



## Staten Island 2024: Is the change ahead a good thing?

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- It was 50 years ago this fall that the Verrazano–Narrows Bridge opened, heralding in sweeping change for a borough long isolated from the rest of New York City, at once proud of and defensive about its "otherness."

"Now we're 50 years off from when the flood gates opened," said Jonathan Peters, chair of the accounting and finance department at the College of Staten Island and a co-founder of the Center for the Study of Staten Island. "The question is: What are the next 10 years going to hold?"

At least one thing is certain - the next decade will bring sweeping change to the borough again. That makes the follow-up question obvious: Is change a good thing?

Staten Island is staring down some \$1 billion in private investment on the North Shore alone, and all that comes with it - including a heightened profile, with plenty predicting the North Shore will be the next Red Hook, or Hoboken. The West Shore will play home to a movie studio, bringing with it jobs, and the hope of a light rail connection in the area lives on.

In the Mid-Island, once the world's largest landfill, Freshkills will be one of the city's largest parks. The South and East Shores, walloped by Hurricane Sandy, face an uncertain future as everyone from individual homeowners to city planners stop to consider just how to live safely on the shoreline.

### PROMISE AND PLANNING

The jobs, tax revenue, activation of the waterfront, increased transit options, housing that appeals to younger people who typically leave the borough -- all that has been touted in press releases and speeches, with borough boosters begging developers to bring it on.

### STATEN ISLAND 2024

*A guide to this week's coverage on SILive.com.*

#### Monday

A vision of Staten Island's future: Is change a good thing?

#### Tuesday

Traffic challenges and a look at the shifting population.

#### Wednesday

The New York Wheel's impact and the future of the real estate market.

#### Thursday

After Sandy: Buyouts, holdouts and memories.

#### Friday

But some may pause, look back to the haphazard development that followed the opening of the Verrazano Bridge, and wonder if it's worth it to move further away from the quiet place they used to know.

"My hope is that new development will actually contribute in a positive way, and make the community better," Peters said.

He wasn't alone in that opinion.

"If we can withstand the temporary inconveniences, and get past the transition period, this will be sort of the golden years for Staten Island," predicted Lynn Kelly, CEO of Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden.

Perhaps the only thing that's constant about New York City, Ms. Kelly said, is that it is constantly changing - but that hasn't always been true of Staten Island.

"I think that Staten Island has had both the luxury and the curse of, in some ways, adapting to the change, and in some ways, not," she said. "But it hasn't always enjoyed the benefits of change all the time, and I think this is one where we're going to enjoy the economic benefits, the cultural benefits."

"(Staten Island) hasn't always enjoyed the benefits of change all the time, and I think this is one where we're going to enjoy the economic benefits, the cultural benefits," said Snug Harbor CEO Lynn Kelly.  
(Staten Island Advance)

Staten Island has always been an attractive place to live, said Mitchell Moss, policy and planning professor at New York University and director of its Rudin Center for Transportation. It has offered the ability to buy a single-family home, to own a car, and to have a little bit more of a suburban feel a stone's throw from Manhattan. New developments and amenities will only make it more attractive.

"The investments in Freshkills, and the investment in the waterfront will all have long-term benefits," he said. "I think it's going to become more connected to the city over the next decade."

Staten Island should of course plan smartly, Peters said, and consider what it wants out of growth -- but it shouldn't avoid change. Cities that fail to adapt don't typically fare well.

"You don't want to be Detroit," Peters said.

Other locales along the region's waterfront have also embraced change. Like stretches of Richmond Terrace, Jersey City's waterfront not that long ago was home to crumbling remnants of an industrial neighborhood. In the last 20 years, it's been revitalized into a long stretch of soaring waterfront condos, a riverside walkway dotted with green space, and New Jersey's largest skyscraper, home to Goldman Sachs.

"I think people are always scared of change. But I think people look back at what happened in Jersey City, and I

New potential for commerce and employment.

### Saturday

Taking the pulse of Island's social life.

### Sunday

In 2024, will change be embraced?

think it's one of the great revitalization stories in the country," Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop said. "And I think you'd be hard-pressed to find any resident of the city, or visitors, who wouldn't say it's a good thing."

## SHIFTING ALREADY

Plenty of change is already in motion on Staten Island.

"I think the great changes are already under way, and that's that the demographics are changing, in ethnic terms," Moss said.

People move from Brooklyn to Staten Island, from Staten Island to New Jersey; they're replaced with more people from Brooklyn - who are of different backgrounds than the last generation of Brooklynites - and also by people immigrating directly to Staten Island.

"Staten Island is already going through a huge shift. It has a community of people from Cyprus, from Liberia, from India," Moss said. "I think it's already becoming a much, much more diverse borough."

And of course, the development along the North Shore - the New York Wheel, Empire Outlets, Lighthouse Point, and housing at the Homeport - have already been approved.

Moss said an area needs a certain combination of investments to reach critical mass: "You need to have retail. You need to have residential. You need to have some kind of investment in amenities, and all of that is working in Staten Island's favor," he said.

That right mix can attract a new kind of audience to Staten Island - younger people who often leave the borough.

