

OPINION / COMMENTARY

By Richard C.D. Fleming

Mastering possibilities at the Nassau Hub



An artist's rendering imagines what buildings and streets could look like if the area around the Nassau Coliseum were developed as an innovation district. Credit: Long Island Index

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The mantra for establishing real estate value has been “Location, Location, Location.” But in 2017, it’s been expanded to include mixed-use placemaking, walkability and innovation. The concept of a Nassau Hub biotech park provides an opportunity that combines all four factors to energize Long Island’s economy.

The Brookings Institution and Project for Public Spaces, a planning and design nonprofit, describe the right development mix as “physically compact, transit-accessible, and technically-wired and offering mixed-use housing, office and retail.” The Nassau Hub biotech park, if properly designed, can be all of that, just 20 miles east of New York City.

Opportunities like this don’t come along often, so it’s important to maximize the site’s potential by creating a distinctive place to complement and connect with surrounding institutions and neighborhoods, and boost the local and regional economies. Examples of successful innovation districts — such as Kendall Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the CORTEX Innovation District in St. Louis — are explored in the Long Island Index’s report “Nassau Hub Innovation District.”

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Several years ago, I assisted Long Island business and civic leaders in crafting an entrepreneurial development strategy and a new institution called Accelerate Long Island. That experience suggests that Long Island has the civic leadership and vision needed to make the Nassau Hub biotech park a successful innovation district.

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National research, and my own experience building innovation districts in Denver and St. Louis, underscore five priorities to maximize this opportunity.

First, the Nassau Hub should be mixed-use, so that a unique character emerges, and here the mix of office, retail, and housing is crucial. Long Island faces a challenge in ensuring that housing is accessible and appealing to the talent needed to work at the biotech park, including young professionals.

Second, this sense of place can generate synergies among the institutions and individuals who populate it. It's not enough to place them near each other; they must interact and connect in ways that create collisions of people and ideas that facilitate innovation. At the 200-acre CORTEX Innovation District, we recruited the Cambridge Innovation Center and its Venture Cafe as a connector of people and institutions. Building on that success CIC at CORTEX has attracted scores of startup firms, and its weekly Venture Cafe attracts 400 to 500 attendees for curated programs.

Third, make the development transit-oriented, which can include bus and internal shuttles as well as train service. Public transit must be frequent, reliable, and affordable. The 16th Street Transit Mall in downtown Denver provides free mall shuttles arriving every 90 seconds at rush hour.

Fourth, parking should not dominate a site the way it has historically at Nassau Coliseum. At St. Louis' NorthSide Regeneration District, the developer will wrap the facades and tops of several large parking decks with housing and retail, so parking is invisible from street level.

Finally, walkability is both a vital place-making asset and a driver of real estate value. Christopher Leinberger at George Washington University says that "walkable real estate product commands a 72% rent-per-square-foot over rents in drivable suburban areas."

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If Long Island achieves this level of creativity, the Nassau Hub biotech park can be an economic powerhouse for the region.

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