

HUNTINGTON

Youth Out In Force At Smart Growth Summit

By Luann Dallojacono

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Joye Brown got everyone's attention at the Smart Growth Summit last week when she stated in its simplest terms an unsettling thought when it comes to Long Island's future.

"So, we're all going to grow old and die by ourselves out here," she said to hundreds of elected officials, community leaders and Long Islanders gathered at the Melville Marriott on Friday.

Her warning, although obviously exaggerated to make a point, was fitting, as this year's summit – a day-long meeting of the minds organized by Northport-based non-profit Vision Long Island to discuss the region's most pressing issues and how to address them – drew more young people than ever before, all of whom had the same questions for their elected officials: Why should I want to stay on Long Island after I graduate from college, and if I want to, how can I afford to do it?

Brown, a columnist at Newsday, started the summit off with a bang, asking tough questions as moderator of a panel of elected officials on "State of the Towns and Villages." Rental housing took up a good deal of the session, revealing that significant progress has been made in creating rental units – nearly 10,000 compared to about seven years ago. Brown had high praise for Nassau County Executive Ed Mangano for breaking with his Republican party's traditional stance to support rental housing in his county, and she appreciated Hempstead Town Councilman Ed Ambrosino's motto on rental housing and entertaining downtowns as they relate to young people: "If you build it, they will stay."

Questions from the audience came mostly from students, who wanted to know how public transportation will be improved and how policies can be written to better recognize the disparity between entry-level salaries and massive student debt.

Issues affecting youth and the subsequent "brain drain" Long Island is battling remained prevalent when summit attendees split up into smaller workshop sessions. Workshop topics ranged from emerging businesses and post-Sandy disaster planning to attracting tech companies and the future of energy.

More than 60 people crowded into the "Youth Vision for LI's Future" workshop, where a panel of young professionals and students explained not only the issues facing them as Long Island residents, but also their solutions to those issues.

Panelists pointed out many of the more obvious deterrents to living on Long



Dr. Nathalia Rogers of Dowling College moderates a panel of millennials discussing youth's vision for Long Island's future at the Smart Growth Summit on Friday.

Island, such as young people's lack of disposable income, inability to move out of their parents' homes, and desire for a more enjoyable, affordable lifestyle; as well as some issues that don't always make it into mainstream conversation, such as under-representation in government.

"Young people aren't running for office," said Josh Lafazan, who made history last year when he was elected, at age 18, to the Syosset Board of Education. The youngest lawmaker in the Suffolk Legislature is 33, he said; in Nassau, it's 32.

"We realize there is a problem with under-representation, but we're not doing anything to solve it," he said.

Solutions from the millennials on the panel included taking bold steps to spur job growth among youth (and in fields they majored in, and not service jobs), perhaps by giving rebates to companies who hire young people; fostering vibrant college towns; and creating next-generation housing, like studios and one-bedrooms, close to train stations.

"This route will help downtowns thrive," Lafazan added.

Similar issues came up in the workshop on "Tourism & Downtowns," where part of the discussion turned to making downtowns a place millennials want to frequent or work.

"The mentality on Long Island is that to have fun you have to go to the city. There aren't that many downtowns with walkability," said Nicole Rapfogel, a student at Syosset High School.

But "people do see Huntington as an alternative [to the city]," Natalie Mathes, also of Syosset High School, added.

Huntington has been able to accomplish that, panelist Jim Kelly, publisher of Long Islander News, said, because of its diversity – from world-class restaurants and The Paramount, one of the top 25 music venues in the world, to attracting tech start-ups.

It is that type of job growth that is critical to stopping the brain drain, panelist Artie Burke, a restaurant owner in Northport Village, added.

"It's hard to grab these kids if we don't have creative businesses in the area," he said.

The conversation on "Tourism & Downtowns" could have continued for more than the allotted hour, but there were other workshops to get to, where topics like wastewater, transit opportunities and sustainability were discussed in just as

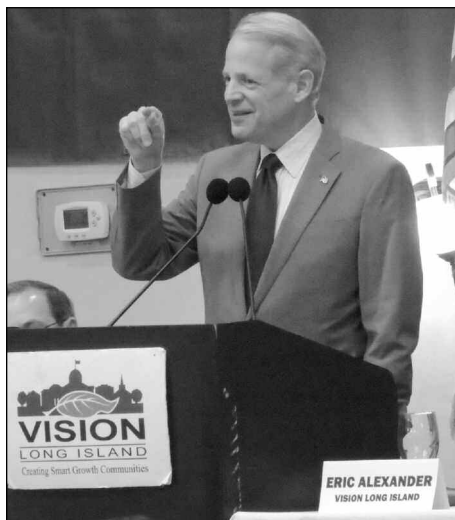
much depth. Congressman Steve Israel delivered a compelling speech on his plans to make Long Island the cyber defense capital of the nation, similar to how it became its defense capital during World War II, as well as a hub for Alzheimer's research. RXR Realty's Scott Rechler gave the midday keynote speech before nearly 1,000 Long Island stakeholders.

But possibly the most important thing to come out of the summit was the realization for many that every community on Long

Island is facing the same challenges, and sharing successes and failures in addressing them is key to the island's future.

"This conversation is really important. Talking about the idea of what makes people want to stay is vital for the future of Long Island," Ben Locke, senior class vice president at Syosset High School, said.

"In terms of progress, I think it's great," his classmate Mathes added. "I almost feel like we're on the wrong end of it. I wish we were being asked the questions."



Congressman Steve Israel, of Huntington, vows to make Long Island the cyber defense capital of the nation.

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