

Local bid for Playland would revamp entire park

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A group of Rye residents upset over the lack of community input into proposals for a re-envisioned Playland took it upon themselves to create their own plan that reinvents one of Westchester's eroding gems.

Sustainable Playland Inc., a nonprofit founded by a handful of local residents earlier this year, met with community members at the Rye Free Reading Room Dec. 12 to explain their plan for a new, holistic version of Playland.

"No other project actually reinvents Playland," said SPI co-founder Sandhya Subbarao, referencing the two other projects created by amusement park companies that the county is looking at.



SPI plans to put \$33 million into reconstructing Playland, keeping the park open year-round. They'd also like to remove 30 percent of the amusement park – leaving only the historic rides – add multiple soccer fields, including one indoors, and create a "great lawn" similar to Central Park's, among a number of other drastic changes.

"The worst mini-golf course in the country would go away," said principal architect Doug McKean to a room of laughter. McKean later added that the new Playland would have a revamped mini-golf course.

Rye Town Supervisor Joseph Carvin (R) threw his support behind SPI over the other two projects, all three of which will go before the County Executive Office in 2012.

Carvin voted for SPI in the Citizens Committee Report earlier this year, which narrowed 11 applicants down to the final three.

"[The other projects] would be better amusement parks, but still amusement parks," he said.

SPI told the community that they'd like to see Playland turned into an experience similar to going to a Disney park, where the amusement rides is not the only draw. Spending time on the beach, kayaking, playing on the ball fields, and eating at their new restaurants would all be critical aspects to the new Playland.

"Besides the rides, there's an experience the people enjoy," said Dan Biederman, a consultant for SPI who not only heads the Bryant Park Corporation and the 34th Street Partnership, but also has input into various other New York City parks.

Nearby residents of the park are hopeful for SPI's plan, saying the sustainability aspect could help the neighborhood.

"If it really could be transformed, it would be great for the community," said Carrie Donahue, who lives next to the entrance of Playland.

Her neighbor, Alessandra Galassi, believes a revitalized Playland would also help out property values.

"Nine months of the year, it's just empty space," she said.

The other projects, created by Central Amusement International and Standard Amusement, would expand the amusement park aspect of Playland. SPI pointed out that the two other companies plan on spending less than \$10 million.

The \$33 million reconstruction wouldn't entirely be borne by SPI. The nonprofit organization plans on running the park like a public-private partnership – the same type of entity run by Biederman's Bryant Park Corporation. They will lease out the features such as the restaurant, sports complex, and amusement park to various companies, all of who will use their own money to upgrade and build the facilities. The total cost of all the construction equals approximately \$25 million.

After that, they will pay rent to SPI, who will pay the county.

SPI would take out bonds to fund the additional \$8 million, which they will pay over a long-term period. The bonds, SPI added, are similar to bonds used by local community institutions, such as the Rye YMCA and Rye County Day School, for their own construction costs.

Playland currently loses between \$3 million and \$5.6 million annually.

If all goes smoothly, county officials will choose a winning bidder in the first few months of 2012.

If SPI is chosen, they said they would close down parts of the park as they reconstruct the various amenities, but the entire park would never shut down all at once.