



Alexander: LI overcoming obstacles

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By Eric Alexander

At this year's Smart Growth Awards, Nassau County Executive Ed Mangano [was recognized for his work](#) securing funding for the Bay Park Sewage Treatment Plant, IDA investments in more than 1,200 units of downtown transit-oriented housing and passage of Nassau's Complete Streets law.

H2M's Robert Scheiner was honored for working on infrastructure investments and being a model corporate citizen. Bernadette Martin of Friends & Farmers was honored for operating farmer's markets in downtowns across LI and for providing one of the few bright spots of revitalization in post-Sandy Long Beach.

Other awardees Friday included [Envision Valley Stream](#) and Village of Valley Stream for supporting transit-oriented development housing; [Operation Splash](#) for cleaning up South Shore waterways and investing in the Bay Park Sewage Treatment Plant; the Great Neck Sewer District for a state-of-the-art facility upgrade; and Suffolk Leg. Jay Schneiderman, I-Montauk, for promoting Sunday bus services.

Redevelopment projects honored Friday included [Greenview Properties](#) in Bay Shore for well-designed mixed-use downtown developments; Watchcase in Sag Harbor, which creatively brings life to an old industrial facility; Downtown on Main in Smithtown, for approved apartments at a vacant lumberyard; and Wincoram Commons in Coram, which is recreating a shuttered movie theater with a dash of community vision.

Post-Sandy community rebuilding volunteers, Neighbors Supporting Neighbors in Babylon, Sandy Support Massapequa Style & 11518 in East Rockaway represent some of the best local leadership helping communities. All told, the collective journeys of these award-winners help us identify the pitfalls making revitalization so difficult. Among them:

Excess regional planning. Long Island has more than 15 regional plans with more on the way. With no regional government and more substantive progress on the local level, endless regional planning is futile and confuses the public while diluting collective efforts.

Over-reliance on design criteria. Some planning has focused more on academic activity but less on working with local decision-makers. We have seen strange design competitions and an ignorance of the public – and the regulatory processes that actually permit construction.

An attitude that more regulation is better. We add regulation piecemeal in the hopes that it will all fit together; we create comprehensive codes that don't interact with existing regulations.

A disconnect with the public. Often, academic conferences hold well-attended sessions teaching us how to connect with people. Comedian Chris Rock ridiculed a lady who was proud to say “I take care of my kids” saying “You’re supposed to take care of your kids.” Similarly, to everyone who says “I talk to the people,” we should say “You’re supposed to talk to people!” The people make our market. Who are we planning, designing and building with if not the public? Rule No. 1 is to avoid insulting folks by calling them idiots, NIMBYs, crackpots, crazies or the like, in any public forum.

When we stumble into these pitfalls, we risk diluting the substantive gains we’ve made over the last 20 years. In order to create great places, we must gain the trust of the people by stepping into their shoes.

What are folks dealing with right now? Healthcare costs up \$200 or more per month, energy costs up 20 to 30 percent (even after our state promised freezes with a new operator), wages lagging behind tax increases, bureaucrats messing with our schools with the Common Core curriculum and nearly impossible home and business credit access.

In a nutshell, people say they love the work we do for downtowns and they want us to continue to design safe streets and help Long Island get its fair share of funds for sewers, transit and infrastructure projects – and they want us to tell the people in charge to stop hurting us.

We are a movement that enjoys ideas and place-making excellence, and we’re proud of the progress. We shouldn’t stop developing the big ideas, but we must also listen to local people like this year’s Smart Growth Awards winners. Take a moment and talk to them, or to 10 random people in your downtown; buy them a cup of coffee and ask how they’re doing, and find out what we can do to assist their community. And please send their ideas to ea@visionlongisland.org.

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