

# Newsday

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## LONG ISLAND CITY

## Hoping the show will go on

■ **Businesses catering to the theater and film industries are feeling squeezed by rezoning and real estate prices**

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Falcon Perspectives, a design company that builds exhibits for Off-Broadway shows, museums and trade shows, has been in Long Island City for 17 years. But lately owner Vincent Toma is thinking of moving his company to another part of Queens or out of the borough completely.

Rising real estate prices and the city's plans to make the mostly industrial Long Island City more residential would make it more difficult and expensive to operate, said Toma.

"This is a great neighborhood," Toma said of the long-time haven for businesses catering to the entertainment industry. "But we see the writing on the wall."

Rezoning and rising property values are forcing some companies that make some or all of their living from Broadway to exit. Companies that rely heavily on the Great White Way are particularly hard hit because the economic health of that sector continues to be wobbly. Long Island City, a neighborhood poised for economic growth, could see those prospects fall short if businesses start to leave, economists warn.

The film and TV industry has long thrived in Long Island City, earning it the name Hollywood East. Silvercup Studios, the production set for HBO's "Sex and the City" and "The Sopranos," has been there since 1983. Kaufman-Astoria Studios, where the HBO special "Angels in America" was filmed, has been there since 1920.

In the 1980s, Broadway types — including set designers, costume makers and lighting specialists — began flocking to the western Queens neighborhood for its cheap rents, warehouses and proximity to Manhattan.

Kenny Greenberg, who owns Krypton Neon, a design company that has done neon lighting for many Broadway shows including "Phantom of the Opera" and "Flower Drum Song," came to the neighborhood about 20 years ago after the rent on his TriBeCa loft tripled in a year.

"It was too expensive to stay," said Greenberg. "Long Island City had much lower rents, and it was still close to my clients."

Other businesses catering to showbiz include Mutual Hardware, which does set decorating and rigging for television and Broadway shows, including "Phantom of the Opera"; and its sister company, Alcon, which supplies makeup for the theater industry; I. Weiss & Sons Inc., a \$6 million business that makes huge curtains for Broadway stages, and Showman Fabricators, a multi-million-dollar business that designs sets. But recent trends in the neighborhood could make it more difficult for this cluster of theater businesses to remain.

### Changes could hurt business

The Department of City Planning is proposing zoning changes that will make Long Island City far more residential by



MARY PIOTROWSKI is co-owner of Alcon, which supplies makeup.

bringing in about 300 housing units in new buildings to Hunters Point, a neighborhood located between the Citigroup office tower at Court Square and Queens West on the East River waterfront.

Toma, whose fleet of hired trucks already has a tough time

negotiating the narrow streets of the neighborhood, said the additional traffic would be a "disaster" for the community. "And more residents mean more kids," he said. "That sounds like an accident waiting to happen."

And then there are the soaring property values. Sales on com-

mercial properties have surged 25 percent annually for the past several years, real estate agents from Long Island City say.

"Rents have actually been stable," said John Maltz, president of Greiner-Maltz Real Estate. "But pressure is there. Higher rents will push marginal businesses out of Long Island City."

Mary Piotrowski, co-owner of Mutual Hardware and Alcon, said she was shocked to see a piece of property that she wanted to buy more than double in value in just three years.

"If I didn't own my buildings, I would have been out of this neighborhood a long time ago."

### Some companies leave

Others have already left. At least two set designers have moved to cheaper neighborhoods elsewhere. Hudson Scenic, a set designer, left Long Island City for Yonkers, and embroidery company Dodgers Stage Clothing has returned to Chelsea in Manhattan after getting a better deal on warehouse space there. Economists say that an exodus of businesses from the area would hurt the neighborhood's local economy.

"If enough businesses leave, there is no question that it would hurt the neighborhood," said Jonathan Bowles, research director of the Center for an Urban Future, a think tank. Bob Usdin of Showman Fabricators said the company moved into Long Island City last year, but he wouldn't be surprised if other businesses left because of increases in property values and the potential change in the neighborhood. Usdin and partner Mike Cioffi recently left Red Hook, Brooklyn, after the landlord tried to triple their rent.

"We came to a neighborhood where the same thing that happened to us is beginning to happen to businesses that are already here," Usdin said.