

EDITORIAL

Wait, another LI arena?

Nassau has one big arena and a second in the works. A third in Suffolk makes no regional sense.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Long Island can't win with an arena hat trick. Between them, Nassau and Suffolk counties have three significant publicly owned parcels ripe for development, all within roughly 45 miles of each other.

These are among the few remaining centrally located properties ideal for ambitious plans for destination development. What's needed is vibrant economic activity to support good-paying jobs or housing.

Now imagine a sports and entertainment arena on each of them.

So much for bold and cohesive regional thinking.

Suffolk County last week chose a developer to build on the Town of Islip's 40-acre portion of the critically important Ronkonkoma Hub. The plan put forth by Jones Lang LaSalle Inc. and its partners is a 17,500-seat arena, with a hotel, convention space, medical facilities and additional development.

But exactly how would that plan succeed with an 18,000-seat arena, hotel and other development being planned at Belmont Park as the future home of the New York Islanders? And what about the remodeled Nassau Coliseum, now a 13,000-plus seat arena, that still sits alone amid 77 acres at the Nassau Hub?

Welcome to Long Island, the land of pristine beaches, lovely vineyards and visions of big sports arenas.

Major projects should be developed with a grasp of how they complement other parts of the region. That's not what has happened here.

Certainly, Suffolk's attempt to build more than housing or office space is welcome. A convention or conference space is needed. And the support from civic groups is important, as often, it's local naysayers who stop big projects.

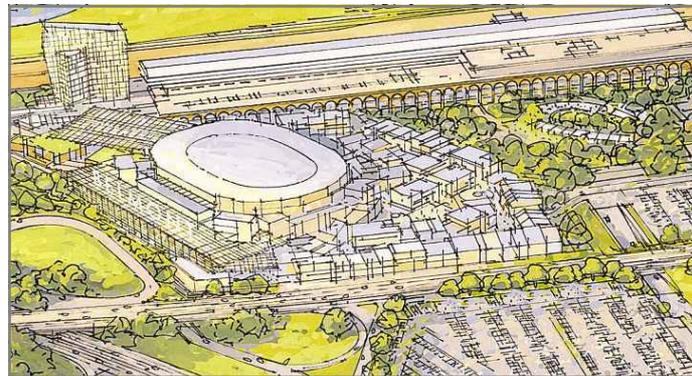
But neither a grand plan nor community support makes the arena concept right for the reborn Ronkonkoma area, especially when the state is proceeding with plans at Belmont, and Nassau officials are again trying to figure out the future of their own hub, and the



ABOVE: A rendering of the newly proposed arena at the Ronkonkoma train station, north of MacArthur Airport.

MIDDLE: An illustration of the arena planned for the New York Islanders on vacant land at Belmont Park.

BOTTOM: The renovated Nassau Coliseum. Nassau County continues to discuss what to do with the surrounding 77 undeveloped acres.



arena there, given those Belmont plans.

There's also no sign that any professional team, including the Islanders, would settle in Suffolk. And the National Hockey League has no interest in another franchise coming to the area.

Given all that, it's worrisome that Suffolk officials would choose the arena-centric option proposed by Chicago-based Jones Lang LaSalle and Woodbury engineer John Cameron.

When asked whether the project fits

with regionwide economic development efforts, Cameron, who chairs the Long Island Regional Planning Council, pointed to the needs of Suffolk residents, the desire for entertainment for young people there, and the adjacent railroad stop and airport. And while County Executive Steve Bellone has taken a back seat publicly, county officials say they're giving the community what it wants.

Both responses are disappointing. All of which makes it seem that

something else is in play. The suspicion is that the plans in Ronkonkoma are really being put forth as a backup in case the arena at Belmont falls through. As of now, it's a strategy that makes no sense. State officials are performing environmental reviews at Belmont, and Islanders owner Jon Ledecky said the Ronkonkoma efforts are "not relevant to us." There's no sign that will change.

County officials say they're not planning a Ronkonkoma arena in the context of a Belmont failure. It's reckless to bet on the failure of one Long Island development in exchange for the potential success of another. Cameron, meanwhile, insists Ronkonkoma is being developed "independent" of Belmont. If so, it's unclear how the seats in such a big venue would be filled.

The county's request for qualifications for the Ronkonkoma Hub was issued in October with a variety of options and ideas. It attracted four bids from well-known developers. The winner was chosen by county economic development officials and Bellone's chief of staff. But the process marked a setback for what had seemed an impressive effort at intergovernment cooperation. Three years ago, a Ronkonkoma Hub "alliance" was formed among Suffolk, Brookhaven and Islip. But Suffolk officials didn't even notify Brookhaven Supervisor Ed Romaine of their decision. That's petty.

County officials say it's early, and the arena's size, project's scope and details are up for discussion. But clearly, an arena is the centerpiece. The developers indicate they want the full-size variety, not one geared to minor league teams or small shows. But their financial ability to build it and attract an anchor tenant is worth looking at closely. The investment banker who is a partner in the effort, Ray Bartoszek, failed to follow through on plans to buy the then-Phoenix Coyotes in 2013, and, years later, to build a promised Seattle arena.

If Suffolk and its developers get this wrong, they could set back the development of the Ronkonkoma Hub by years. Just look at the starts and stops at Enterprise Park in Calverton, or even at the still-undefined Nassau Hub itself.

Suffolk County officials should embrace development that's best for the Ronkonkoma Hub and for the region. It's been 14 years since Nassau first tried to create a major destination at Mitchel Field. It's still trying to get it right. Suffolk needs to get it right from the start.

The region wins only if the whole team plays well — together.

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