

A TIMES HERALD

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Merchants split on village center plan

Residents' responses overwhelmingly positive; Swezey's space rented already?

BY PETER C. MASTROSIMONE

Storeowners in the three Route 25A shopping centers that would be redesigned under a sweeping new proposal offered mixed opinions this week on the plan's viability and benefits. Three Village residents, meanwhile, have flooded the proposal's proponents with overwhelmingly positive responses.

Lee Koppelman, chairman of Long Island's Regional Planning Board, also praised the plan to redevelop the shopping plazas between Hills Drive and the gas station next door to Stop&Shop, calling it a model for downtown revitalization throughout Long Island. Koppelman said that if the concept is carried through, it would rank with Ward Melville's creation of Stony Brook Village in terms of regional planning importance.

The proposal, which was drawn up last spring but has only recently been revealed to more than a few stakeholders, civic leaders and public officials, calls for redesigning and enlarging the shopping

Community meeting Nov. 10

The Setauket Village Center and Village Green proposal will be the subject of the Civic Association of the Setauket's next meeting, to be held at 7:30 pm, November 10, at the Setauket Neighborhood House. New York State Assemblyman Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) is co-sponsoring the gathering. All are welcome.

centers, adding residential space above the stores and creating a 48-acre park on the other side of Route 25A. It was drawn up by a California architect, Rick Robertson, who is working closely with community activist and interior designer Susan Lustik, state Assemblyman Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) and the leaders of a new land preservation group, the Three Village Community Trust.

One of the proposal's major goals is to provide a retail environment that would allow the "mom and pop" stores which make up much of the existing strip malls to remain in business. Several have closed

recently. The owners of those that remain have had mixed reactions to the plan, known as the Setauket Village Center proposal. Several are concerned that if the plazas are rebuilt in an architectural style evocative of local historic buildings, as proposed, their rents will go up.

"Investors look to make money, so unless they're looking to put a lot of additional stores in there that they'd make rent from, they'd have to charge a lot more from the stores that do exist," said Harold Schwab, owner of Schwab's 2nd Wind, an athletic shoe store. "My gut reaction is you'd lose a lot of privately owned stores

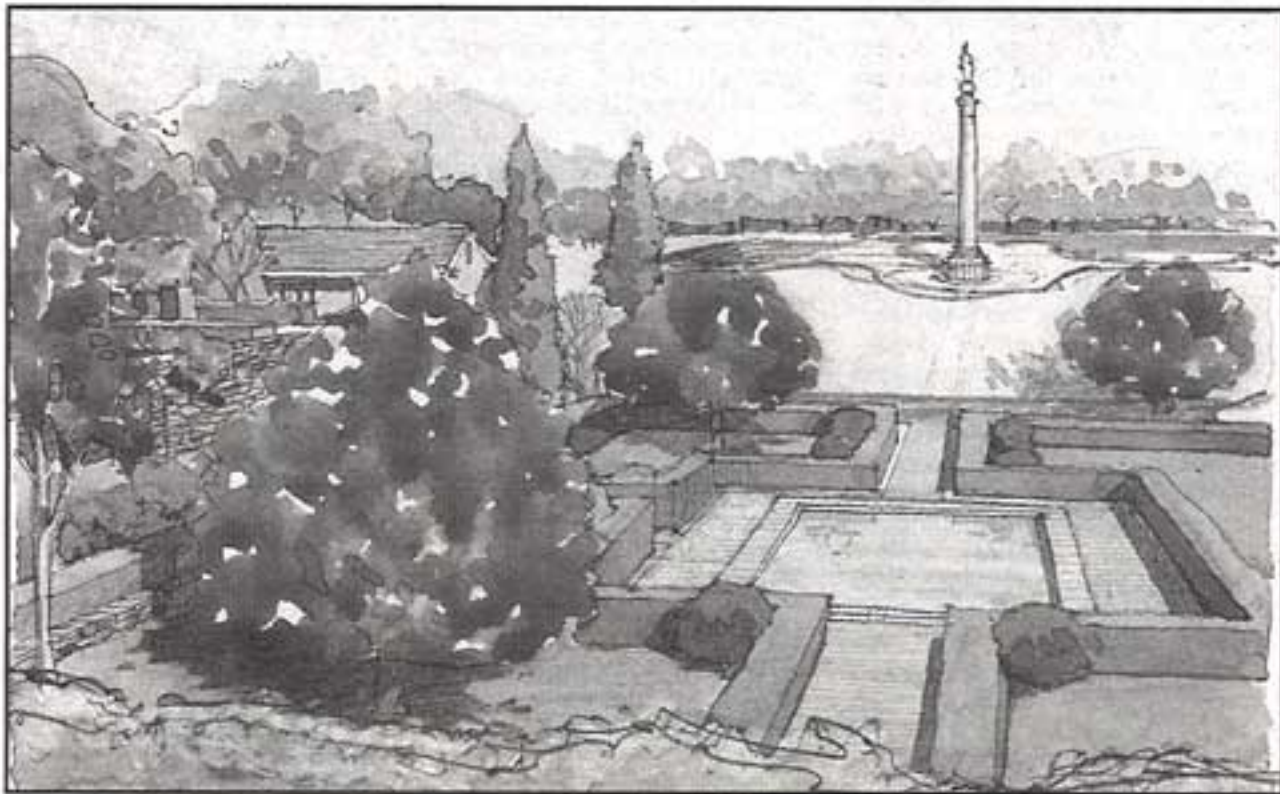
and get chains. Down the road the community could have a beautiful shopping center, but you'll have all different businesses."

