



October 11th, 2003, 01:05 PM

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Senior Member

Join Date: Sep 2003
Location: Jackson Heights
Posts: 286**Setauket Village Center**

Setauket is a historic village on the North Shore of Long Island about 60 miles east of NYC, with many buildings predating the Revolutionary War. Located very close to the historic areas of the town is an ugly blight of a triple strip mall. Now that it is about to lose one of its prime tenants, the time may be right to introduce some better planning...

The Village Times-Herald

New vision of Setauket unveiled

By Peter C. Mastro Simone

The heart of Setauket's retail district would be completely redeveloped under a proposal crafted by a designer working closely with the office of state Assemblyman Steve Englebright (D-Setauket).

The Setauket Village Center would comprise all three shopping plazas on the southern side of Route 25A between Hills Drive and the gas station next door to Stop&Shop. The disparate plazas would be totally redesigned in a unified style meant to recall Setauket's historic buildings and evoke a "sense of place." Current businesses would be allowed to stay, while apartments or condominiums would be built above them, providing affordable housing opportunities.

A village green across the street would run along Route 25A from the St. James Roman Catholic Church east to North Fork Bank, stretching behind the bank up to the Setauket Elementary School's western property line. The park would include gardens, a pond, an amphitheater and a monument, all in a design reminiscent of Frederick Law Olmstead's Central Park in Manhattan.

Architect Rick Robertson — who has offices in New York and Los Angeles — drew up the conceptual design earlier this year after meeting with Englebright, whom he met through civic activist Susan Lustik, a key supporter of the plan. Robertson, Englebright and Lustik say they have a group of investors, some local, who are ready to back the project. They emphasize, however, that the plan is in its infancy.

"This preliminary conceptual plan can only be a win-win for all stakeholders," Robertson says in his proposal. "The new integrated village center with a diverse mix of uses will enable growing economic success that will add value for their owners as well as for the community as a whole. The village center will attract people not only for the shopping and dining but because it is a vibrant and desirable place to be."

Among those who have seen the proposal are Brookhaven Planning Commissioner Dan Gulizio, New York State Transportation Department Regional Director Subi Chakraborti, several of the landowners whose property would be involved, and some of the larger tenants who would see their businesses completely refurbished.

"We have had perhaps a dozen meetings with people who range from civic leaders of prominence to prominent business people to prominent public servants, both elected and appointed, and the response has been very affirmative, very encouraging," Englebright said. "If they're in any way indicative of the response the community will have, then we'll be in good shape." Englebright called the plan a model for Brookhaven.

The planners have to overcome several hurdles, however; including setting aside land for the park, complying with zoning laws that Brookhaven officials are now rewriting, convincing the state to let a water recharge basin become part of a park and winning community support. They say they are making progress on all counts.

The plan was born last winter when Englebright and Robertson had a chance meeting and became fast friends, the assemblyman driving the West Coast architect all around town to show him Setauket's architectural gems. They contrasted those with the buildings in the three logistically but not architecturally linked shopping plazas. The controversy that erupted earlier this year over Stop&Shop's reported plans to move into the Swezey's location provided a sharp impetus to offer an alternative vision.

"It was no longer a hypothetical crisis; it was a real one," Englebright said. "Many of our merchants were threatened, and the vulnerability of our community was made very real to us. We're on the hinge of losing the beauty, the sense of place that makes Setauket so wonderful."

Swezey's announcement that it will go out of business next month only heightened the planners' fears that a large chain store with little or no interest in creating a "sense of place" could move into Three Village Plaza.

What they propose instead is a "beaux arts" reinterpretation of Setauket's historic early American architecture. "This is a response to modern architecture; taking it in a different direction," Robertson said. "Long Island's getting to look like Interstate 35 between Dallas and Waco."

To avoid that fate, Robertson's design draws on Tudor elements, like those evident in the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library and the shingle-style buildings of Stanford White. Visitors would experience a wide range of vistas, whether looking toward the cupola-topped tower of the village theater, down into the park and its gardens or at the fountain that would be centered in the main parking lot.

The businesses that currently rent space in the three shopping centers and the professional offices between them as well as the tennis club could all remain if they wish. Construction would be done in phases to minimize disruption. Parts of the existing buildings would be refurbished while others would be built from scratch.

Sidewalk shoppers and patrons eating at outdoor tables would look across Route 25A, renamed Old Setauket Road, to the village green. The 48-acre park's biggest section would run along Route 25A, but a large spur would run parallel to Watson Lane and end at Main Street/North Country Road. A band shell amphitheater would be located near the end of Watson, facing into the park. A monument, conceived as a single column in Robertson's proposal, would be located near the park's northeastern end and link it visually with historic Main Street.

"The planned monument, visible from both Main Street and the Village Center, would tie the two areas together thematically, thus establishing the sense of the larger community," Robertson's plan reads. "With the park on the north side of Old Setauket Road, all parts of historic Setauket are tied into the parkland and thus into the core of community life." Drivers would park diagonally on Route 25A, which would see new crosswalks and at least one traffic signal installed. Englebright said traffic would be calmed but not slowed. Lustik envisions a trolley-style shuttle bus running from Port Jefferson to Stony Brook University on a frequent schedule, with Setauket's Village Center being a major stop on the way.

The project's backers plan to start showing their concept to the wider community soon, meeting with more civic leaders, the chamber of commerce, school officials and other groups. They envision holding at least one general community meeting.

Englebright said residents have several reasons to support the plan, including financial. "This is the front door of the community, and if you make the front door of the community especially appealing and desirable, it will enhance the value of every home in the community," he said. Robertson — who recently redesigned a much larger part of Los Angeles, winning the city's coveted Star of Design award — said he hopes work could begin soon and be complete in 2005, Setauket's 350th anniversary. "It's possible, if everybody got in line and went for it," he said.

Residents may submit questions and comments about Setauket Village Center by email to setauketvillage@aol.com.

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