

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

A sweeping plan for Long Island after Covid-19

By **KYLE STROBER, MITCHELL PALLY AND KEVIN LAW**

For generations to come, historians will look back at 2020 with an asterisk. There will be life before COVID-19 and life all the years that followed. This socio-economic earthquake will leave in its wake an unrecognizable landscape, reshaping lives, careers, communities, and corporations. Entire regional economies will be altered as investments are either diverted or withdrawn altogether.

Long Island's challenge will be a question of how quickly it recognizes these existential changes so that it may deflect many of the aftershocks and begin the road to economic recovery, job growth, and critically needed tax revenue that will be needed to pay for essential services. One area that can play a key role in the region's recovery strategy is streamlining the submission, review and approval processes embedded in many of our municipal governments.

A "Post COVID-19 Long Island Municipal Modernization Plan" would create a set of uniform guidelines & processes that would allow the region's various levels of governmental jurisdictions to amend and update their application, inspection, permit, and approval procedures in order to directly assist in the economic recovery required in our post-COVID-19 world.

Among the most immediate and important

options is the use of technology to modernize municipal practices that will now prove to be far less effective in the wake of social distancing and other pandemic mandated public health protocols. Moving forward, it is unlikely that our government agencies will be able to return to business as usual, with person-to-person interactions and requirements. Typically, it may no longer be feasible for residents to stand in line or sit in lobbies waiting for a clerk to call them up one by one. Nor may it be possible for a personal inspection of a home or building by an inspector who may no longer be willing to enter a structure. Additionally, these technology improvements must be coordinated among all municipalities so that they are compatible and able to interface when a project requires village/town, county and state approvals.

Recognizing the stark reality we now all inhabit, the Long Island Builders Institute, the Association for a Better Long Island, and the Long Island Association have proposed to town and village halls across Long Island the following four step program. The plan includes recommendations to ensure not only a safer system for all of our residents, businesses and municipal employees, but also a more efficient post COVID-19 economic development process.

1. All aspects of the application/permit process should be accessed electronically,

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including submissions, comments, revisions, approvals, and permit documents. This would eliminate the need for any face to face meetings in the process, and eliminate travel to Town or Village Hall for that purpose.

2. All state licensed professionals should be able to self-certify their work to the town so that the town or village is no longer required to certify such submissions. The current technology makes it impossible for a certified professional to submit a building plan that does not meet the New York State Building Code.

3. Increase the number of inspections able to be completed by third party inspectors or by virtual inspections, increasing efficiency as well as prioritizing public health by reducing face to face interactions between municipal

employees and the public.

4. As the definition of "public assembly" may well be problematic until a COVID-19 vaccine is created and available, all public meetings and public hearings should be able to proceed virtually so that no unnecessary delay is added to a comprehensive process that continues to engage town residents. Accordingly, towns and villages should move towards virtual meetings and consultations until it is safe for the public to gather.

Fortunately, these Four Points that form the backbone of a Post COVID-19 L.I. Municipal Modernization Plan do not require the invention of costly new software. Time tested "off the shelf" technology can easily be implemented to achieve the efficiencies required in an era requiring us all to be agile, innovative, and wary of a "Second Spike." In addition, it is possible for our towns and villages to purchase such technology together which will be of great importance to some of our smaller villages. A healthy economy can only return with consumer confidence in the future. Obstacles, delays, and pre-pandemic practices need to be swept away as part of a shared strategy of recovery.

Kyle Strober is the executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, Mitchell Pally is chief executive officer of the Long Island Builders Institute and Kevin Law is president and CEO of the Long Island Association.

Attacks on journalists are a threat to democracy

By **JUDY PATRICK**

Within the journalism community, there's outrage over the assaults our fellow journalists have endured covering the unrest in America sparked by the death of a black man, George Floyd, in police custody in Minneapolis.

We recognize that those reporters are bearing witness to the events unfolding before them. They are there to hold those in power accountable for their actions. Attacks on journalism diminish the people's right to the truth about what government is doing in their name. This is serious and needs to be addressed.

But let's be frank. Protesters, business owners and police officers are being attacked as well. There's plenty of violence to go around, especially when night falls.

America's outrage is focused, as it should be, on the racial injustices that permeate

our society. To seriously address these fundamental problems, demonstrations and protests need to be followed by lots of dialogue, education, research and real change.

Yet to be successful, the sun must shine on that process. We need to build understanding and consensus, and for that we will need journalists every step of the way. Without them, we will fail.

The recent attacks on journalists in America, especially by police, is truly unprecedented. To be sure, journalists in many other countries face far more adversity. But this is America, the leader of the free world, where the free press is one of our fundamental values and sets the standard.

Covering protests, especially chaotic ones, has always been tough. Reporters are used to getting jostled, taunted and sometimes threatened with arrest. And while the

level of aggression has been increasing in the last decade, the number of attacks of the past few days are far beyond anything we have ever seen before.

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, run by the Freedom of the Press Foundation and the Committee to Protect Journalists, typically investigates 100 to 150 incidents of attacks on U.S. journalists a year. On Monday, the group was investigating more than 100 incidents from the first three days of the current protests alone.

Journalists don't like becoming part of the story. It's a distraction from the central story, which in this case is the unprecedented display of national outrage sparked by systemic racial discrimination.

But it is because the central story is so important that these shameful attacks must be called out and denounced. Other countries may be able to control and limit their

press by intimidation and violence but that can't be allowed to happen here in America.

Journalists are getting pushed and shoved, shot by rubber bullets and pepper balls, assaulted with pepper spray and tear gas, punched, slapped, detained and arrested. Some of this is happening live on air before our eyes.

The danger can come from either direction. Some protesters are targeting journalists, hurling rocks and other debris at them, knocking them down, beating them and setting their vehicles on fire.

This is about far more than journalists' personal safety. This is about democracy. This is about the public's right to know. This is about an institution that, despite its lapses, strives to help us build a better society.

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