

Riffing on Ronkonkoma

By: David Winzelberg May 23, 2018



Despite a host of challenges, a panel of Long Island development professionals, civic leaders and elected officials said a \$1 billion proposal to build an arena and convention center complex in Ronkonkoma could be a major catalyst for economic growth for Suffolk County.

That was the consensus of the five panelists who discussed the plan before more than 100 attendees at the event hosted by Long Island Business News Tuesday at Villa Lombardi's in Holbrook.

Moderated by LIBN Editor and Associate Publisher Joe Dowd, the panelists included John Cameron, principal of Woodbury-based Cameron Engineering and a member of the arena/convention center development team; Suffolk Legislators Tom Cilmi and Robert Trotta; Bruce Edwards, a past president of the Ronkonkoma Civic Association and chairman of the Ronkonkoma Visioning Implementation Committee; and Mitch Pally, CEO of Long Island Builders Institute and a member of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board.

After decades of neglect, the area around the Ronkonkoma Long Island Rail Road station has been targeted for a transformative overhaul. While a \$650 million mixed-use project from Tritec Real Estate is currently under construction on about 50 acres on the north side of the station, about 40 acres of county-owned property on the south side of the tracks is the site of a proposed development from JLL and a Chicago-based investment group called Ronkonkoma Vision Project that would create an arena, a convention center, 360,000 square feet of office space (which includes an 80,000-

square-foot medical research facility), a 500-room hotel and 90,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space. The total project would create 1.69 million square feet of development.

Still in its early planning stages, the specifics of the proposal could change.

“In the next six to eight months, we will vet the viability of the overall plan, not just economic viability, but also the sizing, and then come back to Suffolk County with a firm proposal,” Cameron said.

Meanwhile, the already-underway Tritec project aims to add 1,450 residential units, 195,000 square feet of retail space and 360,000 square feet of office/commercial space to the north side of the LIRR station.

And while the combination of the two side-by-side, transit-oriented developments are certain to bring jobs, much-needed rental housing and attract businesses, the panelists at Tuesday’s event say the biggest obstacle is likely to be an increase in vehicle traffic, which could severely impact local businesses and nearby residents.

“There’s been an outcry over traffic issues,” Cilmi said. “There haven’t been improvements to roads to accommodate that traffic. When you add all of the development to that mix, it will only get worse.”

Edwards, part of the civic group that spearheaded the visioning of the site with the Regional Plan Association that began in 2016, said his group has been asking for better infrastructure to handle traffic in the area.

“That’s what we’ve been looking for,” Edwards said. “We’re going to hold the developers and elected officials feet to the fire.”

Pally said much of the transportation to and from the Ronkonkoma developments will revolve around the railroad, pointing out that Ronkonkoma is the largest station in the county and the third largest in the entire LIRR system. He added that LIRR expansion projects, such as the second track between Farmingdale and Ronkonkoma to be completed this summer, the third track for the Main Line slated to take four years and East Side Access to Grand Central scheduled to be ready at the end of 2022, will dramatically improve reverse commuting and increase service through Ronkonkoma by 40 percent.

Though the discussion centered on Ronkonkoma, Trotta took the opportunity to rail against government spending, inequitable IDA benefits, high taxes and exorbitant county fees. He said projects like the arena/convention center plan offer needed economic development and revenue to ease the tax burden on county residents.

“We need money from outside coming in here,” Trotta said. “The only way out is to bring tourists and a convention center. If not, it’s a sinking ship.”

Pally agreed that the project will provide a much-needed boost.

“Our economy needs to diversify,” Pally said. “The convention center business is a billion dollar business. Right now, Long Island loses out on that business. A convention center there would be a perfect fit.

Cameron said the county deserves its own arena and entertainment venue.

“There are a dozen arenas and stadiums within 35 miles in and around New York City,” Cameron said. “Why not Suffolk County? We need to stop being a stepchild to New York City. We need to think about growing our own economy.”

While the plan still needs to be finalized and approved by the county legislature, Cameron said he’s optimistic it could be completed within five years.

“We’d like to get a shovel in the ground as early as next year,” he said. “We want to get this done as soon as possible.”