

**Three R's for Tomorrow:  
Rethinking, Redevelopment,  
Re-investment**

by  
**Robert A. Scott, President  
Adelphi University**

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## Introduction

I am here today as a citizen first: Long Island is my home. I am here as an educator second: learning is my ambition. I am here as president of Adelphi third: I have the best job in the world, one where people, ideas, resources, and the future are constantly in mind. In my approach, the university, any university, plays three roles: as curator of the past, creator of the future, and critic of the status quo—a critic of answers that seem definite when questions seem ill-defined.

The three R's we know are reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—the basis of a public education created to prepare citizens who can vote knowledgeably, serve on a jury fairly, perform productively in a needed job, and in these and other ways contribute to society in a meaningful manner. These three R's are our old standards—and still have relevance.

Although we have not had universal success in making sure that every child has these skills at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels, we still refer to the three R's as ideals and as expectations.

In a similar manner, I propose three R's for those of us past school age—those of us in positions to influence public policy. These three R's are Rethinking, Redevelopment, and Re-investment, and they are inspired by concerns familiar to us all: corporate excess and insider trading; sources of land for housing our children and their teachers; and

the varying quality of schooling for our neighbors. These, too, are ideals and, for some of us, expectations.

## Rethinking

We think we know best—that we know best how to solve all problems, especially by using technology. We think that our idealized empirical method, focusing on “just the facts,” is the best way. After all, look how far it has gotten us.

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But do we have such a system? While I believe that fact-based decision-making can be the ideal method, we achieve this goal only when everyone has equal access to the information which is supposed to be public and is not kept in the dark by privileged participants.

I don't mean to void patents or confidential R&D. I am talking about insider trading and various forms of “bait & switch” operations. We can't go by the facts if those in authority withhold evidence, letting some know the truth and letting others think they do. These scurrilous

methods turn empirical reasoning into something as non-objective as fear—or prejudice or superstition.

There are other ways of knowing, and we need to keep them clear. In addition to empirical reasoning, we must also recognize the power of emotion, empathy, and epiphany in some settings, and ancestors, spirits, and the earth in others. Not everyone on this globe thinks the same way we do, and if we are to live and negotiate with them, we must understand them.

In addition to how we think—or make decisions—we must be clear about our assumptions: are people humans or consumers? Are air, land, and water eternally renewable no matter how much we abuse them? Are energy supplies inexhaustible? Can technology solve all problems? Should some problems be avoided even if technology can be a corrective?

If people are more than consumers, why do we treat clothes as billboards and schools as mini-malls? Do we really “coo” at the baby in the crib and say, “greed is the best motivator?”

The chances are that we don't, and we want our new child or grandchild to live in a world that is fair and just, where everyone has an equal chance, without unfair competition due to lineage, force, or inside information. This then is the first “R,” Rethinking, which means that we not only obey the letter of the law and know the religious dictates about good and bad, but also that

we are ethical—that we know some decisions are not black and white, but represent choices between two virtues, both legal, both moral, but not equally just or fair. Two interesting examples are slavery and corporate repurchase of stocks.

Slavery was legal, approved by religious institutions as moral, but unethical because it was unfair, unjust, and inequitable.

Another example is more contemporary. Think about the public corporation with extra cash and choices as to how to use it. It could put more into research and development, shore up its pension fund, increase the compensation of employees, lower prices, pay an extra dividend—or buy back stock so that executive-owned options were “in the money.” All legal choices, but the last is questionable ethically because only a small number would benefit.

We have other contemporary questions. Do we have an ethical election system? We own the airwaves and could make free TV available to any candidate meeting certain criteria. Instead, we allow Congress to sell our property.

Is it ethical for some to buy land or development rights at steep discounts not available to others? Is it ethical for a public body like Congress to meet behind closed doors, barring minority participation and limiting debate, before passing legislation that is of questionable benefit? Could your school board get away with that? Where is our sense of shame; of justice; of fairness? What does it say about us that we are more interested in Michael Jackson than in medical justice?

