



Commuters on the platform of the Rockville Centre LIRR station in Rockville Centre, June 18, 2014. Rockville Centre bounces back from recession and has Long Island's lowest unemployment rate. (Credit: Heather Walsh / Heather Walsh)

Rockville Centre's housing mix, 'cool downtown' attracting young people

Originally published: June 20, 2014 3:49 PM

Updated: June 20, 2014 7:48 PM

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For decades, Long Island has grappled with how to retain its young people, who flee the region's high costs, lack of affordable housing and suburban sprawl.

One community making a focused effort to create more options for them, experts say, is Rockville Centre, with its thriving downtown and growing stock of apartments.

The village's mayor, Francis X. Murray, stresses that he wants to retain the residential character of the midsized village of 24,109 residents, but he also believes in expanding diversified housing as part of the "cool downtown" concept for attracting young people.

Some experts agree that the cool downtown concept as exhibited in Rockville Centre could make a big difference on Long Island, boosting the region's economy.

'Livable and walkable place'

"In some ways Rockville Centre is a model for what many other communities can be," said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of Hofstra University's National Center for Suburban Studies. He moved back to the village two years ago from Huntington to be closer to Hofstra and for the village's "pulse," he said. "It's a livable and walkable place that has a range of housing stock, a diversifying population, and jobs along the full spectrum of the market."



(Credit: Heather Walsh / Heather Walsh) Melissa Catalano, owner of Elements Massage on Sunrise Highway in Rockville Centre, opened her thriving business only one year ago, gets a shoulder massage from Tina Barrella, massage therapist, during the 1st Annual Eat.Shop.Rock.RVC, event in Rockville Centre, June 7, 2014. Rockville Centre bounces back from recession and has Long Island's lowest unemployment rate.

Some other experts say that while Rockville Centre's approach has promise, it's not necessarily a panacea; some areas lack many of the advantages the village has.

No matter where the approaches come from, experts say, Long Island badly needs ideas to reinvent itself as a place where people 20 to 34 years old want to live.

The last recession left the region with a double whammy: A longtime affordable-housing shortage is now compounded by fewer well-paying jobs. Lower-wage jobs have led employment growth here in recent years. Efforts by university-affiliated incubators to turn inventions into commercial products that lead to business creation and higher-paying jobs have yet to generate abundant jobs.

A recent survey of social media users reflected young Long Islanders' frustration. Destination LI, a nonprofit smart-growth group based in Plainview, found that Long Islanders ages 20 to 34 are unhappy because of too few housing options and too few jobs commensurate with their skills and salary expectations. More than 75 percent of the 413 respondents surveyed said the scant housing options may drive them away.

The young people surveyed said they wanted affordable housing "in walkable communities with public transportation." Such transit-oriented housing is known as "smart growth" and several planned housing complexes would address that.

But progress has been slow. The proposed 9,000-unit Heartland Town Square apartment project, which would be built close to the Deer Park train station, was first presented 12 years ago and is still inching toward approval.

Vibrant downtown a draw

Rockville Centre already has key elements of a vibrant downtown, "lots of apartments," Murray said, and proposals for more close to its business district.

Virginia-based developer AvalonBay Communities Inc., which built a luxury 349-unit rental complex called Avalon Rockville Centre I near downtown about five years ago, is seeking a variance to construct a high-density four-story, 177-unit complex. The mayor wants to include studio and one-bedroom apartments to make them affordable for young people. The two-acre site, where an indoor tennis facility is located, is zoned for about 36 units.

The builder made a smart-growth pitch in its variance application last month.

"The project will provide much-needed rental housing for young professionals and empty-nesters," the development company said. "With its proximity to the Long Island Rail Road, the efficient commutation time to Manhattan, the downtown Rockville Centre location, as well as the documented demand for rentals in Avalon Rockville Centre I, the project will provide much-needed rental housing."

A decision is expected later this year, a village spokeswoman said.

Rockville Centre has the advantage of a downtown with a retail store occupancy rate of 98 percent, Murray said, up from about 82 percent five years ago. Murray, who worked in his family's office-cleaning business until he took office in 2011, pleased local businesses in his first



(Credit: Heather Walsh / Heather Walsh) The community comes out for the 1st Annual Eat.Shop.Rock.RVC, event in Rockville Centre, June 7, 2014. Rockville Centre bounces back from recession and has Long Island's lowest unemployment rate.

act in office by ending paid parking after 6 p.m.