"Staten Island will no longer have that terrible brain drain we've had for so many years - where people grow up here, they go to college, and then they don't move back -- because where are they going to move to?" Ms. Kelly said.

She cited her own experience after going away to college: "There was no place for me to move back to. There were no apartments that were close to public transportation or activities -- it didn't exist."

In Jersey City, investments into the waterfront transformed downtown neighborhoods. But other areas of the city are still struggling, waiting to see the benefit.

### View full size

Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop said he felt "100 percent" sure the change to his city had been a good thing. "I think you'd be hard-pressed to find any resident of the city, or the visitors, who wouldn't say it's a good thing." (Photo courtesy NJ.com)

"You love to see investment dollars come in, and the challenge is making sure that no neighborhood gets left behind," Fulop, elected last year, said.

Fulop said previous administrations have

struggled with resentment breeding elsewhere in the city -- the belief that two separate cities had emerged within one.

"The challenge that the Borough President and City Council and the mayor are going to have there is making sure that the rest of Staten Island still feels like they're important, and they're relevant," Fulop said. "And that's not always easy to maintain when you have a billion dollars in investment coming into one area of the the borough."

But Fulop said it's possible for other neighborhoods to capitalize on waterfront growth. Development in Jersey City began in the Newport neighborhood, spread down the waterfront to Exchange Place, and is now moving inland to Journal Square, where the city is offering developers incentives to build.

It helps, Fulop said, that Journal Square has a PATH station, providing easy access to Manhattan -- and the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail was built to run along the waterfront, where a large fast ferry network has also emerged.

"Investments into mass transportation, I think that's important -- and I think that's a challenge for Staten Island," Fulop said.

Not every neighborhood will change. Just like the rest of New York, Staten Island will continue to offer diverse housing stock, Moss said - from single-family homes with driveways to the new apartment complexes on tap for the North Shore.

"New York is always going to have a mix of housing choices, so I think Staten Island has had single-family, it's been its identify for many years. Before they had farms. I think we're going to see a growth in multifamily units," he said.

Still, like Freshkills, many aspects of the borough's transformation are found beyond the North Shore waterfront. And like Freshkills, some are simply new, smarter uses of an old space - like the Broadway Stages movie studio on tap for the former Arthur Kill Correctional Facility.

"The movie studio is a perfect example," Peters said. "We had the decline, the removal of a state entity and somebody happened to have a need for that facility and said, 'Perfect, let's reuse it.' I don't think there's a loser in that game -- there's two winners."

## **SUCCESS IN BROOKLYN**

Waterfront neighborhoods in northern New Jersey and Brooklyn - visible from St. George - have undergone profound change in recent years, the same kind many are predicting for Staten Island.

"There's always going to be sort of temporary inconveniences and growing pains as we work through this - that's normal. Brooklyn went through it, but now look at the upside of what's going on there," Ms. Kelly said.

It's easy for some who grew up on Staten Island to find it unfathomable that Staten Island would ever be cool - but a generation ago, the same was said about Brooklyn, the current center of the city's cultural universe and home to all things hip.

"Brooklyn, when I was growing up as a kid in Staten Island, that was where your grandmother lived," Peters said.

But neighborhoods that were marginally used in the past - Bushwick, Williamsburg - are overflowing with pricey lofts and havens for artists. Already rents in parts of Brooklyn once unexplored are higher than in the heart of Manhattan, leaving many to look elsewhere for the next big locale.

"As your artist community gets pushed out of Williamsburg and pushed out of Red Hook, and all and these areas are gentrifying again -- where do they go then?" Peters asked.

Ms. Kelly said the new developments have raised hometown pride - and have the power to shape the perception of Staten Island.

"We're authentic here. This is an authentic borough, and authentic is the new cool -- it really is," she said.

New Jersey, too has struggled with the stigma of not being particularly cool. But Jersey City is home to outposts of hipster hotspots that began in Brooklyn -- Barcade (which is exactly what it sounds like), and independent bookstore Word, as well as a slew of highly regarded restaurants.

"We're investing about a million dollars that we're putting into a marketing branding campaign," Fulop said.

He said it all begins with determining who Staten Island wants to lure to the borough and branding it appropriately.

"I think the Brooklyn brand is a very strong brand that's happened over the last 10 years," Fulop said. "Some of it organically, and some of it has been created."

## **CRITICAL TRANSIT ISSUES**

Whenever there's talk of a growing population, a new development, or nearly any change on Staten Island, the first concerns raised are traffic and parking. But study after study shows future generations moving away from a car-centric culture.

"I think they've realized correctly that car-based suburbs are not always a joy-fest -- maybe I'd rather be in a more urban setting," Peters said, where they can walk or use public transit.

The more people who move to use public transit, the better, Peters said.

"It's hard to serve more people with the same physical infrastructure, if everyone is driving," Peters said. "Victory

Boulevard is the same Victory Boulevard I drove on as a kid. It's a challenge. If you add more and more cars, it's problematic."

The borough has its problems with transit now, but Moss pointed out that it's an easier commute than living in a true suburb.

"People live in Staten Island and take commuter buses to Midtown -- there's some elements of Staten Island that are attractive, which is that it offers the kind of suburban home experience with proximity to the rest of the city," Moss said.

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