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Is it the real deal?

Heavy hitters make a pitch

By Tim Gannon

A cool \$100 million to make EPCAL a major Long Island destination?

That's the offer on the table from a development group consisting of RexCorp and Long Island Destination Group. They are offering to buy 755 acres at the Calverton Enterprise Park for \$100 million, and proposing to build, among other things, a hotel and conference center, a motor sports facility, an equestrian facility, a cultural arts and entertainment center, indoor and outdoor sports and recreation facilities and 1,088 transient housing units with fractional ownership, meaning that no one owner could occupy them full-time.



Plans for the entrance to the proposed Raceway Village at EPCAL. News-Review drawing courtesy of RexCorp

They presented their plans, which they dubbed EPCAL Centre, to the Riverhead Town Board Friday.

RexCorp was founded by former members of Reckson Associates, and is headed by Scott Rechler, who is currently working with New York Islanders owner Charles Wang to redevelop the Nassau Coliseum area.

Long Island Destination Group is headed by Jim Petrocelli Jr. of J. Petrocelli Contracting, which built Atlantis Marine World in Riverhead and the Long Island Ducks stadium in Central Islip, and Peter Scalise, who had proposed a motor sports facility in Calverton several years ago.

Spector Group, the architect on the proposed Apollo Real Estate Advisors project in downtown Riverhead, is the project architect. Michael Mannetta of Spector Group is a cousin of Riverhead Supervisor Phil Cardinale. The supervisor has said he received legal advice that he doesn't need to abstain from voting on that project because Spector Group is not a principal in the development.

Mr. Petrocelli and Mr. Scalise were involved in a similar proposal from a group called Top Gun Entertainment that came before the town last year. They had also proposed a similar project on county-owned land in Yaphank, but were not selected by the county to develop that land.

Mr. Rechler said his company owns more than \$3 billion worth of properties in the tri-state area and has projects worth about \$2 billion under construction.

"We recognize that this is a preliminary vision that needs to be refined, and we need to get more feedback from the community and from the government officials and for ourselves to spend the time refining this vision," Mr. Rechler said before making the presentation. "Understand that we are not going to have all the answers today and that we are approaching this flexibly. If there is feedback on things that the community thinks need to be addressed, we plan on addressing them."

Matthew Frank of RexCorp described the Calverton project as including six venues.

There would be a 150-acre equestrian center, including a show area, indoor arena and barns, at the north of the property fronting Route 25, he said. Also proposed are 160 vacation townhouses for horse owners and riders to use, he said. The proposal also includes an equestrian medical facility and an area for a new town animal shelter.

There's also an 84-acre Town Square area to include a 250-room hotel and 100,000-square-foot convention center, a 400-room family resort lodge, and both indoor and outdoor sports and recreational facilities. The recreational facilities would comprise two main buildings, four multipurpose fields, two "ice sheets" that could be used for skating and seven outdoor multipurpose fields. The fields could be used by schools, tournaments or country fair-type events, Mr. Frank said. Restaurants, go-karts and batting cages are also among the proposed recreational facilities, according to Mr. Frank, along with a 15,000-seat amphitheater.



RexCorp's south aerial view of the proposed racetracks.

Mr. Frank also described the project's proposed cultural arts and entertainment center, which would include a Long Island Tourism Expo showcasing the area's wineries and equestrian uses, a Long Island Motor Sports Museum paying tribute to Long Island's many racetracks, of which Riverhead Raceway is the last, and an East End Veterans Museum.

News-Review drawing courtesy of RexCorp

This area also would feature an 8,000-seat indoor arena, a children's performing center and a new community center for the town, he said.

On the western end of the property would be what Mr. Frank called a Motor Sports Country Club, which would "cater to car enthusiasts who prefer to spin around the track on a leisurely roll." It would include a 2.5-mile road course circuit, a spa and fitness center and 428 vacation townhouses.



Scott Rechler spoke with his attorney, Larry Feldman, Friday morning before presenting to the Town Board his company's plan for 75?5 acres at EPCAL.

