

LI's downtowns are vital treasures

We must ensure that we strengthen these fundamental community builders

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Guest Essay

Long Island's downtowns are major community assets, as important to the health of the region as our railroad, universities, research laboratories and natural resources. By providing a walkable area with conveniences such as pharmacies, bakeries, restaurants and retail stores for books, clothing, stationery and other goods, these centers represent the social and commercial life of a town. Unlike malls or shopping centers, they give us a sense of place and belonging.

Historically, downtowns on Long Island have evolved from their roles as centers for the region's agricultural and fishing industries. Huntington, for instance, was a main agricultural area and the center for the British during the American Revolution, while neighboring Oyster Bay was more connected to the sea and played a major role in George Washing-

ton's spy network. For the next 100-plus years, these and other towns in the region served the social and business needs of their residents.

By the early 20th century, the automobile's introduction meant that people were no longer as constrained by where they lived. After World War II, the growth of suburban housing, strip malls and big box retailers turned Long Island into a commuter community and moved our daily interactions well beyond the historic town centers. Today, following decades of growth in digital communications and online retail, those interactions are increasingly online. In fact, the average daily screen time for adults is more than 10 hours a day, bringing with it attendant increases in feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

The Rauch Foundation, aiming to understand the impact of COVID-19 on our vital town centers, over the winter commissioned research to see how downtowns have fared during this time. The hope was



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The dining room at Hatch in Huntington, in 2018.

this research could assist our downtowns in adapting to new conditions, thereby strengthening them for the future. Among the findings, researchers found that over a third of all downtown businesses projected a loss of more than 50% in revenue in 2020 compared to prior years. Permanent closures in lower-income communities were significantly higher than average.

The report offers 11 interventions aimed at accelerating recovery. These include doubling down on support for

small businesses, particularly in communities of color, repurposing storefronts and outdoor spaces, and developing year-round open streets. Longer-term recommendations include investment in transit-oriented development and multifamily housing. And to preserve our most precious resource — water — recommendations call for sewers where appropriate, high-tech septic systems and green infrastructure.

Nassau County Executive Laura Curran has included the report on the recently launched

Boost Nassau Resource Center website, and she has indicated that the recommendations dovetail with Nassau's efforts around investing federal recovery funding. In Suffolk, County Executive Steve Bellone has convened meetings with senior staff and local legislators to put into action the recommendations that will best support the county's revitalization efforts.

Even in the midst of our demanding lives, downtowns continue to draw us in, connecting us with one another and linking our present with our past. As one of the few remaining places for direct human interaction, downtowns are essential spaces for connecting us to one another and to Long Island's history. We recommend that we all do our part by supporting efforts to strengthen our downtowns and visiting and enjoying these fundamental community builders.

■ **THIS GUEST ESSAY** reflects the views of Nancy Douzinas and Patti Schaefer, the president and managing director, respectively, of the Rauch Foundation. The foundation provided a three-year grant to Newsday to establish its nextLI project.