Vito Di Chiaro, owner of The Crazy Cow card and gift shop, disagreed. Customer traffic at the Route 25A centers has "dropped drastically" in the last two years, as more stores have opened on Route 347, Dichiaro said, but the village center proposal would bring shoppers back. "Yeah, down the road I'm going to pay more in rent, but my flow of customers is going to be more," Di Chiaro said. "If this doesn't happen, I guarantee you in a couple years you'll see boarded-up stores here." Referring to the Swezey's location, he added, "If it's not done, the result is going to be a Wal-Mart or something over there and all these little stores closed down."

Di Chiaro was the most enthusiastic of more than a dozen business owners and managers interviewed this week. But

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Courtesy of Rick Robertson

A columnar monument, reflecting pool and formal gardens would all be part of a 48-acre park under architect Rick Robertson's preliminary draft.

Village center

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many agreed with his assertion, echoed by Koppelman, that the proposal would be a "win-win-win" for merchants, shoppers and residents alike.

"I definitely think it'll be very beneficial for all the stores," said Sue Jetmar, co-owner of the Country Kitchen restaurant. "It'll bring an anchor store into the Swezey's shopping center. My main concern is traffic flow, but I hope this comes to pass."

Another shopkeeper, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said Three Village Plaza's property manager told him the Swezey's space has already been rented to a new tenant, but that could not be confirmed. Persistent rumors pointed to King Kullen as the new tenant. Sources said the supermarket would occupy the space in April, but company officials could not be reached for comment.

Whatever happens in the Swezey's location, Jetmar said she could "work around" the construction that would be necessary to make the village center proposal a reality. Work would be done in phases to minimize disruption to business, but the plan's proponents acknowledge some inconvenience is inevitable. Most storeowners said they can live with that as long as they can remain open for business.

Constantino Drepaniotis, a co-owner of the Setauket Village Diner, said he is supportive of the plan overall but wonders what impact reconstruction will have on the interior remodeling his family has done there. He said they have spent \$250,000 upgrading the restaurant in the five years since they bought it.

Echoing the thoughts of several other shopkeepers, Drepaniotis also said he was disappointed to have not been told about the revitalization plan by his landlord. "Due to the fact that I've been here five years, I feel like I'm a good tenant," Drepaniotis said. "I was totally in the blind, and I was a little upset when I read about this in the paper rather than have somebody tell me."

The three shopping centers are owned by different firms, and the project's proponents say they have been meeting with representatives of each. Their hope is that the three landowners will work together to make the project happen.

Thomas Donahue, property manager for the firm which owns the plaza where the diner and Wild by Nature are located, referred most questions to the company's owners, who could not be reached by press time. But Donahue said, "We cer-

tainly have our ears open. It's a grand idea.... But there are legal and property issues that need to be addressed."

Meanwhile, Setauket's civic leaders and residents praised the village center and village green concept almost unanimously (see letters, page A26). Citizens are encouraged to ask questions and make comments on the plan by emailing setauketvillage@aol.com.

"The reaction has been phenomenal, only because people are starting to see the importance of planning; planning for the future, especially with land use," said Bill Schaub, president of the Civic Association of the Setaukets. "My initial reaction is I'm very encouraged. It's pleasing for me to see someone's taking the initiative to move forward with a concept of what we'd like to see in the Setauket area. Hopefully we can reach consensus among all the parties so we can move forward. Hopefully we're going to lose the Route 112 look."

Members of the Three Village Community Trust also want to avoid the "Route 112 look." The newly founded nonprofit group is dedicated to protecting the Three Village area's heritage by preserving land and historical sites. The group may play a role in future village center and village green planning sessions, said Bob deZafra, a member of the trust's founding committee.

Cynthia Barnes, a trust cofounder and aide to Englebright, said, "We welcome the initiative to redevelop the Setauket Three Village center and to preserve open space, and look forward to working with the various owners and the community to create a village center the community will be proud of."

Koppelman, director of the Center for Regional Policy Studies at Stony Brook University, vowed to make every effort to push the plan forward, starting with inviting Robertson to present it to the Regional Planning Board. Koppelman predicted the board would pass a unanimous resolution backing the proposal.

He also said the plan's proponents should use public land purchase programs to preserve the property they wish to turn into a park on the northwest side of Route 25A. Another option is to transfer the current owner's development rights to the southeast side of the road, where the shopping centers would be expanded. But Koppelman said that would not be necessary.

"My choice would be to buy the property," Koppelman said. "The financial resources are available. This is something the county may wish to join in too. Being

able to pay for it is a nonproblem, which is something you can't always say when acquiring open space."