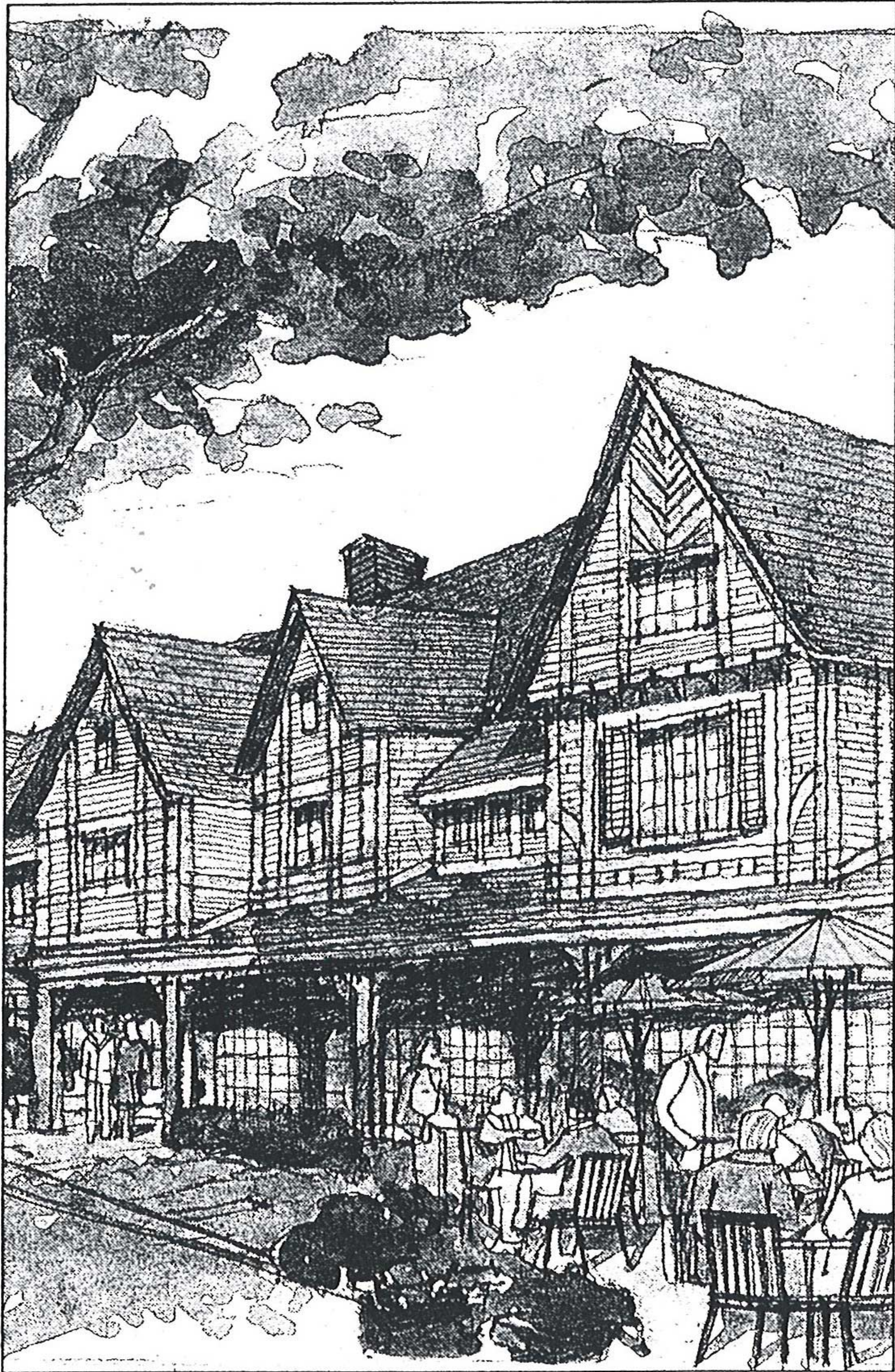


Big Plans Afoot for East Setauket



A rendering by Robertson Partners Architecture shows part of a proposed retail and residential redevelopment for East Setauket. The redevelopment plan, spearheaded by Assemb. Steven Englebright, would replace three strip shopping centers on Route 25A.

By Dawn Wotapka

STAFF WRITER

As Assemb. Steven Englebright drove around East Setauket recently, he pointed out the hamlet's revered colonial gems, including the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library, one of Suffolk's oldest, and the Caroline Church of Brookhaven, built in 1729.

But there's one spot he's eager to gut — a trio of suburban strip shopping centers on Route 25A he deems unsuitable for the historic area.

"We don't have a core anymore," Englebright (D-Setauket) said.

So, he is spearheading an ambitious and controversial project to convert the bustling centers into The Setauket Village Center. The estimated \$250-million development plan calls for affordable apartments or condos above shops for young adults and seniors, an approximately 30-acre park modeled after Central Park, and an amphitheater, among other features.

The proposal, which will be unveiled to the centers' merchants today but has not officially been submitted to Brookhaven Town leaders, is already stirring debate.

For several months, Englebright has circulated the sketches by Richardson Robertson III, a Los Angeles architect who drew them for free. If the project is approved, Robertson wants to be the lead architect.

"I can tell you it's a little odd," Brookhaven Supervisor John Jay LaValle said of the project, adding that town zoning laws don't allow for housing above shops there, particularly those with ovens and grills. "It's highly unethical for a politician to compel a property owner to use a particular architect. . . . The insinuation is that unless you use this architect, we're going to oppose this project."

Englebright, however, denied he was "using any type of hammer" to sell the plan.

Robert de Zafra, a community activist and founder of the Three Village Community Trust, a land-protection organization, said the project comes at a time when the area needs to modernize its approach to shopping facilities. "We've got three side-by-side strip malls that have basically outlived their time," the longtime Setauket resident added.

Lee Koppleman, executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board, supports the project and thinks the zoning should be changed. "This, in effect, would upgrade and improve the commercial area and at the same time provide much needed housing," he said.

Shopping center owners who under the proposal would fund much of the cost, may not be eager to replace a profitable venture with a speculative one, warned Charles Lefkowitz, property manager for the Ridgeway Plaza and a Brookhaven Town board member whose term ends Dec. 31, which will be long before any vote on the proposal would take place. "We've got a realistic outlook," he said. "We're sitting and waiting and looking for the same answers that I'm sure a lot of business owners are looking for."

Another possible snag is persuading the owners of the land where the proposed parkland would be developed to sell the property. Part of the land is owned by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, but it is not for sale, said spokeswoman Karen Montalbano. Another property owner, Anthony D. Costabile, has been approached by Englebright and others, but is not willing to sell.

LaValle also worries the redevelopment could stifle shops and restaurants in nearby Stony Brook Village Center and Port Jefferson's downtown. "I'm not sure doing a whole other center right there would be beneficial," he said. "If anything, we should be trying to shore up the existing village centers rather than introducing new areas to compete against them."

So far, merchants have received the proposal with mixed reactions.

Vito DiChiaro, owner of The Crazy Cow card store, was "jumping up and down" after he heard of the idea. "I firmly believe it is going to increase business immensely," he said, adding that it would draw more customers and help him compete with nearby national stores.

But it also would increase rent and push out the independent shops, said Harold Schwab, owner of Schwab's 2nd Wind running store. "You're not going to see any mom-and-pop shops," he said. "They might say, 'You're allowed to [stay],' but it won't be financially feasible."