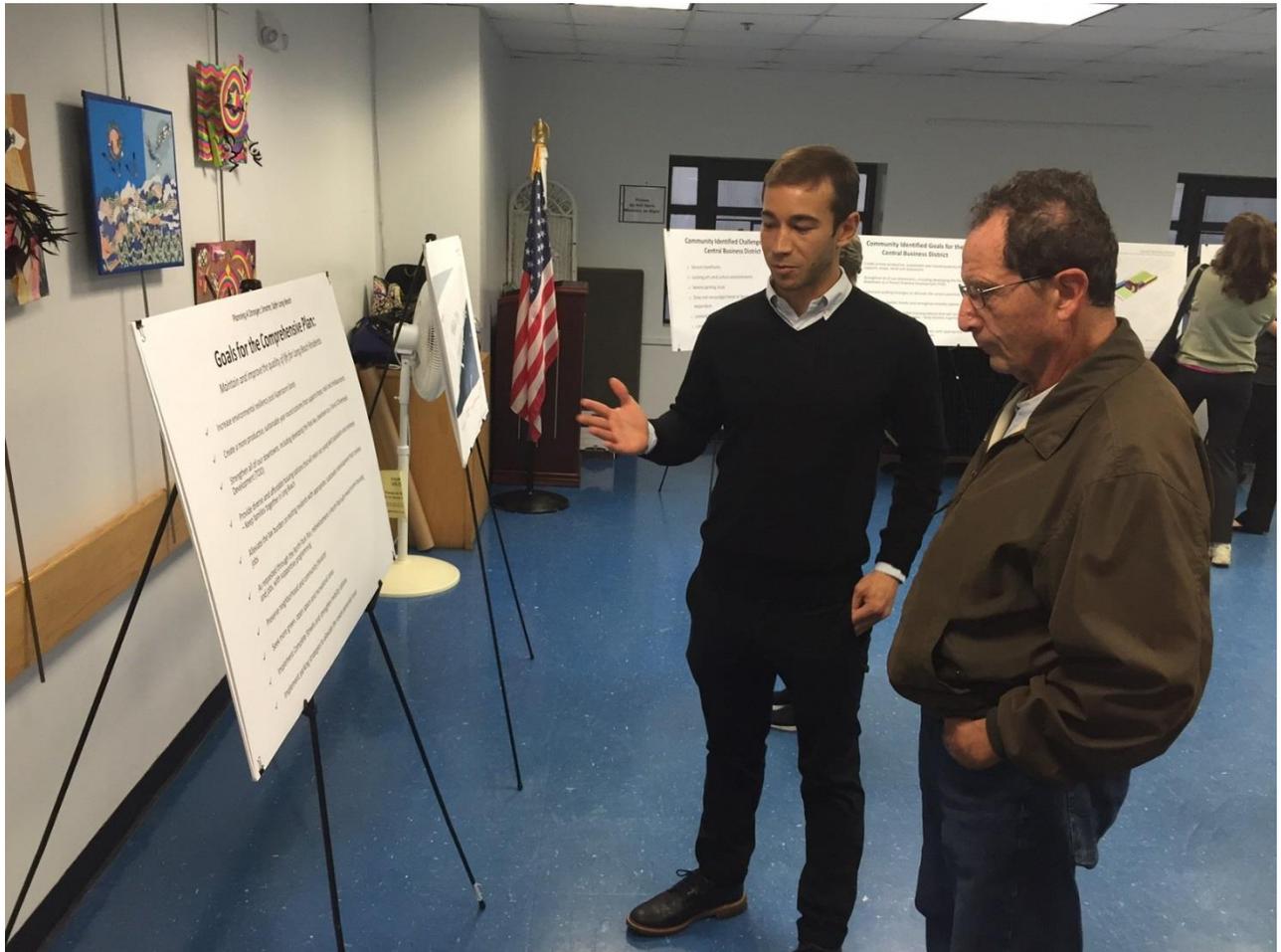


City gathering final feedback on Comprehensive Plan

Plan calls for developing bayfront, revitalizing downtown

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City employees answered residents' questions about the Comprehensive Plan at Magnolia Community Center on Oct. 6.

By Ben Strack

City Hall and Kennedy Plaza could be relocated to the Stop & Shop property as part of a larger comprehensive development and economic revitalization plan that city officials said they hope to pass this year and implement over the next few decades.

Other major proposals include a bayfront esplanade where residents and tourists can walk and ride their bikes, a multi-acre oceanfront park, and increased storm mitigation measures throughout the city, all aimed at spurring economic development and greater resiliency for Long Beach.

After developing a comprehensive plan in 2007, the city was awarded a grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority last year to update its vision for Long Beach, and officials have developed goals to tackle a variety of economic and environmental issues that became more apparent following Hurricane Sandy.

