

## Playland, Re-Invented, in the Zone



Westchester County has selected Sustainable Playland to manage the "new" re-invented Rye Playland. Attractions will be grouped into zones that include amusement park rides, aqua zone and beach, outdoor ball fields, indoor field house, renovated indoor ice rink, new outdoor winter ice rink, a "great" lawn, a multi-use facility and restaurants.

"Following up on his pledge to "reinvent Playland for the 21st century," Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino Thursday announced a "civic-commercial partnership" that broadens the appeal, strengthens the financial foundation and preserves the family character of the iconic park in Rye.

With Playland's boardwalk and Dragon Coaster as a backdrop, Astorino signed a letter of intent with Sustainable Playland Inc., a not-for-profit organization based in Rye that has assembled a team of some of the nation's leading amusement, sports, restaurant and park operators to finalize an agreement to manage the 100-acre waterfront property overlooking the Long Island Sound.

"Saving Playland has been a priority for me since the day I took office," Astorino said. "What do you do with one of the most beautiful pieces of property anywhere, whose amusement park has become an untenable drain on county taxpayers? We started with a blank sheet of paper and asked experts – ranging from industry professionals to school kids who love the rides – to help us draw a new future. Today, we have arrived at the new future – a civic-commercial partnership that preserves tradition by embracing innovation to keep Playland vibrant and financially sound for generations to come."

The historic amusement park will remain. Sustainable is committed to making an initial investment of \$34 million in capital improvements to the existing park and adding an array of new elements, which include:

- Aqua Zone, featuring a mini-water park and beach attractions
- Outdoor ball fields and an indoor field house

- Renovated indoor ice rink and a new outdoor winter rink
- A Great Lawn, with sweeping views of the Sound, which can be used for a variety of events, such as graduations, corporate-sponsored functions and outdoor concerts
- Indoor multi-use facility, which can be rented for parties, weddings, meetings and conferences
- New restaurants.

On Thursday, Astorino signed a letter of intent to develop an Asset Management Agreement with Sustainable's President Dhruv Narain, a Rye resident. The process to select Sustainable as the park's new operator began in August of 2010 when Astorino formally sought ideas to address chronic losses that have been running \$3 million to \$5 million annually.

Out of the 12 proposals reviewed by the county and a citizens committee, Astorino said Sustainable was chosen because it had the best vision for the park financially and operationally, as well as far-reaching experience and strong local ties.

"The strength of our proposal is its breadth and depth," said Narain, whose team includes advisors from across the county. "We see the park as a year-round destination for everyone. Singles, couples, families, businesses – anyone who wants to spend time in a beautiful place surrounded by fun things to do, and not just in the summer. By building ball fields, creating new water attractions, developing a Great Lawn, expanding the ice skating, and adding new restaurants, we are giving more people more reasons to come on more days throughout the year and more to do once they get here."

Under a proposed 10-year management agreement, the county will receive an upfront payment of \$4 million from Sustainable, as well as a minimum payment of \$1.2 million a year. The money will go toward retiring the county's existing \$32 million of debt on Playland. The plan will save the county \$18 million in interest and principal payments over the remaining 12-year life of the bonds.

Sustainable will be responsible for the operation and maintenance of both the amusement area and the surrounding 100 acres of parkland. Proceeds to pay the county, maintain the grounds and make capital improvements will come from the fees Sustainable charges the operators it will hire to run various elements throughout the park.

Under Sustainable's plan, general admission will be free, as will entrance to the new Great Lawn. Throughout the park, attractions will be grouped into a variety of zones, such as amusement, water, beach and fields, with fees charged for various activities.

Sustainable's management structure is that of a holding company. It views the various activities in the park as "assets" and has assembled a nationally renowned team of operators to run them. Overseeing the overall operation as the "asset manager" will be Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, headed by Dan Biederman, a Chappaqua resident whose experience includes co-founding and managing the Bryant Park Corporation, the 34th Street Partnership, the Grand Central Partnership and heading major efforts in Manhattan to bring private resources and management techniques to bear on public problems.

