## A tale of two towns

In contrast, Petrone played a more active role. In a conversation with the current owner of the property, he said that the 109 single-family homes were not the best possible use for the land. So he suggested developers who might do something more imaginative, including AvalonBay. And he helped arrange an early meeting between AvalonBay and the school district, a key stakeholder.

From the developer's point of view, Petrone helped introduce them to the community, and AvalonBay went on to meet with a variety of groups, including those that focus on housing, economic development and business.

To be clear, this is not a perfect TOD project. While it is very close to mass transit, offers 25 percent of its units at affordable rates, and will likely stimulate further revitalization of Huntington Station, it does not include retail and other uses.

Still, it's a project that deserves support. In approving it, Huntington would create new zoning for transit-oriented development — a key step forward, with one asterisk: The Suffolk County Planning Commission approved the project but expressed disappointment that the TOD zoning would apply only to this one narrow

area — the same concern that one of the speakers voiced Tuesday night.

The commission is moving toward developing a model TOD zoning district that towns could adopt. Towns all over the Island should also begin thinking about creating this form of zoning, to attract future projects.

Perhaps the most obvious location is Hicksville, with its major LIRR station. Sadly, the most prominent feature there right now is a vacant lot where the crumbling parking garage used to be. The Town of Oyster Bay is rebuilding it on the same spot, but so far without a commitment to re-imagine and revitalize Hicksville, using transit-oriented development.

In Suffolk, Brookhaven Supervisor Mark Lesko wants to do TOD — a mix of retail, office, residential and perhaps a hotel — in the area near the Ronkonkoma station. But it won't be easy. It borders Islip, and the needs of both towns will have to be met.

For now, the Huntington Station project could be a catalyst, to help make TOD stand for transit-oriented development — not just the same Tired Old Development.

## BOX SCORE

# \$55.7 billion

That's how much 36 recession-battered states cut from their budgets this year, according to the National Governors Association. New York bucked the trend to trim. The 2009-2010 budget here grew by \$10 billion to \$131.9 billion, an increase fueled in part by \$7 billion in new taxes and fees.