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LI needs more 'walkable urban spaces': expert

Caron Washington of the Urban League of Long Island Young Professionals speaks to an audience of business leaders and planners during the Destination Long Island Leadership Summit at the Marriott Residence Inn in Plainview. (June 19, 2013) Credit: Daniel Brennan

By **OLIVIA WINSLOW**

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Long Island is not meeting the rising demand for "walkable urban places" in the suburbs from both ends of the age spectrum -- young professionals starting out, and baby boomers seeking to downsize -- a Brookings Institution fellow told a local audience Wednesday.

"The millennials are demanding walkable urban places, but we're not giving it to them," said Christopher Leinberger, the Brookings fellow who is a professor at The George Washington University in the nation's capital, specializing in downtown redevelopment, real estate and financing.

Boomers and so-called millennials -- those in their 20s to mid-30s -- are two of the largest demographic groups whose desires are affecting the market, Leinberger said. More and more, people are seeking what once was a niche market of areas where there is a mix of commercial activity and residential living in downtowns or in regional centers, he said.

"Walkable urban is THE market, and you're not in the game," Leinberger told nearly 100 people from a cross-section of business, academic, government and nonprofit sectors at the Destination Long Island Leadership Summit, held at the Marriott Residence Inn in Plainview.

Long Island, once a leader in the development of what he called the "drivable suburban" community, now lags behind other suburban locales that have reimagined their aging, deteriorating sectors, enhancing their economic fortunes in the process.

He pointed to Arlington, Va., as one example. A strip mall there, marred by a closed Sears department store, was redeveloped into a vibrant mix of commercial and residential properties. "The market is demanding choice," Leinberger said.

Tara Bono, 26, of Seaford, is a case in point. Bono, the community programs manager for EmPower Solar in Island Park, said in an interview that she continues to live in the Seaford home in which she grew up because she frowns on living in an "illegal apartment in someone's basement."

"For me, my goal is to own a home on Long Island -- a single-family home -- but I know I can't do that today. I can't do that next year," Bono said. "What I need right now is a bridge for a few years -- live in a downtown area before I get married, before I start a family. And that's just not available right now." She added, "The old way of doing things isn't really working anymore."

Bono was one of 20 young professionals, 22 to 35, who are part of a new organization called LIincs, to represent their views on economic, government, social and environmental issues. They have teamed with Plainview-based developer Renaissance Downtowns, which co-sponsored Wednesday's summit and launched the website destinationli.com to be a platform for young people to, as Bono said, "provide their community input."

Donald Monti, president of Renaissance Downtowns, said the firm wants to help young professionals "because without them, there is no future for Long Island, as far as economic development." Monti's company has several real estate projects on the Island and has been selected by Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano to develop the area around the Nassau

Coliseum in Uniondale.

Martin Cantor, director of the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy, noted that the region's workforce is aging. Workers over age 60 increased by 83,000 in the last decade, he said, while people under age 20 -- "the future workforce" -- declined by 20,000. To stave off a decline in economic growth, Cantor said in an interview, "The young are the answer."

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