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Riverhead to choose Wednesday between indoor ski mountain and racetrack

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Riverhead town officials convened a now-or-never meeting yesterday to decide whether to allow an indoor ski mountain or a racetrack to be built in Calverton. But after seeking to prod an unorthodox verbal auction between the competing developers, officials ended up putting off their decision for two days more.

Backers of the two competing, tourism-oriented mixed-use proposals for the 755 acres of former Grumman property were egged on by Supervisor Phil Cardinale to raise their final bids for the land, which had been roughly equal at \$125 million plus a share of the revenues they expect to reap. After they told him during a recess that they were willing to go as high as \$140 million, Cardinale called the competitors, RexCorp Realty and Riverhead Resorts, to the microphone and invited them to take turns topping one another's offer. RexCorp officials said they were prepared to raise their bid.

Riverhead Resorts attorney Mitch Pally vowed to match any offer RexCorp made. RexCorp then protested this contest was pointless.

"Maybe they can arm-wrestle," one spectator shouted helpfully from the audience.

Eventually the competitors handed in sealed bids containing undisclosed "final offers" that town officials opened but declined to make public. They will debate and vote on the competing measures, they said, at 8 a.m. tomorrow. But Cardinale seemed to agree with RexCorp Chairman Scott Rechler that the prices paid by the bidders should be secondary in decision-makers' minds to their long-term impact on the town and region.

Several fans of NASCAR-style racing turned out to urge approval of the RexCorp proposal for that reason. "This is the last shot at a motor sports on Long Island -- the last place," said Alan Estergomy, a retired teacher from Ridge. "If it doesn't happen here, it's not going to happen."

But the heads of two local civic associations said their groups opposed the noise and traffic a track

would bring, and they objected to what they called RexCorp's "ultimatum" to the town to force a decision between the two groups. "They're not making any more land," said Rex Farr, president of the Greater Calverton Civic Association. "Why are we rushing into a decision?"

Cardinale was pleased with the results of the meeting. "The bids are higher and they are good for the town," he said after the meeting, adding that the secret, final offers were close to one another. "Higher is good."

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