

Time for change at Playland

Editorial Staff | Feb 17, 2012 |

Is it really true?

Could there be a viable plan to resuscitate Playland from being a county owned park known more for generating negative publicity to a place that everyone can appreciate year round and actually become a moneymaker?

Excuse our incredulity, but we were taken by surprise when we heard that there are three proposals for revitalizing this once gleaming historic jewel by the sea.

Two of the proposals are being pitched by national amusement companies – with their bottom lines in mind – that would keep much of the park intact and update it with new rides.

A proposal by Central Amusement International L.L.C. of Boonton, N.J., basically keeps the park as a family destination maintaining the seven historic rides while replacing the other dated rides over a number of years. The pool and mini-golf would also be updated.

A proposal by New York city-based Standard Amusements follows a similar path, proposing to improve the park without altering “its mission, footprint or historical integrity.”

An innovative approach – a public-private partnership that includes a not-for-profit stewardship structure, similar to Bryant Park in New York City and Boston Common in Massachusetts’ capital city – is being pitched by a group called Sustainable Playland Inc.

The group has a Class A group of visionaries on board, including Dan Biederman, co-founder of the Bryant Park Corp. and involved in the largest complex of private urban redevelopment projects in the nation; principal architect Doug McKean, whose works include the restoration of Grand Central Terminal and development of the Shanghai Cultural Plaza; and Divney Tung Schwalbe, whose recent work includes Ridge Hill in Yonkers.

The diverse plans for Playland include:

- adding restaurants and cafes that would be open all year and generate a new stream of sales tax;
- building a 72,000-square-foot athletic fieldhouse that could be rented to sports teams and leagues;
- reclaiming a vast expanse of the parking lot to reconnect to Manursing Lake and Long Island Sound;
- restoring the Ice Casino and brining in new revenue by utilizing it for events and conferences; and
- restoring the historic amusement rides and updating the other rides as needed.

One economically endearing aspect of the Sustainable Playland plan model is the county “will not be at risk of having a for-profit developer partner renege on its promises due to market difficulties.”

In addition, this model, according to the application, “will be insulated from significant shifts in real estate markets and can also leverage additional sources of revenue not available to for-profit developers.”

And, the group promises, “Playland will never again be allowed to deteriorate.”

But the bottom line remains the bottom line for the county. And as leaseholder of the property, Westchester would receive nearly \$1.2 million yearly from revenue generated. A far cry from being in the red for \$3 million a year.

While Sustainable Playland did not plot out the new park’s economic impact on the county, in 2009, the Spano administration commissioned Economics Research Associates to do such a study. Those findings showed Playland then had an estimated \$27.7-million impact. Perhaps a year-round viable park as envisioned by Sustainable Playland will prove even financially stronger.

To make its plan work, Sustainable Playland will need to invest \$33.5 million, the bulk of which will come from individual operators “revenue-generating program elements,” excluding the Ice Casino, using debt and equity.

Will it work? We certainly hope so.

Playland has been the ugly stepsister in the county park system for too long. It’s time for a change. We just hope the county acts in a timely manner.