

Arverne East Plan Includes 'Anti-Gentrification' Stores and Nature Preserve

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Nature Preserve and 'Anti-Gentrification' Stores Highlight New Arverne Plan

A new plan for long-vacant Arverne East includes "anti-gentrification" stores that are owned by businesses instead of being leased, a nature preserve and a forest, officials said.

Construction on a new vocational school, the first element of the plan, could start as early as next June on the 80-acre stretch of land, which has been empty for decades. But the plans still faces major hurdles like a lack of infrastructure and funding.

Local Office Landscape Architecture, run by Walter Meyer and Jennifer Bolstad, was hired to create a new version of the plan, including a mixed-use community with 1,199 residential units, a 154,000 square-foot commercial space including a supermarket and storefronts Meyer called "anti-gentrification" because the businesses would be able to own their buildings.

According to Meyer, the idea is to create economic resiliency in the community by giving control of the property to business owners.

"That's the deal, having ownership on site," Meyer said.

The new plan also features a 50-acre nature preserve, including bioswales and a forest to protect the peninsula from future storms, that would help provide jobs for locals.

The idea, which was presented Wednesday night to more than 200 residents in Bayswater, is different from the design by Swedish architects White Arkitekter that won the FAR ROC competition last October.

"It's close," to the winning design, said Steve Bluestone, of The Bluestone Organization, which is an investor in the site. "It had some good ideas, and we incorporated those ideas."

The White Arkitekter plan didn't precisely follow the original RFP for the site, Bluestone said, and created a nature preserve that was smaller.

The peninsula will be protected by the forest and other design features, Meyer said, and would also feature a bike share program from the Beach 44th Street subway station that connects to the boardwalk.

The development of Arverne East, which has been vacant since the 1960s, is being spearheaded by L+M Development Partners, The Bluestone Organization and Triangle Equities, which were designated to develop the land in 2006.

Increased exposure after Hurricane Sandy reignited interest in the site, and Councilman Donovan Richards, who helped organized the event, said the area "now has the opportunity to do something great."

"Through crisis, there is always opportunity," said Richards, who vowed to make sure there was also a mix of affordable housing in the community.

The biggest issue on the peninsula is jobs, said Kalin Callaghan, a lifelong resident of the peninsula who runs the community group Rockaway Wildfire.

She thought the plan was "awesome" and said she was happy to meet with the developers to "hold their feet to the fire" over what they need to get done.

But major hurdles still stand in the way.

Ron Moelis, who runs L+M Partners, said there are major infrastructure issues — mainly that there isn't anything on the site.

"Funding, funding, funding," was also a major issue, he said. The land is currently owned by the city and he hoped for cooperation from the current administration in securing the money needed for development.

"This is a blank canvas," he said, and could be tied into Mayor Bill de Blasio's 10-year, \$41 billion plan to create 80,000 units of affordable housing.

"This can be a model for the de Blasio administration."

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