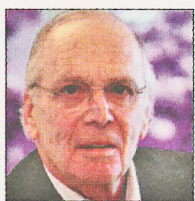


Projects can't be hostages to community groups



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There is a new and challenging hurdle for developers to clear on Long Island if they wish to build anything, and while it is unofficial it may be the toughest, most intractable obstacle yet in trying to create jobs, investment and confidence in our future. I am referring to the new, un-credentialed, grassroots, neighborhood-watch, community-based economic/demographic/socio-graphic market analysis justification review committee.

During a recent open competition held in Lindenhurst, three developers offered profoundly different visions for a particular site. The various proposals, this author's included, were innovative and well thought out, and any one of them would add to the community, creating the type of investment a township needs.

While all three were different in their approach to development, they all had to follow a similar trajectory. First and foremost, does the project make economic sense? Before any rational developer even contemplates a concept he or she must consider whether there is a return on investment. Every economic facet needs to be considered early on because the developer is going to spend millions on studies before even broaching the topic with a municipality.

What are the demographics of the community and where are these trend lines going? What are the current real estate values in the surrounding area and what impact will this proposal have on those numbers? A quarter of a million dollars can easily be spent on getting these answers before turning to the detailed environmental and traffic studies. A variety of architectural studies needs to be commissioned before ever getting to a town meeting so that the proposal works in harmony with the neighborhood.

Then government reports need to be filed separately and distinctly from the internal reviews already paid for, documenting the scope of the project, its environmental and economic impact along with a mind-numbing set of reviews just for the opportunity to appear before a town board.

Yet with all these efforts those three developers in Lindenhurst found themselves confronted with questions from a handful of neighbors who want the applicants to share proprietary economic data on just how their company is going to be assured a return on investment. Say what?

Developers have an obligation to consider aesthetics, traffic and environmental questions from the surrounding neighbors. But when grassroots critics can block a proposal based on questions regarding the developer's business model then it's time to pack it in. Let's be clear. In a free market no developer is going to put millions of dollars at risk without having conducted full economic due diligence on a project and no developer is going to share that information in an effort to gain approvals.

At some point our elected officials are going to have to bring down the curtain on this theater of the absurd or simply adopt the Smithtown model of shuttered stores, abandoned homes and rutted streets.

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