

Ronkonkoma arena plan doesn't include NHL team, league says

Local officials, surprised by Suffolk's decision to pursue an arena development, question the wisdom of it without a commitment from any team.



A rendering shows a view of an arena complex proposed by Jones Lang LaSalle for a 40-acre property in Ronkonkoma. Photo Credit: Ronkonkoma Vision Project LLC

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The New York Islanders and National Hockey League officials on Monday dismissed speculation that the team or another professional hockey organization would consider moving to a 17,500-seat arena picked by Suffolk County officials as the centerpiece of a plan to develop a 40-acre tract in Ronkonkoma.

County officials announced Sunday they had selected a Chicago real estate developer to build a \$1 billion complex featuring the arena and a 500-seat hotel on land between MacArthur Airport and the Long Island Rail Road's Ronkonkoma station. County officials touted the plan — including a sports medicine facility and space for offices and retail — as an economic engine that would help revitalize Ronkonkoma.

But the Islanders and NHL officials waved off questions about whether the team or the league would have any role in the project. The Islanders are preparing to build an arena as part of their \$1 billion sports and entertainment project at Belmont Park, which is targeted to be ready in time for the 2021-22 NHL season.

“We have no real knowledge of what’s going on in Suffolk,” Islanders co-owner Jon Ledecky said Monday. “It’s not relevant to us.”

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the proposed Ronkonkoma arena would not be considered for an expansion team to join the Islanders, Rangers and New Jersey Devils.

“I’m fairly certain that our Board of Governors would have no interest in, nor would they support, adding a fourth team — either by expansion or relocation — in the New York metropolitan area,” Daly said.

Brooklyn Sports & Entertainment, which recently invested \$180 million in an 18-month renovation of NYCB Live's Nassau Coliseum, declined to comment about the Ronkonkoma arena, a spokeswoman said.

A committee of four Suffolk economic development officials on Friday picked Ronkonkoma Vision Project, a consortium backed by Chicago developer Jones Lang LaSalle and investment banker Ray Bartoszek, to act as master developer of property mostly owned by Suffolk and consisting of sprawling parking lots serving the train station.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said in a statement the selection would help achieve the community vision of the area becoming “a premier destination and entertainment venue.”

The arena complex would be built on land south of the train station, adjacent to the Ronkonkoma Hub, the multiphase residential and retail complex under construction by East Setauket-based Tritec Real Estate north of the train station.

Ronkonkoma Vision Project's 76-page proposal does not specifically state the arena is designed with a professional hockey team in mind, but the proposal emphasizes the group's hockey ties. Bartoszek in recent years has tried unsuccessfully to purchase the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes and build an arena for an NHL expansion team in Seattle.

“You wouldn’t build a 17,000-seat arena without thinking about a major league franchise,” JLL senior vice president Steve D’Iorio said. But he said their first priority is to get the entire project off the ground.

County officials picked the arena plan over separate proposals for housing and shopping submitted by Tritec and Uniondale-based RXR Realty, and an e-commerce distribution facility proposed by Plainview-based Renaissance Downtowns.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Martin Cantor, a former Suffolk economic development chief, said of the selection. “If you’re tapping the same audience to go to Belmont that would go to the Coliseum, then what do you have left for Suffolk?”

County officials and the developer must negotiate a memorandum of understanding that requires approval by the Suffolk Legislature before the project can proceed. The document would include an agreement by the county to either sell or lease its land to the developer, officials said. An environmental review of the site also is required before construction can start.

Islip spokeswoman Caroline Smith said Town Supervisor Angie Carpenter declined to comment until the proposal is formally presented to town officials for review.

The arena received a “mixed” reception from Ronkonkoma residents after the county announced its decision, said Bruce Edwards, president of the Ronkonkoma Civic Association. He said many residents had expressed a preference for business development on the site.

“In a sense, they [county officials] listened to the community, because most of the community didn’t want more housing,” Edwards said. “It’s going to actually be a benefit. It’s going to bring in tax [revenue].”

A Madison Square Garden spokeswoman said: “We do not know much about it, but will certainly be watching to see what happens.”

An American Hockey League spokesman said Long Island is within the territorial rights of the Bridgeport Sound Tigers, the Islanders’ AHL affiliate and the team can veto any potential move here by another franchise.

An East Coast Hockey League spokesman said league officials “are very interested in having a team in the NYC area but are not currently in discussions to do so.”

Bernard Shereck, a Bayville developer who has proposed landing an ECHL team for a 7,500-seat arena he wants to build in Medford, said the Ronkonkoma arena could halt his plans. “If that sees the light of day, I don’t think it makes sense for me to do that,” he said.