Operational members of the Sustainable Playland team include:

- Amusement Park, Beach and Aqua Adventure: Steve Turk and the Mega Funworks Team. (Capital investment: upwards of \$7 million)
- Indoor Field House and Outdoor Fields: John Abate and Eric DeGraw of Westchester Sports Center. (Capital investment: \$12.4 million)
- Indoor and Outdoor Ice Skating: Shane Coppola of American Skating Entertainment Centers. (Capital investment: \$600,000)
- Restaurants/Multi-use Facility: Various operators. (Capital investment: \$6.6 million).

This is a better business model," Biederman said. "We have multiple operators who must each stand on their own. This means Playland's future will no longer be tied to having all its eggs in one basket – a 90-day amusement park whose attendance and revenue can be dramatically altered by bad weather on a few key weekends. Operational and financial diversity will greatly enhance our chances of success by increasing our growth potential and decreasing our risk exposure."

Twelve companies presented ideas through what is called a Request For Proposals (RFP) process. All 12 proposals were then reviewed by a 19-member Citizens Advisory Committee, which included members of the Board of Legislators (Democrats Bill Ryan and Judy Myers and Republican Sheila Marcotte), local elected officials, and business, civic, church and student representatives. Sustainable was among the Citizens Committee's top ranked recommendations, along with Standard Amusements and Central Amusements International.

"This has been a thoughtful and open process," said Jim Chisholm, chairman of the Citizens Advisory Committee, who is also chairman of the Westchester County Parks Board. "The final selection of Sustainable Playland validates the hard work and suggestions of our committee."

Astorino thanked everyone who participated in the process and had high praise for all the companies that spent time, money and energy advocating on behalf of their proposals. "In particular, I want to thank Standard Amusements," Astorino said. "In the end, it came down to two and we could select only one. I can't thank Standard enough for its professionalism and responsiveness throughout the process."

The criteria used by the Citizens Committee for its review were called the "5 Es."

- Economics – Did the proposal provide a financially viable, long-term business model?
- Environment – Was the proposal appropriate and sensitive to local surroundings?
- Entertainment – Were the proposed activities consistent with the mission of a park?
- Experience – Did the proposers have a track record of success?
- Expectations – Did the proposal come with a realistic chance of completion in a reasonable amount of time?

"Sustainable did the best job of meeting all the criteria," Astorino said. "Economic viability, environmental sensitivity, entertainment quality, and the level of experience of this team gave us the confidence that we could move forward quickly on making the new vision a reality."

With the letter of intent signed, the next step is for the county and Sustainable to enter into a legally binding contract. The hope is that this can be done within 90 days.

"Once we have a contract, we can start moving immediately," Narain said. "Some aspects of the plan will take longer than others, but our portfolio approach will allow us to move forward in phases. My guess is that the first phase will be to build the ball fields and they can be operational within 12 weeks from the start of construction. If we get an early enough start, we could also be running the amusement area this summer."

The plan calls for the amusement park to be open for the 2013 season, whether run by the county or by Sustainable.

Astorino said all the necessary approvals would be secured in an open and collaborative manner. "We have a number of stakeholders – the Board of Legislators, the City of Rye, the Town of Rye, the County Parks Board – that need to be part of the process," he said. "This is a team effort."

But he also stressed that Sustainable's \$34 million commitment to Playland can't get started until a contract is finalized and that unnecessary delays could not only put the park at risk but could hurt the county's economy as well.

"We have some of the best sports, entertainment and restaurant companies in the country now coming into Westchester as part of this new venture," said Astorino. "A revitalized Playland will be a job creator: summer jobs, construction jobs, career training and opportunities tied to the park's new operations."

He added: "We will address concerns carefully but with an eye toward solving legitimate issues as quickly as possible. We can't allow the future of the park, jobs for our residents and relief for our taxpayers to get bogged down in politics, bureaucracy and red tape. The time for a reinvented Playland is now."