

Parts of NYC’s housing proposal can work on Staten Island, say real estate experts

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Randy Lee, a longtime Staten Island real estate developer and attorney, bottom, and Phil Rampulla, urban planner with Rampulla Associates Architects, say accessory dwelling units won't work on Staten Island. (Advance composite)

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EDITOR’S NOTE: *Tipping Point?* is a journalistic initiative launched by Advance/SILive.com to inform Staten Islanders how NYC’s City of Yes for Housing Opportunity proposal could impact the borough. The plan, which will be voted on by the City Council this year, calls for significant zoning changes designed to spur development of new homes and apartments amid a citywide housing shortage.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- When longtime Staten Island urban planner Phil Rampulla was asked to review a massive rezoning proposal designed to create more housing across the Big Apple, he knew changes would include more residences around commercial strips and transit hubs.

And the principal of the New Dorp-based Rampulla Associates Architects believes this is the most beneficial way to provide more housing across Staten Island.

“Personally, I have always advocated for housing near transit, especially for our elders and our younger generation,” said Rampulla, who also co-chairs the City Planning Committee for the New York City Building Industry Association. “A good example is in Dongan Hills, which already has three-, four- and five- story buildings peppered around [the Staten Island Railway]. It’s not dense. There’s no adverse impacts from that.”

The concept is part of the proposed plan, dubbed “City of Yes for Housing Opportunity,” that Rampulla thinks could work across Staten Island, which has a less dense housing landscape than the other four boroughs.



An example of town center zoning is pictured. (Credit: NYC Planning) Credit: NYC Planning

“You could have a commercial hub on New Dorp Lane, or in Great Kills, or on Lincoln Avenue, right down the street from the railroad, then I think you can increase the density, and people will use the train to get to Manhattan. I’m for that,” said Rampulla. “I think a mixed-use building in the heart of a train station town is the way to go.”

This type of housing Rampulla described could fit into two categories of the City of Yes for Housing Opportunity plan: town center zoning and transit-oriented development.

Town center zoning would allow for “mixed-use” apartments to be built atop stores in low-density commercial corridors, which can be found in older areas of the borough where it was permitted during the first half of the 20th century, but later outlawed.

Transit-oriented development will “allow modest, three- to five-story apartment buildings where they fit best: large lots, within half a mile of subway or rail stations, that are located on wide streets or on the short end of the block,” says the proposal.

Randy Lee, a Graniteville-based attorney with nearly a half century of real estate experience on Staten Island, agrees that the portions of the City of Yes housing proposal that could work here are transit-oriented and mixed-use housing.



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“I think they [city officials] need to study the transportation corridors. If you ride down North and South Railroad avenues and New Dorp Plaza, you’ll find there are plenty of locations where it would be appropriate to have three- or four-story multiple dwellings,” said Lee, noting there are also many North Shore locations, like on Bay Street or Victory Boulevard, where small apartment buildings could work.

Opposition to Tiny Houses

While Rampulla and Lee agree with the concepts of transit-oriented and town center zoning, there are other aspects of proposal with which they vehemently disagree. Both said tiny houses and backyard cottages, without accounting for off-street parking, would be detrimental to the car-centric borough.

“For me, the accessory dwelling units are just a non-starter,” said Rampulla. “If the property is large enough it could be done. But it would be something that would have to be decided on a case-to-case basis.”

