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- [Community](#)
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- [Shopping](#)
- [My Zwire!](#)

Home -> News -> Franklin Square Elmont -> Stories

Monday 12 February, 2007

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Stories

Hub plan headed to Hempstead

By Doug Miller

February 08, 2007

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The Nassau Legislature voted 16-2 on Monday to give Lighthouse Development Group its blessing to begin the process of negotiating with the Town of Hempstead over the future development of the 77-acre Nassau Hub site.



But the approval came with a terse admonition from legislators on both sides of the aisle, who warned that many of the existing conditions of the memorandum of understanding between County Executive Thomas Suozzi and Lighthouse were unacceptable, and that not enough had yet been done to alleviate the concerns of the surrounding communities.

The Legislature approved a resolution that would authorize Suozzi to execute an agreement with Lighthouse Development Group, a consortium made up of Islanders owner Charles Wang and his partners, which include Reckson Real Estate Corp., to redevelop the land around the Nassau Coliseum into a multi-use sports, residential, commercial and retail facility that would include several more hockey rinks for public use, a minor league baseball team and a mix of high-end and affordable housing.

Before the vote, the agreement was amended to include language designed to smooth the ruffled feathers of certain North Shore legislators, who had complained that, by giving the Town of Hempstead full authority to regulate the zoning of the project, the deal excluded North Hempstead and Oyster Bay residents from participating. The amendment requires Lighthouse to hold community outreach meetings in those two towns also, and authorizes the supervisors of each to appoint a member to the project's oversight committee. And Scott Rechler, chairman and CEO of Reckson, made himself available to the legislators before the vote for public questions. "This project will enable Nassau County to be more competitive," he said. "It will drive jobs here." He estimated the project would create 15,000 construction jobs and, once completed, \$50 million to \$60 million annually in additional property taxes.

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▶ Malverne
W.Hempstead
▶ Merrick
▶ Nassau (5 Towns)
▶ Oceanside/Isl. Pk
▶ PrimeTime
▶ Rockville Centre
▶ Valley Stream
▶ Stepping Out
▶ Columns
▶ Classifieds
▶ Business Directory
▶ Community Websites and Events
▶ Company Profile
▶ Links

He also revealed that, as part of their partnership, Reckson and Wang had pooled all their resources, in essence making each other partners in all aspects of the Hub project. It also means Reckson is now a co-owner of the New York Islanders.

Rechler said he planned to meet with Town of Hempstead officials "immediately" to begin negotiations on the scope of the process. He said he was hopeful that public hearings on the matter could begin to take place in six to seven months. Once begun, the process is expected to take at least a year. Once Lighthouse has all the approvals from the Town of Hempstead, it must return to the Legislature for final approval of the lease, since Nassau County is the owner of the land. A rider in the agreement between Wang and the county would transfer ownership of the land to Lighthouse at the completion of what is likely to be a 99-year lease.

When the matter was before the finance committee Jan. 22, concerns were raised that if the Legislature votes down the plan ultimately worked out between Wang and the Town of Hempstead, the deal allows the Islanders to break their lease at the coliseum, which is due to expire in 2015.

But the Legislature's minority leader, Republican Peter Schmitt, announced on Monday that he will vote against the final lease if it still contains the clause about transferring ownership of the property. "I'm voting to approve this, to move it along," Schmitt said. "But when the lease comes back I will not be able to support it."

His comments were echoed by Legislator Francis X. Becker, a Republican of Lynbrook, who also voted in favor of the resolution.

The 19th member of the Legislature, Democrat Craig Johnson, recused himself from all Hub-related votes because he is an associate of a law firm that represents the Coliseum management.

Voting against were Republicans Vincent Muscarella, whose district includes Garden City and West Hempstead, and Richard Nicoletto, whose district includes several North Hempstead communities on the north side of Old Country road. Both expressed frustration that, as the owner of the property, the Nassau County Legislature would not have enough say over what is built there. "To put this before the Town of Hempstead is an abdication of our responsibility," Muscarella said.

Nicoletto warned that the future Legislature would feel too cowed by the magnitude of the project to vote against it, no matter what the repercussions. "There is no way we will be able to say no to such powerful developers as these," he said. "There is no way we will be able to say no to organized labor. There is no way we will be able to say no to the Islanders. We are losing our ability to influence this development."

Comments about this story? DMiller@liherald.com or (516) 569-4000 ext. 213.

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