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Coliseum project may be do-or-die for Islanders

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Islanders owner Charles Wang and real estate partner Scott Rechler share a vision of turning the dilapidated old hockey barn known as Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum into the stylish anchor of a sports and entertainment complex at the heart of their Lighthouse Project development in Uniondale. If the approval process goes well, the Islanders could find themselves in a new ice palace as soon as November 2010.

But if the plans they expect to file Wednesday with the Town of Hempstead meet opposition strong enough to kill the project, then the future of the four-time Stanley Cup champion franchise might be in jeopardy. Billionaire Wang has deep pockets and a commitment to Long Island, but after weathering losses of \$15 million to \$20 million each year since buying the team in 2000, even he has a limit to how long he can hold out if there's no Lighthouse at the end of the tunnel.

"Everyone asks me that question," Wang said when asked recently if there is a point at which he would have to move or sell the team. "I've been here on Long Island for 55 years. I don't want to go anywhere else.

"Yes, there is a point. But the last thing I want is for anything to be construed as a threat. If I wanted to, I could have made threats a long time ago. We've got to get it done. [Devils president] Lou Lamoriello got it done in New Jersey, and [NBA Nets owner] Bruce Ratner is getting it done in Brooklyn. We've never been this close before."

Wang and Rechler are focused on digging in and building, not selling or moving out, but it largely depends on the outcome of an approval process expected to take up to 18 months. In the best-case scenario for the Islanders, renovations to the Coliseum would begin in July 2009 after the Arena Football League Dragons complete their schedule.

Construction would take place from July through October over the course of at least two offseason periods and possibly three, in which case the opening would be pushed back to November 2011. The Isles would play all their October games on the road for two or three years as the Devils did for the first nine games this season before their new Prudential Center opened in Newark.

Although plans for the complete Lighthouse Project include up to 2,000 residential units, office buildings and a minor-league baseball field, it's the core phase that is crucial to the Islanders' future. That includes a refurbished arena costing \$300 million with a new roof covering fashioned to resemble a sail stretching over the Coliseum and a new connected sports complex that will include four regulation NHL ice sheets, two basketball courts and a training facility.

The initial phase also includes a conference and exposition center between the Coliseum and the Marriott hotel to the east plus two high-rise office towers housing a luxury hotel and condominiums.

Arena seating capacity will be 17,500 for hockey, 18,500 for basketball and 20,000 for concerts. The current roof will remain, but some walls might be removed. Renovations begin by gutting the building and lowering the ice surface to create room for 15 rows of seating and two rings of luxury suites on the lower level, which will have its own concourse. The new suites will be downsized to accommodate 8-12 people and fit the budget for Long Island's medium-size companies.

Plans call for the upper bowl to be serviced by a second concourse. Existing luxury boxes above will be converted to party rooms for large groups, and concession stands will be moved to the outer walls of the concourses. Electronics inside the arena will be state-of-the-art, and season-ticket holders might receive PDA devices they swipe for admission and use to get statistics.

Goaltender Rick DiPietro said a modern facility should help in the recruitment of top players. "When guys become unrestricted free agents, they look at where they're going to practice and play," DiPietro said. "Having seen the plans, what Charles plans to do is phenomenal."

Should community opposition scuttle the project, the Isles could leave the Coliseum by 2015 when their contract with Spectacor Management Group runs out, or they could negotiate their way out even earlier. But Wang isn't thinking in those terms. He's focused on the vision of a modern hub area revolving around Long Island's only major pro sports franchise.

"If we can't get this done, we've got big problems on Long Island," Wang said. "It's going to be the crown jewel."

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