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Lighthouse hailed, questioned

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An architect's model of the planned Lighthouse Project.

South Shore residents packed a Town of Hempstead scoping meeting last Thursday to review the potential environmental impacts of the Lighthouse Project, a proposed \$2 billion face-lift

for the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum and its environs.

Many in the audience of about 100 lent their support for the project, saying it would generate desperately needed jobs, increase tax revenues by tens of millions of dollars, and add offices, shops, condominiums, two 31-story luxury apartment buildings and a five-star hotel on the barren acres of asphalt surrounding the coliseum. It would also include a sports-science center and potentially a minor league ball field.

Billionaire developer and Islanders owner Charles Wang and his partner in the project, Scott Rechler, chairman and CEO of RexCorp Realty, spoke during the meeting. Wang said the project "would create opportunities for everyone." Rechler said the Lighthouse development team has already spent \$10 million to study the project's potential impacts, as well as held more than 100 meetings with community groups to hear their concerns. "We're approaching this project as neighbors," Rechler said.

Wang said he hopes to break ground on the project, which would encompass 150 acres, by the summer of 2009. If the town approves the plan and it moves forward, it would be the Island's largest construction project in decades.

Bernadine Ladson, pastor of the Olivet Baptist Church in Valley Stream, said, "I am excited about the Lighthouse Project, as are my congregants." She said the Island needs affordable housing, and the project answers that call.

The project is to include "next-generation" housing; that is, apartments that are priced low enough that young people can afford them. Resident after resident encouraged the town to make sure that the Lighthouse Project includes at least 20 percent of next-generation, or workforce, housing -- onsite and in perpetuity. William Stoner, AARP's associate director for livable communities, said, "It would be a travesty if the opportunity for affordable housing in this project were missed."

Rosalie Norton of West Hempstead said a number of young people are leaving Long Island not because they cannot find affordable housing, but rather because they cannot get well-paying jobs. Most of all, Norton said, the Lighthouse Project would provide good jobs. "What would be the economic impact, the economic hardship, if this goes away?" Norton wondered.

Nicholas Gilio of North Bellmore was among a number of recent college graduates who spoke during the session. He said he sees no future for himself

on Long Island unless the job market turns around. Among the young people who spoke, he was not alone in this view.

Richard Schary, a North Bellmore civic and environmental activist, said he worries that the project could add many more cars and trucks to local roads, increasing traffic congestion. He noted that the coliseum has no north-south truck route leading into it. Trucks are not permitted on the nearby Meadowbrook Parkway, so they must travel into the area from the east or the west, through Uniondale or East Meadow.

Lisa Tyson of North Bellmore, director of the Long Island Progressive Coalition, said the project is an opportunity to rethink Long Island's current transportation modes. She said she would like to see rapid bus or light rail included in the project, lessening the need for cars. And she wants a better system of connecting Long Island Bus with the Long Island Rail Road.

"At the end of the day, Long Islanders will ride the bus and the train," Tyson said.

Roy Meserole, owner of the Meserole Funeral Home in Inwood, wondered how Nassau County's volunteer firefighters would provide protection for the site's two proposed skyscrapers. "This is a massive project...and these guys have to secure this," Meserole said, noting that fighting a high-rise fire differs vastly from battling the house and small-business blazes that Nassau's volunteers are accustomed to.

Meserole pondered about the effect that the project might have on surrounding businesses. With an infusion of high-end shops and restaurants around the coliseum, Meserole asked whether local merchants would lose out. "We don't want to see Roosevelt Field vacated because of the [Lighthouse] Project," he said.

Hempstead Town officials, including representatives of the building, water and conservation and waterway departments, said they would consider the public's comments. They planned to hold a second public scoping session on Tuesday, after press time. Written comments will be accepted through June 3.

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