Also included, he said, would a quarter-mile auto racing track catering to local racing enthusiasts, much as Riverhead Raceway does, surrounded by a larger 3/4-mile oval track for NASCAR-type competition. It would have 20,000 spectator seats, with the ability to expand to 80,000, and would host only one major weekend event per year. The smaller track would operate two days per week from April to September, he said.

The 7,000-foot runway, which the town does not plan to use and which would be sold with the 755 acres, would be redeveloped as a "runway boulevard," Mr. Frank said, featuring restaurants and retail stores while providing vehicle access to the site. In addition, he said, there would be a trolley service to connect people to different venues on the property as well to other areas of Riverhead.

So how would you get there?

Mr. Frank said that issue will require "significant research and study," but that they are seeking to have traffic directed to the site from Exit 69 of the Long Island Expressway, up an "expanded" Schultz Road, and into the facility's proposed main entrance on Grumman Boulevard. They also propose two additional entrances on Route 25.

The proposal also seeks to investigate the reopening of the rail spur on the property, and to use shuttle service and remote parking for major events, Mr. Frank said. The maps presented Friday also showed several two-level parking garages on the site.

Mr. Frank said they believe the proposal complies with the town's Planned Recreational Park (PRP) zoning for the site, and that they plan to comply with other requirements, such as having 1,000-foot setbacks from both Grumman Boulevard and any tiger salamander breeding areas. They estimate the project will cost \$1 billion to construct, and will create about 2,000 construction jobs and 2,500 permanent jobs, he said.

Mr. Rechler estimated the project could generate about \$15 million a year in property taxes, which he said was a rough estimate. He also said he did not at know at the point the breakdown of the salary ranges into which jobs created at the proposed site would fall.

Mr. Rechler said he believes the project would enhance the adjacent industrial park at the Calverton site — for example, that auto makers might be attracted by the presence of car clubs and auto enthusiasts on the site.

He said the hotel and raceway would be built first to establish the site as a destination. He also said they also foresee operations on the site using the existing 10,000 foot runway to fly in clients or materials.

Councilwoman Barbara Blass said the presentation was "quite ambitious," but cautioned the project could affect the quality of life.

The pressure for this type of development comes from other areas, such as Yaphank, where Mr. Petrocelli proposed a similar project on county property but was not chosen by the county.

"The impacts are here and this will forever change Riverhead," Ms. Blass said.

Mr. Rechler said the Top Gun proposal was not selected for the Yaphank site, but the county still plans to develop that site. But he agreed that this proposal was ambitious.

"We're ambitious people," he said. "We like to do ambitious things. We don't like to do small things."

Members of the Greater Calverton Civic Association have opposed motor sports proposals at Calverton in the past, and told Supervisor Phil Cardinale earlier this year that they feel motor sports should be removed as a permitted use in the Calverton Enterprise Park.

Asked about the potential for such opposition, Mr. Rechler said, "You have to look at the project as a whole, not just the racing component."

Mr. Frank had said that auto racing is the fastest growing spectator sport in the country and ranks second only to football as the most watched sport on television.

NASCAR has been seeking a venue in the New York metropolitan area and recently sought a site on Staten Island, but was ultimately rejected.

Mr. Cardinale said Friday that he would speak with board members informally during the week about the proposal as well as at Thursday's Town Board work session. He said he hopes to pursue more information on the proposal.

Any proposal to buy land from the town at the Calverton site requires a qualified and eligible sponsor hearing, during which the prospective buyer must prove it has the financial wherewithal and ability to do what they propose.

The Rexcorp proposal is one of two the town has recently received for the 755 acres. The other, called Snow Valley, has run into criticism, since the group's principal, Thomas Stewart of Scotland, failed to disclose that he was in bankruptcy in Scotland. Mr. Stewart later dropped out of the project.

A company called Rechler Equity Partners, headed by Scott Rechler's brothers, also has made a proposal to purchase 600 acres of industrial and office park property the town is selling on the northeast portion of the Calverton property.

Former town councilman Vic Prusinowski, who is working with Long Island Destination Group, said they hope to make presentations before the Greater Calverton Civic Association and other local civic groups.