“You look at what you want to accomplish as a city,” said City Manager Jack Schnirman. “Once you start to get a sense of that, you start to build in how you’re going to get there, but you can’t do the how you’re going to get there before you decide where you want to go.”

The city held its ninth public meeting at Magnolia Community Center on Oct. 6, aimed at gauging resident feedback for the draft plan, including goals already in progress to others 20 years down the road. The proposal focuses on revamping three key areas — the oceanfront, bayfront and the central business district — and includes projects ranging from hazard mitigation, environmental sustainability and economic development to zoning changes, transportation, pedestrian improvements and housing.

“It’s not going to all happen overnight,” said Patricia Bourne, the city’s director of economic development. “It takes time, it takes money, it takes involvement by a developer to do some of these things, but some of the things we’ve already started to do.”

The city is still collecting feedback, Bourne said, and is set to hold a meeting at the Martin Luther King Center on Oct. 24. In addition to the open houses, the city launched an online survey as part of the City Council’s Long Beach Listens initiative that received 1,200 responses.

Bayfront and oceanfront proposals

Goals of the proposal range from continuing current initiatives throughout the city — like replanting trees and upgrading sewer and drainage utilities — to more ambitious visions along both waterfronts to spur revenue.

The city has proposed a multi-acre oceanfront cultural park on the foundation block — on higher ground behind the boardwalk — which would include recreational and event space, retail, and mid-rise residential buildings with parking decks.

Also included in the plan is a “Bay Mile” esplanade from Washington to Franklin boulevards where residents can walk and bike — with a nearby marina and restaurant east of the Long Island Rail Road bridge — to increase jobs in an area, which the city calls one of its “greatest untapped assets.” Additional development on the bayfront would include mixed-income housing units, retail space, a parking garage and acres of open space.

With future storms in mind, the city — which already has \$25 million in state funding for New York Rising Community Reconstruction Plan projects — will pursue additional funding for implementing bulkheading and other storm-mitigation measures to protect the city’s fire stations, recreation center and community centers. The city is also planning to include landscape-based infrastructure like rain gardens and permeable sidewalks and roads on both waterfronts. The planting of trees along oceanfront streets would provide friction and absorption during flood events.

Central business district

Development within the central business district is designed to increase the number of shoppers and workforce, which would activate the core of Long Beach’s downtown — serving as the transit gateway and hub of the city — and support a year-round economy.

The city’s proposal recommends the relocation of Kennedy Plaza and City Hall onto a portion of the Stop & Shop property, where an expansive town green — replacing the current Kennedy Plaza — would sit east of the LIRR

station. The space would be surrounded by buildings that include ground-level restaurants, as well as redesigned city offices, a 1,000-seat cultural venue and apartments on the above floors.

The relocation would free up Kennedy Plaza's current site for further parking, housing and commercial space.

"You just want to make sure that there's not overdevelopment...that it's common sense, that it looks good, and that it's not going to be too big some places, too small some places," said Scott Bochner, a lifelong resident and local environmentalist who supports the plan. "You want to make it so that it's going to be, across the board, a good way for this community to grow."

Next steps and concerns

James Hodge, chairman of the MLK Center Board of Directors, said he pushed for a final meeting in North Park, where many people would be affected by the plan. He said he is calling for a Community Benefits Agreement within the proposal, which would allow the community to be heard in regards to combating gentrification, keeping housing affordable and preserving some of the area's historical churches.

City officials said they are concerned about protecting the North Park community and are committed to keeping housing affordable throughout the city. They added a CBA would have to be negotiated in the future, but the concept for such an agreement would be included in the plan.

Once a final draft of the Comprehensive Plan is finished, the city will make a presentation to the City Council, which will vote on the proposal, a process that Bourne said she hopes to have complete by the end of the year. From there, officials will look to update the city's zoning ordinances to accommodate the plans, a separate process that will involve more public meetings, she added.

But some residents remain skeptical of certain items in the complex proposal. Leslie Tepper, who moved to Long Beach in 2012, called the plan progressive, but said he thinks projects on private land may not pan out.

"I believe you have to be optimistic and think that that is going to be possible," Tepper said, "but then again you have to be realistic and know that that is not necessarily the way it's going to happen."

Sam Pinto, president of the Eastholme Civic Association, said many of the concepts were "not realistic or attainable," and added that the city should focus on preserving what makes Long Beach unique instead of looking to resemble nearby destinations, like Huntington.

"The beauty in Long Beach has tremendous character, and we're not the same as other villages and towns on Long Island," Pinto said. Those towns "aren't Long Beach, they're not the beautiful barrier island. ... Don't try to change it, let's harness that beauty."

Bourne said plans are still being discussed, but the city is committed to "keeping the community character," and would consider residents' suggestions to help guide future projects.

"You start the plan, get people's input and look at the zoning," Bourne said. "Then developers are going to be much happier because by having consensus from the public and having a direction, they know which way to go."