The news media don't help. They lose sight of truth when they bend

over backwards to be balanced; they decide which stories to be told but neglect the policy issues to be highlighted by the stories. This is what I mean by the need for rethinking. I don't know the answers, and I surely don't know all the questions, but I am certain that too many serious questions are being hidden by spurious answers. We seem to know the cost of everything, the price of plenty, and the value of little.

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It is time to acknowledge the values behind which we are asked to stand united, revise our thinking, and consider new ways to look for difficult questions hidden by easy answers. Let's start with “redevelopment.”

## **Redevelopment**

One issue where questions are hidden by answers is in what is called affordable or workforce housing—housing for our children, their teachers, our police and firefighters, our carpenters, and others working hard and saving for the future. I am not talking about low-income workers and those on welfare, whom many fear will flood their schools with unwanted children. They need help, for sure. But today I am concerned about those who are working but feel that raising their family and putting down roots on Long Island is not an option.

You know the data. In June, 2003, the median price for a house in Nassau County was \$382,000; in Suffolk, it was \$303,000. And few rentals are available.

In response, many elected officials state that affordable housing is a priority. The problem, they say, is that there is no land. Well, maybe land is available. What is called “restorative development,” the reclaiming of contaminated land and old factories, holds lessons for other challenges, such as housing. If what we now call “workforce housing” is truly a high priority, why do we accept as an answer that there is no land available? Of course, there is no land if we only think of potato fields, and one-acre zoning for single family detached houses of a similar design and construction owned by the occupants.

But what about the thousands of acres of land owned by government agencies (i.e., by you and me) as well as by businesses that want to find new uses for their property. What about “surplus” Nassau County land: Mitchell Field, Pilgrim State, the Gyrodyne property, King's Park Psychiatric Center, the Calverton Naval Weapons site, and the Gabreski Airport in Westhampton? These properties and numerous strip malls, old warehouses, and no-longer-needed office buildings can be redeveloped into housing for all income levels. What about second-story apartments over retail stores in downtown locations near the railroad station? What about new financing mechanisms? What about rethinking zoning and planning? Such redevelopment is routine in other parts of our country. Why not here?

Why can't we have both “open

space” and affordable housing? Why do we accept the answer of “no land,” when that response does not answer the question: How can we meet our goal of providing affordable housing for our children and those others who keep our communities vital, while ensuring land for parks and other public uses? This question leaves open the possibility of mixed-use areas, rentals, co-ops, pre-fab, new uses for downtowns, and imaginative designs for density, aesthetics, recreation, and community.

The answer is obvious: it is not a matter of land, it is a matter of will, and many hope that the steps taken by United States Congressman Steve Israel, with whom I took the Long Island Housing Partnership’s tour, New York State Senator Michael Balboni, and New York State Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli, will lead us toward solutions. Will you help?

Another issue deserving attention for redevelopment is that of transportation. We complain about commutation time and roads crowded with trucks, but make little progress in improvements. In fact, more and wider roads seem simply to bring more trucks and traffic. There are alternatives that would not only help our traffic but would also help protect us against terrorism. Why do we insist on fuel-guzzling vehicles when we know we are buying a large portion of our fuel needs from states who are known to use oil income to pay terrorist groups and supporters? Why don’t we insist on alternative fuels and more efficient modes of transportation?

For example, did you know that, nationally, 40% of all freight is moved by rail into and out of major metropolitan areas. In New York City,

Long Island, Putnam, Westchester, and Connecticut, only 2.8% of freight moves by rail, meaning virtually all goods move by truck in the metropolitan area east of the Hudson River.<sup>1</sup> Which brings us to our third “R,” Re-investment.

