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Lighthouse Project shines light on forgotten LI

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November 20, 2007

The first time Scott Rechler revved up the big-screen version of a new plan to remake the commercial heart of Nassau County, the sound didn't work.

Things got rolling quick enough and, finally, the screen filled with colorful drawings of a luxury hotel, recreation facilities, housing and commercial buildings.

Two things have changed since Rechler's partner, Charles Wang, first proposed that ambitious remake of a 77-acre area surrounding Nassau's Coliseum four years ago.

First, Wang's lighthouse is no more. The idea's fallen sideways, morphing into the centerpiece of new plans filed last week: A manmade canal pulsing through the center of the once-verdant Hempstead Plains.

Wow.

A second change was stunning too.

Rechler told the luncheon crowd at Vision Long Island's annual conference Friday that the plan, like the lighthouse, might keep morphing, depending on what Nassau residents want. He also said that, if the development couldn't work, he would walk away.

There are still plenty of questions before anyone knows if he'll have to. One thing is certain, though. The plan has made a priority of using valuable land that for too long has gone fallow.

Even before opening the floor to questions Friday, Rechler acknowledged that key questions remain to be answered.

The audience quickly zeroed in on the most pressing. The first was on transportation. How would that work in an area already choking on cars? (Underground garages, shuttle buses.) The second was on affordable housing. How much would there be? (To be determined later.)

The next three questioners jumped to cover schools, policing, fire and sanitation. Could the current infrastructure handle it all? (No, except for schools, since the project wouldn't add many students to the system, he said.)

No one in the audience brought up Long Island's number one issue: taxes. Or jobs. But the crowd - a mix of builders, planners, community activists, public-policy makers and zoning experts - nonetheless made quick work of cutting to the heart of the matter.

Rechler answered what he could and, to his credit, acknowledged being unable to answer what he couldn't, or wouldn't - for now. Answers should come as the proposal is dissected by the town, county and others in weeks and months ahead.

But the questions are important too, because Wang's plan isn't the only thing that's changed.

Wang's failed first proposal, lighthouse and all, merits credit for accomplishing something four years ago. Remaking Nassau's Hub became a priority. And it made it easier for other developers to at least propose projects that would add more than the ubiquitous strip mall and single-family home to Long Island. Builders are thinking green; projects are sprouting near railroad stations and in dying downtowns. The changes are significant, as the region - to a degree unnoticed even four years ago - knows something's got to give.

Four years ago, the Long Island Index had yet to quantify the exodus of local youth; the New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, now studying ways to curtail the high cost of government, did not exist; global warming was a myth; gas prices were closer to \$2 a gallon than to \$4; and complaints about crushing taxes on Long Island hadn't reached critical mass.

Is the region ready to consider Big Ideas?

And, if so, why shouldn't some take wing in proposals from Wang-Rechler or even Gerald Wolkoff, who is working to remake an even bigger area in Suffolk County?

The proposals represent a chance to do something about transportation, housing, bettering the environment, and addressing the knot of public school funding (only two school districts, Uniondale and Brentwood, for example, would benefit from these mega-projects).

On Friday, as the crowd left the ballroom, Lisa Tyson, director of the LI Progressive Coalition, handed me a flier.

The sheet's heading read: Y-I-M-B-Y.

"Yes" - as opposed to "Not" - in My Backyard.

And I couldn't help thinking: Could the Wang-Rechler proposal - with needed modifications, that are certain to come - ever make that cut?

At some point on Long Island, somebody's will have to.

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