

More Homes, Fewer Malls

By ROBERT A. SCOTT

EVERYONE knows that Long Island has a serious affordable housing problem. Nearly every local politician has pointed this out, but few have offered any real solutions. Well, I have a suggestion. Let's build homes on the thousands of acres of land that are owned by the government. Why? Because in order to recruit workers to sustain our communities, we need to think outside the box when it comes to housing.

Even middle-class families — for example, teachers, police officers and firefighters who make salaries that allow them to find housing with little difficulty elsewhere in the country — have been priced out of this heated market.

And it certainly is a heated market. Last June, the median price for a house in Nassau County was nearly \$400,000; in Suffolk, it was nearly \$325,000. While the federal government recommends that housing costs should be no more than 2.5 times a buyer's annual income, in Nassau County it is 4.5 times and in Suffolk County it is 4.0 times. Few rentals are available in either county.

The most recent Long Island Index, a report issued by the Rauch Foundation, found that high housing prices and living costs were driving away young people who grew up in Long Island. According to the foundation, 53 percent of Long Island residents 18 to 35 years of age — most of them middle class — said they con-

sidered leaving the area. What's more, employers have had problems recruiting professionals or luring engineers and scientists to Long Island because of this lack of affordable housing.

Many elected officials have said that affordable housing is a priority. According to them, the problem is that there is no land. And that's true, if you think only of potato fields and one-acre zoning for single-family housing developments.

But what about land owned by government agencies? There's the officers' quarters at Mitchell Field that could become civilian housing. Pil-

Government land could cure the local housing shortage.

grim State Psychiatric Center's 492 acres could provide a variety of accommodations. And what about Kings Park Psychiatric Center's 368-acre site, the 2,900-acre Calverton Naval Weapons site and the Gabreski Airport in Westhampton, which the federal government wants to close?

These properties should not be sold to the highest bidder to become golf courses, gated communities or parkland. These lands, along with strip malls, old warehouses and no-longer-needed office buildings should be redeveloped into housing for all income levels. Apartments can be constructed over downtown retail stores near

railroad stations to meet housing demands here as they do elsewhere.

Granted, opponents cite concerns about the demand on schools and roads, and many wonder who will pay for the environmental clean-up needed at places like Kings Park and Calverton. But these challenges are planning issues that should not trump the need for housing to keep Long Island communities vital.

The cost of housing affects not only where young people can live but also the hiring of talented teachers and professors, scientists, engineers and managers for Long Island enterprises. At Adelphi, we've discovered that even the relatively high starting salaries we offer — \$58,000 for a new Ph.D. — do not meet the costs for housing on Long Island.

To address this problem, we have developed programs with banks and real estate agents to help our staff buy homes. We also are talking with other colleges about buying property to create jointly owned "starter" housing for new faculty and staff. Adelphi has also joined forces with the Long Island Association to advocate for local and state public policies that support affordable housing for local professionals. But these steps are not enough if we are to keep tuition fees in check and attract first-rate faculty.

Affordable housing is not a matter of land: the land is there. It is a matter of will. Politicians, developers and residents need to think more creatively for Long Island.

Robert A. Scott is president of Adelphi University.