## Re-investment

According to Congressman Jerrold Nadler, this almost total dependence on trucking pollutes our air, giving us (our region) the highest asthma rates in the United States, congests our streets and roads, tears up our infrastructure and water-mains, increases the cost of doing all kinds of business, exacerbates our loss of manufacturing jobs (which we have been losing at a rate six times the national ...), and adds to the cost of all consumer goods in the region... that congestion, the second worst in the nation...has caused major

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distortions to the economy....<sup>2</sup>

And this volume of freight and truck traffic is expected to increase by 79% in the next 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

The magnitude of re-investment needed to address such a challenge is more than the private sector alone can provide. The market system depends upon the profit motive, and, as we have seen, roads, rails, bridges, sewage treatment, potable water, and energy transmission lines are

the means that make investments attractive, but are generally too big for private entrepreneurs. These basics create the infrastructure that makes our market-based commerce possible. But they are so large and capital-intensive that to expect them to be provided by the private sector is to expect them to fail, because users could not afford the fees providers would need to charge in order to make a profit. Hence, they would not fulfill their purpose. No, this is a role for government. What have we done to advocate expanded rail service? We subsidize airlines and truck lines, but for some reason are hesitant to support rail.

I know this is heresy in some quarters, but there is a role for government beyond defense and diplomacy.

Another area for re-investment is in foreign language and area studies at our universities. Even with firms such as Berlitz, our partner at Adelphi, the market has not produced the language specialists needed for defense, diplomacy, and justice. In fact, less than one-half of billets in our U.S. Departments of Defense, Intelligence, Justice, and State requiring strategic language capabilities are filled by those with language proficiency. There is a role for government incentives in assuring our national security—a role than can be enhanced by partnerships with higher education and business. But we—universities and businesses—cannot do it without the government as partner.

A familiar arena for re-investment is our schools. Our children—all of them—are our future. Therefore, we all lose if some lose. Remember the statistic about Social Security: several decades ago some eleven

workers were actively contributing to the system for every one who retired. That ratio is now close to two or three for each retiree, and if we lose students from Roosevelt or Wyandanch, for example, we fall even shorter. This is not to say that people are only “workers,” but we need everyone’s work if society is to function well, and if we are to achieve the kind of nation our founders dreamed of and that brings thousands of people to our shores—some at great risk to life and limb. We need educated citizens who are also scientists, engineers, managers, and teachers. Our best bet is to prepare them—not rely solely on imports.

This issue of schooling will receive a great deal of attention in the coming months. The State must reply to the Court’s order to provide a meaningful and sufficient education for every child. Fifty years after the U. S. Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* called for equality in education, we face a similar decision. Let’s address it by helping all children—not by sacrificing a new population to make up for past shortfalls for others. All students need the three R’s—plus, not minus.

## Conclusion

Rethinking for fairness and justice. Redevelopment for new uses to meet social priorities. Re-investment to ensure the strength of our citizenry, our communities, and our economy. These three R’s represent challenges, yes, but around the world we can see examples of how others have dealt with them. We are not alone.

***“These three R’s represent challenges, yes, but around the world we can see examples of how others have dealt with them. We are not alone.”***

Nor are these challenges to be left to schools, or businesses, or universities, or government bodies alone. We must work in tandem, and our institutions of higher education on Long Island want to help. All of these issues affect us: we are major employers, with over 21,000 faculty, staff, and administrators, and with an \$8 billion impact on the region. So, don’t leave us out.

Some of us have joined with the Rauch Foundation’s “Long Island Index” project to identify issues and indicators, and to establish benchmarks—both longitudinal and comparative—in order to monitor progress. At Adelphi, we have created the Long Island “Vital Signs” project, in conjunction with the Rauch effort, to monitor health indicators.

This and other organizations have initiatives. We need to work together, not alone, so as to learn from each other and gain leverage from cooperation. We know what needs to be done. We can be more effective working together. What part will you do? Monday morning comes soon.

Thank you.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication from Brett Heimov, Administrative Assistant to Congressman Jerrold Nadler, November 12, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> “Rail Freight and the Port.” Report of Congressman Jerrold Nadler, September 10, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.