

The New York Times

In a Dozen Plans, Ideas for Restoring the Thrill to a Westchester Amusement Park

By LISA W. FODERARO

March 27, 2012



A proposal to revive Playland, which is losing visitors and millions of dollars a year, could be chosen by the end of the summer.

RYE, N.Y. — Would Playland still be Playland without rides?

With expansive water views and Art Deco architecture, Rye Playland — the 1920s-era amusement park owned by Westchester County — has offered generations of children in the area their initial taste of cotton candy and first spin on the scream-inducing Dragon Coaster. But amid competition and shrinking budgets, Playland has been less than thrilling for the county, losing millions of dollars a year as its popularity steadily declines.

Now the Westchester County executive, Rob Astorino, wants to reimagine the amusement park. In 2010, he invited prospective entrepreneurs to think creatively about recasting 100 acres, which

includes 50 rides, an ice rink, a swimming pool, a boardwalk, a beach and an artificial lake, all perched on the edge of Long Island Sound in this affluent community.

Mr. Astorino, who came to Playland as a boy and now brings his own children here, invited developers to do away with the amusement park entirely, if they chose, or to expand it. The only stipulations: public access to the beach and the boardwalk had to be maintained, and housing was off limits.

“What can we do to reinvent Playland for the 21st century?” asked Mr. Astorino, a Republican, who vowed to address the Playland problem when he ran for county executive in 2009. “The underlying theme should not necessarily be to make money, but it shouldn’t be a burden on taxpayers, either.”

A 19-member advisory committee assessed the dozen proposed plans last fall, ranking them according to their viability.

While three landed in the top category, county officials have taken pains to avoid calling them finalists, explaining that other proposals are still in contention. Mr. Astorino hopes to select a proposal by the end of the summer. The county’s Board of Legislators would then need to approve any contract. It is possible that none of the plans will be chosen, Mr. Astorino said.

County officials say that Playland is among only a few amusement parks in the United States owned and operated by a local government. The park opened in 1928, when thigh-baring bathing costumes first became popular for women, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1987.

In recent years, Playland has become something of a money pit. The amusement park has lost \$3 million to \$5 million annually in recent years. Since 1991, the county has spent \$36 million on capital improvements, including the rehabilitation of the bathhouses, the boathouse and the music tower, and the purchase of new rides. Nonetheless, some areas of the park look faded, with cracked asphalt, peeling paint and buckling boards on the boardwalk.

Perhaps as a result, fewer people have been attracted to the park each year. There were 418,000 visitors last year, down from one million in 2005. Only a third of visitors live in Westchester, with a majority traveling from the New York metropolitan area.

“It’s gotten rundown and just isn’t the attractive destination that it was even a few short years ago,” Mr. Astorino said.

Accidents in recent years further tarnished the park's reputation. Two people have died on the Mind Scrambler ride, which whipped spinning cars around in a circle, including a 7-year-old girl who was thrown from it in 2004. It has since been dismantled. The next year, a 7-year-old boy died on Ye Old Mill, a gentle water ride in a dark tunnel, after he apparently climbed out of his boat and became pinned beneath an underwater conveyor belt.

While the request for proposals does not insist that the rides remain, it does encourage an understanding of the "memories and emotional connections since 1928."

"The Dragon Coaster is sort of a rite of passage," Mr. Astorino said.

Most of the dozen proposals keep the rides.

Of the committee's top three picks, two came from experienced amusement-park operators, Central Amusement International and Standard Amusements. Their proposals called for more emphasis on the rides.

"Rye Playland will never be a Six Flags," said Valerio Ferrari, president of Central Amusement International, an affiliate of the Italian ride manufacturer Zamperla and an operator of rides at Coney Island. "But it has historic value in our industry, and it would be a shame to lose it. There could be fewer rides, but better rides."

The third plan came from a group of Rye residents led by Sandhya Subbarao and her husband, Dhruv Narain, who have already formed a nonprofit corporation, Sustainable Playland Inc. Their concept envisions a greener park with amusements, as opposed to an amusement park, and seeks to emulate the model of the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit group that runs the park for New York City.

Sustainable Playland's plan removes 30 percent of the rides (the seven rides with landmark status, including the Dragon Coaster and the Derby Racer, would remain) and adds a "great lawn" overlooking the sound. Revenue would be generated by a new field house, the development of outdoor playing fields, a year-round restaurant, a private event space and a renovated ice rink.

The park impresario Dan Biederman, who pioneered the private management of public spaces with the restoration of Bryant Park in Manhattan, has signed on as a consultant. Mr. Biederman, a Westchester resident, works with parks around the country, including Boston Common. He thinks Playland could, in time, be New York's answer to Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen.

“There are few amusement parks in the country with as picturesque a location as Playland,” said Mr. Biederman, who grew up in Scarsdale and now lives in Chappaqua. “We like to do turnarounds, and this needs a turnaround.”

Coincidentally, Doug McKean, an architect based in Rye who designed the plan for Sustainable Playland, sketched out a nearly identical blueprint years ago. As a graduate student in landscape architecture at the University of Virginia, Mr. McKean had made Playland the focus of his master’s thesis in the late 1970s. Even then there were calls to fix Playland.

“Playland has become a one-trick pony — amusement park in the summer, ice rink in the winter,” said Mr. McKean, who lives three blocks from the park. “But we thought, ‘Why not more?’ Not in terms of intensive use. But there needs to be a more consistent use throughout the year so you smooth out the peaks and valleys.”