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Gov must retool housing plan

Hochul needs to work with Long Island leaders and offer incentives



Left, Gov. Kathy Hochul speaks about her New York Housing Compact at the YMCA in Patchogue Thursday, and right, local Republican officials and leaders gather Thursday at the Port Washington train station to protest the governor's housing plan. Credit: Newsday / Steve Pfost, Chris Ware

Let's move beyond the politics, angry rhetoric, and ugly misinformation that has emerged in the wake of Gov. Kathy Hochul's New York Housing Compact proposal.

Focus, instead, on the goal.

Hochul is correct to ambitiously spotlight the state's housing crisis. She's right to recognize that the entire state, including Long Island, needs more housing of all types, at a variety of prices.

But Hochul introduced her plan with an unfortunate, top-down approach. Her focus on mandates rather than incentives, and admonishments rather than partnerships, is destined to fail. In its current iteration, the Housing Compact could make municipalities and developers even more hesitant about pushing housing proposals forward.

But there's hope. As the budget process winds on, Hochul and the state Legislature have an opportunity to re-imagine a plan to encourage more housing. During Hochul's visit to Patchogue last week, Suffolk County town supervisors shared ideas with her, although to some of them, she didn't seem open to significant change. The governor must recognize that real concerns remain. She should accept constructive feedback. Long Island's state legislators who know their communities should work on amendments to the governor's plan.

A thoughtful and open-minded process that's a true partnership with local leaders has a real chance of success.

The best course is one that differs from the governor's proposal but retains some elements, beginning with the goal of adding housing statewide.

START WITH DATA

The smart part of Hochul's housing plan is the effort to gather data and zoning information from each municipality. Such information should include building permits, housing starts, sewage systems, completed construction, and maps of current zoning. This data would not only measure progress but serve as an initial baseline, providing the state with a more complete understanding of a community's capacity and challenges. Starting with a data-driven approach and a tight time frame would be a solid first step.

EMPHASIZE INCENTIVES

As it stands, carrots are a small piece of a plan mostly reliant on sticks. Reverse that. Hochul is right to establish an infrastructure fund — but it must be much larger than \$250 million statewide. Long Island alone could spend that money and more on the sewers critical to any housing discussion, especially in Suffolk.

Another big expense is parking garages which can cost \$50,000 or more — per space. Encouraging commuters out of their cars is critical, but providing parking remains necessary. Impacts on first responders and water quality must be considered, too. Beyond infrastructure, Hochul's focus on technical support and planning assistance is helpful.

And rather than hold a community hostage by threatening a review of zoning decisions by a state housing board, or state litigation against villages and towns, the state could make existing grant programs for economic development or environmental protection contingent on a community moving forward with new housing.

LOOK TO COMMUNITIES

While mandates aren't the answer, Hochul's target of 3% growth in three years makes sense in some communities. In others, it's inappropriate or even impossible. The same is true for transit-based zoning, where the right kind of overlay district differs by municipality. The state should provide a range of targets and a menu of options, and ask communities to submit their own plans. Those could include elements of Hochul's existing proposal but it would be by choice, rather than by mandate. If communities establish their own targets and their own ways of achieving them, threats of state overrides become unnecessary.

FOCUS ON STATIONS

Broad transit-oriented requirements won't work; the concept is more effective in some areas than others. Zoom in on communities with commercial, industrial, or mixed-use property near train stations; they can work with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to utilize empty lots and add more units. Provide more nuanced zoning suggestions, recognizing that the same limits, density, and mileage won't work for every station or community. Flexibility is essential.

ESTABLISH A LOOK-BACK

It's easy to paint Long Island with a broad brush by saying the region doesn't build enough housing. It's also not true or fair. There are communities — such as Patchogue, Westbury, Ronkonkoma, Wyandanch, Mineola, and Hempstead — that have built or are constructing significant housing. The state must grandfather in such communities, so they can be credited and rewarded for the work they've done.

IMPROVE REGULATIONS

It's unfortunate that a mentality of blaming the suburbs for the housing crisis has taken hold. But there is blame to go around. A good plan would look inward by streamlining state processes, establishing tighter deadlines for environmental reviews and financing approvals, and adopting sensible changes like developer self-certification for building permits.

REMEMBER AFFORDABILITY

Hochul argues that increasing supply will increase affordability. That's true. More housing options will benefit everyone. But go further: Specifically encourage the construction of housing affordable across the income spectrum, beyond the now-obligatory 10%.

By listening and creating a compact that reflects Long Island's needs and nuances, Hochul would provide a path for the Island to do its part.