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N. Bellmore weighs Lighthouse plan

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Project Manager William Schaefer explains details of the Lighthouse development model to community members.

Few would dispute that Long Island needs an economic shot in the arm, including added tax revenues and new jobs. And the Lighthouse Project - a \$2 billion mixed-use real estate development proposed on 77 acres around Nassau County Veterans Memorial Coliseum - would undoubtedly provide economic stimulus.

A number of residents, however, questioned the project during a recent meeting of the North Bellmore Civic Association, wondering about traffic and density issues, as well as the effect the project might have on surrounding communities such as North Bellmore.

The Lighthouse Development Group's Managing Director Mathew Frank spoke about the proposal. He described a residential and commercial community, with an array of sports and entertainment options. At the center of it all would be the Islanders. Developers Scott Rechler of RexCorp Realty LLC and Computer Associates magnet Charles Wang, the Islanders owner, formed the Lighthouse Development Group.

The Town of Hempstead will consider the scope of the project at a meeting at Town Hall in Hempstead at 10 a.m. on May 22 and at 7 p.m. on May 27.

"The purpose of these scope sessions is for you to come to make sure we didn't miss something," Frank said.

The size of the project is to be mitigated to one degree or another by its pedestrian-accessible, suburban-like design. "This type of mixed-use community needs to be broken down into walkable blocks," Frank explained. "We broke down the site into 400-foot blocks to provide a sense of community, like a downtown, like a main street."

The project review process, begun about a month ago, is expected to take about 18 months, culminating in a detailed Environmental Impact Statement. Frank said the group hopes to begin the first of a two-phase construction plan in July 2009.

Over the 10 years that the developers expect it would take to complete, Frank said it would create about 17,000 construction jobs, 8,400 permanent on-site jobs, and "a ripple effect" of thousands of other tertiary jobs and businesses. He said the project is anticipated to generate about \$50 to \$60

million in real estate tax revenues annually, and about \$200 million in sales taxes for the county and state.

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Traffic & transportation

"We'll be stuck with the traffic, and you guys will be long gone," said one woman to Lighthouse Group Project Manager William Schaefer before the meeting, as he explained the elements of an architectural model of the site.

"If we screw up the traffic, we mess up our own businesses," he replied, referring to RexCorp-owned buildings, including the nearby RexCorp. building (formerly EAB Plaza), the

Long Island Marriott and the Omni office buildings.

Local environmental activist Lisa Schary said, "I don't want oversaturation with too many cars and too many people. We do need a better coliseum, but I don't want that to hurt local businesses and local communities."

She said her main worry is transportation to and from the site, particularly since there is no north-south route for trucks, other than local roads such as Merrick Avenue and Newbridge Road. No trucks are allowed on the Meadowbrook Parkway.

Frank said the on-site concept centers around pedestrian access, underground parking and a possible trolley service, and that transportation to and from the site is being analyzed, particularly with a view toward an express bus shuttle to a main line Long Island Rail Road connection in Mineola. Residents asked if the closer Hempstead or Westbury rail links were being considered. "We do have that train that brings the circus to the coliseum," Schary said, "but it doesn't seem to work any other time."

Impact on surrounding communities

The Environmental Impact Study will outline results of other studies conducted by consultants hired by the developers and the town, according to Frank. The statement will be added to a draft report presented to the town last month as part of a request to rezone the property for mixed use.

"We are here to start, to continue the dialogue with this and other community groups," Frank said, encouraging those in the room to ask questions.

Ask questions they did. Some raised issues about transportation, particularly traffic through surrounding communities, as well as parking in and around the site. Others voiced concerns about the project's demands on local resources such as water and sewage, emergency, fire, police and other security, and medical services. Others asked about the potential economic impact that the complex might have on competing retail and commercial businesses such as those at the Roosevelt Field and Source malls, as well as surrounding communities.

Other issues included the project's potential impact on adjacent wetlands, quality-of-life issues such as air and noise, and the determination of the amount and types of renewable resources that may be used to generate the added energy needs of such a large development.

Next-generation housing

A major issue facing the plan is whether the 20 percent "next-generation housing," a form of affordable residential property, required by the county will be located on or off site. "From voices I've heard," County Legislator Norma Gonsalves said, seated in the audience, "they want the 20 percent second-generation housing on site."

County Legislator Dave Denenberg, also in attendance, explained that the concept of "next-generation housing" in the development was to include "housing for seniors or for our children to live in a vibrant, mixed-use area."

That equates to 460 units at a cost of no more than \$250,000 each by today's market standards of the total 2,300 residential units proposed at the

site, Frank said. The others would be at various "price points and product types," including multi-million-dollar ones.

Not done yet

"We're not done yet. We're at early stages of the project," Frank commented, again announcing that the public is invited to comment at the two meetings later this month. He said, "If it is determined that it will have a negative impact, the project scope will have to change."

Environmental activist Richard Scary said, "I don't see how they can go ahead without dealing with three major issues: traffic problems, affordable housing needs, and environmental impacts such as on sewers, water usage, energy and so on."

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