

**NEWS FROM Legislator**

# **Lou D'Amaro**



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## **PRESS RELEASE**

**For Immediate Release**

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### **ANOTHER STEP FOR WORKFORCE HOUSING LEGISLATOR D'AMARO'S INNOVATIVE WORKFORCE HOUSING PROGRAM IS A HUGE SUCCESS AT COUNTY AUCTION**

*(HUNTINGTON STATION, NY...January 19, 2010)* --- The results are in: Suffolk County Legislator Lou D'Amaro's (D-Huntington Station) new workforce housing program, which targets the development of lots usually rejected by Suffolk's towns for their own workforce housing programs, was immensely successful during the County's most recent real estate auction. Fourteen out of twenty-nine lots were sold with workforce housing covenants at the October 21<sup>st</sup> auction, which was the first one held since the law's passage in early 2009.

"We proved the skeptics wrong," said Legislator D'Amaro. "Reform is never easy because it is always more convenient to stick with the status quo, but these auction results show that a little ingenuity can go a long way. Now 14 families, whose dream of homeownership has been elusive, may soon be able to call themselves first time homebuyers."

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Under the innovative program, before a rejected lot can be sold to an adjoining owner, developers are given the opportunity to conditionally purchase at auction these residential building lots that typically fall just short of minimum zoning requirements, and be given two years to obtain permission from a town zoning board to construct a single family, affordable dwelling.

If permission is granted, the developer will then be required to purchase the lot from the County and construct a single family dwelling that substantially conforms in size and appearance to surrounding homes in the immediate neighborhood. Through the imposition of deed covenants, the developer is required to price the dwelling within affordability guidelines that cannot exceed 60% of the median sales price for Suffolk County single-family dwellings, based upon the State of New York Mortgage Agency Guidelines. They also have to sell the newly constructed single family home to a first time home buyer.

“The 14 lots that were sold at the auction are located in a number of hamlets within the towns of Babylon, Islip and Brookhaven,” said D'Amaro. “This is important because it disproves the argument that certain communities will be ‘overwhelmed’ with this type of housing. It is also crucial because affordable homes are needed throughout Suffolk County if we are to effectively combat the ‘brain drain.’”

Recent statistics from the Long Island Index illustrate the severity of the affordability crisis facing our region, as over 70% of the all important 18-35 age bracket responded that they would be forced to move off Long Island within the next five years. “Given, these gloomy statistics, there is no question that the time is ripe for this type of ‘outside the box’ program,” added D'Amaro. “Local elected officials must do all they can to stop the ‘brain drain’ dead in its tracks.”

To ensure the program's effectiveness, the first time home buyer will be required to occupy the affordable dwelling as his or her primary residence for a minimum of ten years, and must qualify to purchase the home based upon maximum personal and household income guidelines that do not exceed 80% of the HUD-established median income for the Nassau-Suffolk Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area adjusted by family size. The developer will be required to file annual reports with the County to confirm that all program guidelines have been met.

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By targeting slightly substandard lots, the program encourages the development of vacant parcels that are part of a community that already has many other smaller, developed lots that do not conform to current zoning requirements. Town affordable housing programs typically shy away from these lots and only request lots from the County that meet all zoning requirements. The smaller lots are rejected because the towns do not want to apply to their own zoning boards for variance relief. In the past, these rejected lots were then sold by the County to adjoining residential lot owners rather than put up for auction for workforce housing.

Given the affordability requirement and the substandard size of the lots in the program, developers will be able to purchase them for much less than a typical building lot that requires no variance relief, and pass that savings on to the first time home buyer. To avoid the development of overly small lots, the program requires that a workforce housing lot have a minimum lot area of five thousand square feet and at least fifty feet of street frontage. If a qualifying lot is not sold at auction, or if a developer is unable to obtain a variance to build, ownership of the lot will then revert back to the County and be eligible to be sold to adjoining property owners.

“This innovative program helps struggling first time home buyers by making more affordable housing available,” said D'Amaro. “It also helps the County and towns by putting these lots back on the tax rolls, it helps developers by giving them construction work during an economic downturn, and it helps the neighborhood surrounding the substandard lot by removing what usually amounts to a vacant, unmaintained and littered eyesore from the immediate neighborhood.”

D'Amaro first became aware of these lots as Chairman of the Legislature's Ways & Means committee. That committee is responsible for reviewing and approving the sale of substandard lots, appraised for less than \$30,000, to adjoining residential property owners. Over time, the Chairman, drawing on his experience as a former town zoning board chairman, noticed that many of the lots put before the committee meeting after meeting, were only slightly below code development requirements and were located in neighborhoods where most of the surrounding developed lots were already substandard. “These lots are diamonds in the rough,” asserted D'Amaro, “their development would completely conform to the surrounding neighborhood and give first time home buyers the ability to realize their piece of the American dream through home ownership.”

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D'Amaro's Housing Program is a Success  
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After consultation with the County's Division of Real Property Acquisition and Management, which administers the program, D'Amaro drafted Resolution 32-2009, formally known as "A Local Law to Promote the Development of Residential Dwellings for First Time Homebuyers." The bill was overwhelmingly approved at the Legislature's February 3, 2009 meeting.

"It was a long and arduous process but the fruits of that labor, which we just witnessed for the first time at the County's recent auction, make it all worth while," D'Amaro said. "I will be paying close attention as the process continues, and the successful bidders now submit applications to their respective towns for building permits, but I am extremely confident that affordable homes will be built on these lots in the not too distant future. This program has limitless potential, which should make for a very Happy New Year for a number of Suffolk families."

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Suffolk County Legislator Lou D'Amaro (D-North Babylon) represents the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislative District, which includes parts of North Babylon, Deer Park, Dix Hills, Melville, West Hills, Huntington, South Huntington, and Huntington Station. He is Chairman of the Ways and Means committee, Vice-Chairman of the Budget & Finance committee and Vice-Chairman of the Environment, Planning and Agriculture committee of the Suffolk County Legislature.