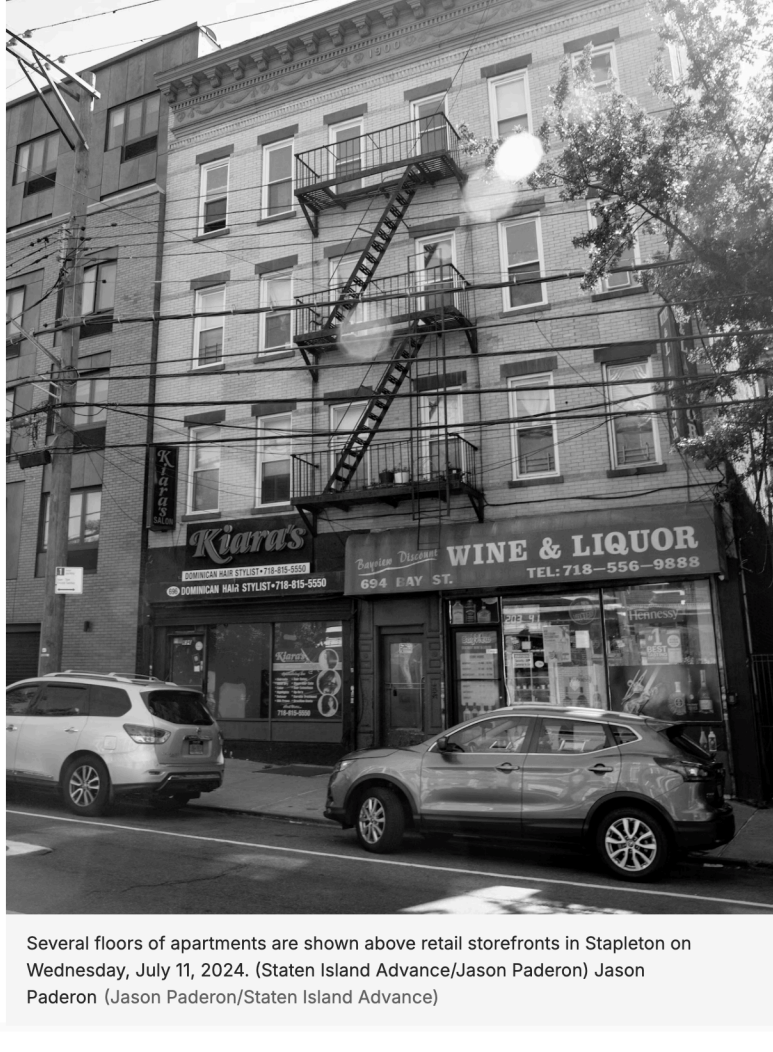
During the ongoing public review period for the proposal, Mayor Eric Adams’ administration has received significant pushback from lower-density parts of the city, including Staten Island’s community boards and elected officials, all of which have voiced serious concerns that the proposed reforms would change the character of the borough’s quiet, residential neighborhoods and exacerbate existing issues with the borough’s infrastructure.

“What we really need is a ‘Borough of Yes’ for Staten Island -- a plan designed for Staten Island. What works in other parts of the city doesn’t always work here,” said Lee.

Need for Affordable Housing

Both Staten Island real estate experts agree there is a great need for more housing -- affordable for both younger and older generations -- across the borough.

“We come out of a bedroom community, and we usually age in place or aid those who age in place and would like to see our younger family around us,” said Rampulla. “But we don’t have housing types for both. They’re few and far between.”



Several floors of apartments are shown above retail storefronts in Stapleton on Wednesday, July 11, 2024. (Staten Island Advance/Jason Paderon) Jason Paderon (Jason Paderon/Staten Island Advance)

Legalizing Mother/Daughter Apartments

Lee said he’s also in favor of legalizing basement and attic apartments, often referred to as “mother/daughter” apartments, which already are plentiful across the borough. This another aspect of the City of Yes housing proposal.

“These mother/daughter homes are already all over the Island, and if they became legal there could be benefits for the homeowner, such as when there are rent disagreements [which could end up in court], and it would add to the tax rolls,” said Lee.

“If you provide an easy roadmap to legalize mother/daughter and basement apartments in a safe way, this can really help homeowners who have empty basements. What a lot of this has to do with is when you get to retirement age, you want to carry the house, but can’t afford it,” he added.

A rental income would also allow Islanders to stay in their homes rather than fleeing to cheaper states, like Florida, in their retirement, said Lee.