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# Op-ed: Let's not repeat the unintended consequences of rezoning in LIC

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If there is such a thing as an accidental skyline it would have to be in Long Island City, where over the past fifteen years the former industrial area transformed into New York City's fastest growing neighborhood, developing at five times the city rate.

When the area was rezoned in 2001, it was part of a long-envisioned plan for two new central business districts (the other being Downtown Brooklyn) outside of Manhattan. However, as the Municipal Art Society illustrated in 2018, savvy developers recognized the rezoning also allowed a far more lucrative alternative to commercial office space: high-end residential. The unplanned growth that followed came with unintended consequences: inadequate infrastructure, lack of open space, overburdened schools, and rapidly changing demographics.

This spring the City is poised to certify a new rezoning known as OneLIC, which targets 54 blocks, comprising over 200 acres along Long Island City's East River industrial waterfront, for mixed-use development. With its prime waterfront location, proximity to Manhattan, vibrant cultural scene, active industrial business zone, and abundance of underdeveloped sites, there is tremendous opportunity for investment in the area, including building much-needed affordable housing. However, many of the issues MAS raised about the 2001 rezoning, particularly the need for infrastructure upgrades and the lack of open space, remain unsolved.

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By 2035 OneLIC is expected to spur 22 million square feet of development and bring almost 37,000 new residents to the area. The proposal anticipates the construction of 16,000 new housing units (up to 4,800 would be affordable), over five million square feet of commercial space, and 900,000 square feet of industrial space. OneLIC also contains four City-owned redevelopment sites, including a 561,000 square-foot, six-story, Department of Education administrative building.

But infrastructure improvements are sorely needed to support the planned growth. The southwestern portion of the rezoning area, which is in the 100-year flood plain, is prone to frequent flooding. One private waterfront site along Vernon Boulevard floods so often it is referred to by locals as Lake Vernon.

Long Island City still suffers from a pronounced lack of open space, a mere one-third of an acre per 1,000 residents, which is far below the city average of 1.8 acres. Queens Community District 2 ranks 57th out of fifty-nine citywide community districts in percentage of parkland.

The neighborhood also presents stark socio-economic contrasts. While average rents in Long Island City are over \$3,300 per month and area median income is over \$119,000, directly north, outside the rezoning area lies NYCHA's Queensbridge Houses, the largest public housing development in the country. Thirty-four housing shelters are clustered within a one-mile radius of the development.

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While zoning is not a panacea for these challenges, the city has more tools at its disposal than it did in 2001. Mandatory Inclusionary Housing assures up to 30 percent of new residential units will be permanently affordable based on set income standards. The recently passed City of Yes for Housing Opportunity (COYHO) allows developers to build 20 percent more residential floor area if all units are 100 percent affordable. In approving City of Yes, the City Council also secured \$5 billion in community investments to finance affordable housing, stormwater and sewer system upgrades, and open space.

Many community stakeholders are concerned that OneLIC lacks a comprehensive plan that includes the needed infrastructure investments. Some are calling on the city to capture value from future development to finance infrastructure upgrades and new open space. The four City-owned properties, particularly the DOE building, present excellent opportunities to develop true public amenities to the wider community.

The prospect of transforming the Long Island City waterfront into something special is at hand with OneLIC. For it to be successful, the City must find a way to fuse investments in infrastructure and the public realm before development can begin. Otherwise, to quote Yankee great Yogi Berra, it might be déjà vu all over again.

*Tom Devaney is Senior Director of Land Use and Planning at the Municipal Art Society of New York.*