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# Dick Spotswood: In the Big Apple, there are lessons for the Bay Area



Midtown Manhattan, Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021, in New York. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

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I just returned from two weeks in New York City. It's been two years since my wife and I last made our annual visit. Pandemic-related changes were notable. New York is a bellwether of urban life with distinct implications for suburbs similar to Marin that about central cities.

The epidemic was a cruel blow to retailers. About 30% of the shops in the Manhattan and Brooklyn neighborhoods I saw were vacant. Smaller ones likely failed due to losses during the COVID-19 lockdown. Nationwide, the pandemic supercharged the shift from "brick and mortar" stores to online shopping.

Almost every Big Apple restaurant has a parklet in front occupying parking spaces. It's been a warm autumn in the East and outdoor dining is hugely popular. Don't expect them to disappear. They'll empty out in the winters but locals will flock back with the first hint of spring.

Neighborhoods where retail shopping was once the economic driving force with cafes providing an incidental amenity have morphed. Now main streets are about restaurants where people come to eat and drink and then do a little shopping. The hospitality sector is generating foot traffic that's essential for retail survival, not vice versa. Switching café parklets for parking and the unintended consequence is decreasing overall foot traffic.

The popularity of bikes and motorized scooters grew enormously during the shutdown and will be a permanent factor of New York life. When crossing busy avenues the concern isn't tracks and buses. They're big and obvious. The danger is that bikes and scooters appear at high speed seemingly out of nowhere. This is one urban trend that so far hasn't exploded in suburbs as it has in dense urban centers. To paraphrase, "It's the geography, stupid."

New York is different from San Francisco and upscale suburbs in that there is an obvious presence of police officers usually walking in pairs. Middle class Black, Asian and older White folks overwhelmingly support the city's likely new mayor, Eric Adams, a retired Black police captain with a liberal but not progressive outlook. They have zero interest in "defunding" the police. Security is valued and expected.

If the "build, baby, build" theory works, high density New York should be a utopia of reasonably priced housing. NYC Planning reports "New York has the highest population density of any major city in the United States, with over 27,000 people per square mile."

The reality is that condos, co-ops and rentals, particularly in the borough of Manhattan, are priced similar to properties common in San Francisco and Marin. If the goal is truly to provide housing for lower income residents, then planners should concentrate on building subsidized workforce housing and drop the Bay Area regional housing needs allocation that mandates evermore market rate homes.

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On Monday at 1:15 p.m., I will moderate a free online forum hosted by the Marin Coalition of Sensible Taxpayers. The topic is "California's New Housing Laws: Truth and Consequences?" The conversation will center on Senate Bill 9, which abolished single-family zoning. Aiming to fix California's high cost of housing, the law allows a second home on each residential lot and permits lots to be split with two homes on each parcel for a total of four units.

The discussion examines consequences — good and bad — of limiting cities' control over planning, growth and zoning.

Panelists are North Bay state Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, who co-sponsored SB 9, Marin-Sonoma Assemblymember Marc Levine, D-Greenbrae, who voted no on SB 9, Novato Mayor Pat Eklund, a proponent of local control for new housing, and Mill Valley's Susan Kirsch, chair of Livable California, whose concern is speculators' impacts on neighborhoods.

Almost 400 have already signed up. Preregister by going to [costmarin.org](https://costmarin.org). Registrants will receive a confirmation email with a personal link for attending Monday's online forum.

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