"We have seen a lot of growth, and we have done a lot of ribbon cuttings," said Greg Schaefer, 39, the Rockville Centre Chamber of Commerce first vice president and the chief financial officer of Better Home Health Care Agency Inc. in the village. He also moved back to Rockville Centre, three years ago from Manhattan.

Many other municipalities are struggling to find ways to fill retail space and attract customers in the age of big-box stores.

The North Hempstead Business and Tourism Development Corp. and Hofstra's suburban studies center recently co-hosted a conference on revitalizing the Island's older downtowns.

Rockville Centre's downtown helped hook Shital Patel, a labor market analyst in the state Labor Department's Hicksville office. Patel and her husband, George Cooke, a lawyer, bought a house in the village last June.

The couple, who moved from Manhattan, quickly narrowed their house hunting to the South Shore because Cooke works in Brooklyn. They settled on Rockville Centre, Patel, 36, said because, in addition to "its proximity to the city and its excellent school district . . . we liked that Rockville Centre had a vibrant downtown with a great variety of restaurants and bars."

Economy, business strong

Rockville Centre's economy is strong. For four straight months, it has had the lowest unemployment rate on Long Island. It was 3.4 percent in April, compared with 4.5 percent for Long Island overall and the state's 6.1 percent, the latest Labor Department data show.

Business growth has allowed more residents to find work locally. The number of residents who work in the village, though still small, jumped 19 percent to 1,246 from 2007 to 2011, U.S. Census data show. That compares with a 2.1 percent decline in the number of residents who live and work in Nassau County and a 0.8 percent increase in Suffolk.

The village has several large local employers that include Mercy Medical Center, Molloy College



(Credit: Heather Walsh / Heather Walsh) Ralph's Italian Ices and Ice Cream on a busy Friday night on North Park Ave., in Rockville Centre, June 6, 2014. Rockville Centre bounces back from recession and has Long Island's lowest unemployment rate.

and Better Home Health. The mayor said that many of the young families who move to the village include lawyers and doctors who work in the several large medical buildings.

The nearly 500 businesses, including more than 50 local restaurants, provide employment for young people, especially teens, Murray said. "We have many opportunities for people to work," he said.

The vast majority of employed residents, 89 percent, work outside the village, and proximity to New York City (34 minutes by train) allows residents to consider employment there. Rockville Centre lost 20 residents in the 9/11 attacks, more than any other municipality on Long Island, Nassau County data show.

The village has some advantages that many other municipalities would struggle to match. Its workforce is highly educated: 77 percent of village residents between 25 and 34 have a bachelor's degree, compared with 49 percent in Nassau and 37 percent in Suffolk, according to the U.S. Census 2008-2012 American Community Survey. South Side High School has been rated among the best high schools in the nation.

"Places where people have high education levels and the skills that employers are looking for will have low unemployment rates," said Christopher Jones, vice president for research at the Manhattan-based Regional Plan Association.

The median household income in the village in 2012 was \$112,268, outpacing Nassau's \$97,049 and Suffolk's \$87,778.

Not a 'one-size-fits-all'

"Rockville Centre's downtown. . . has many interesting qualities and elements to attract people to its downtown area," Kaiman said. But, he added, "there is no one-size-fits-all answer" for renewing downtowns.



(Credit: Heather Walsh / Heather Walsh) Erik Ventuleth, of Rockville Centre, works as a bartender at Rooftop 32 at Kasey's Kitchen and Cocktails on North Park Ave., in Rockville Centre, serving drinks on a busy Friday evening just as the sunsets over the town, June 6, 2014. Rockville Centre bounces back from recession and has Long Island's lowest unemployment rate.

And Rockville Centre itself hasn't fully reached its goals. Levy of Hofstra believes the mayor and others need to do even more to make the village a model of a vibrant and livable suburban area. For example, he said, the village needs to consider a parking lot for the downtown area and to "come up with some traffic-calming strategies" for Sunrise Highway.

"The mayor and other leaders in the village recognize that they still have a long way to go," he said.

Murray summed up the need for more smart growth to attract younger people in business terms: "I believe that to sustain what you have you have to build to get better. Otherwise, you're going to lose market share."