Panel Discusses Urban Sprawl

Residents Discuss the Alarming Disappearance of Long Island's Open Spaces

By Carly Weinreb

The threat that increased housing and community developments pose to Long Island's steadily diminishing number of open spaces has many residents worried. Locust Valley and neighboring town and village residents gathered Tuesday, May 10, at the Locust Valley Library to debate the issue of land preservation vs. development during a panel discussion sponsored by The New York Times.

Event attendees were fairly divided regarding the issue, with some people advocating the protection of open spaces to preserve the quality of life on Long Island, and others supporting the development of land to decrease housing costs and to improve the economy.

"We're running out of land; we've got to make better use of what we have," Locust Valley resident Robert Francis said.

Although most people at the well-attended discussion agreed that a balance had to be achieved between space and sprawl, a solution was not agreed upon. Possible solutions included "smart growth" - an initiative which combines land use planning with open space preservation - and brownfields development, which is an effort to clean up and build on contaminated lands. Another suggestion involved introducing a Hovercraft water taxi transportation service to decrease traffic and congestion on LI caused by lack of mass transit. Those who attended people recognized the need for
increased communication between the towns and villages to provide a more unified approach to solving the issue.

The event was sponsored by The New York Times in an effort at community outreach and to increase the visibility of the paper on the north shore. The New York Times editorial board member Lawrence Downes, who also served as the moderator for the event, hoped that the discussion would allow him to learn about issues that concern his readers. "Anytime we get a chance to go out and meet readers...is almost as good as reporting," Mr. Downes said.

The discussion was led by three panelists, including North Shore Land Alliance Board Chairman Carter Bales, Long Island Regional Planning Board Deputy Seth Forman and The New York Times Long Island reporter Vivian Toy.

According to Mr. Bales, overdevelopment has decreased the beauty, sense of community and quality of life on Long Island. Mr. Bales also claimed that urban sprawl decreases the value of pre-existing homes, essentially robbing families of the wealth invested in the value of their home. In addition, Mr. Bales argued that the overpopulation caused by urban sprawl will result in overcrowded school districts and will tax the supply of natural resources, especially the water supply. "The taps won't have water when we turn them on if we're not careful," he said.

Mr. Forman disagreed with Mr. Bales' reasoning and claimed that land preservation increases the cost of living making it harder to live on the Island. He said the rising cost of housing is especially problematic for young people, whose decreased population on Long Island is believed by many to be hurting the economy. Mr. Forman also argued that popular opinion against sprawl has been perpetuated by a bias in the media, and cited the fact that the majority of Americans are moving to sprawling areas.

President of The Land Use Institute and event attendee Clifford Sondock said he preferred a free-market approach to land use. Mr. Sondock disagreed that there is a land shortage on Long Island and denied the efficacy of public transportation. "We're in favor of the right to property and managing growth as opposed to stopping it," Mr. Sondock said.
However, many people opposed this approach, fearing that unregulated land development would turn Long Island into another Queens. Ms. Toy, one of the panelists, cited the town of New Castle as an example of a town that became blighted through such unchecked and unplanned development.

The Village of Muttontown, on the other hand, has tried a highly regulated approach to land management, enacting a temporary moratorium on all subdivisions of three-acre zones, and has contemplated increasing property zoning from three to five acres. Muttontown Mayor Richard Murcott said he is invested in preserving the green spaces of his town, but that it is getting increasingly costly. "I would like to preserve as much as we can but it's a very difficult thing to do," he said. "Everyone's in favor of it [land preservation] but no one's willing to step up." A decision has not yet been made for the future of zoning in Muttontown when the moratorium is lifted in three months.

Mr. Murcott also mentioned that increased zoning diminishes the water supply because the amount of water used for lawn care is much greater than the amount used within a household.

Although no conclusion was reached about the future of Long Island's open spaces, almost everyone agreed that increased communication between the townships is vital to the correct management of growth and development.

During the meeting, many of the attendees discussed past actions by Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi and Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy regarding land use. Mr. Levy recently made an effort to unify planning initiatives by proposing changes to the Long Island Regional Planning Board, a bicounty advisory board involved with land use.