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# Turning a Blighted Area in Central Suffolk Into a Hub

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Ronkonkoma

FROM the fifth floor of the parking garage across Railroad Avenue here, the Ronkonkoma train station — with its whimsical eyebrow dormers and slate roof — resembles a storybook cottage. It is flanked by single-story retail complexes with shops including a dry cleaner, a nail salon, a pizzeria and a Dunkin' Donuts; the flanks are linked by an elevated pedestrian walkway.

A sea of parking lots stretches to the south, east and west, accommodating the 14,000 to 17,000 commuters who pass each weekday through this station, the busiest in Suffolk's network of the Long Island Rail Road. Beyond a wooded buffer one can see the tails of parked planes and the control tower at Long Island MacArthur Airport in Islip.

To the north, the picture is different: an industrial and commercial zone with a bus yard, a day care center, warehouses and a strip with a bar, a billiard hall and a barbershop. Mark Lesko, the Brookhaven town supervisor, promotes a repurposing of this 150-acre swath in the middle of [Suffolk County](#). He sees the blighted 54 acres north of the tracks in Brookhaven as a hub, "a new heart and engine" where people can work, live and shop without a car. He recently began the search for a "respectable blue-chip" master developer with deep pockets.

As for the 100 or so acres owned by Islip, Suffolk County and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, this month Mr. Lesko reached an agreement with Islip to collaborate on the Ronkonkoma hub project and to secure state and federal funding.

Since March he has been consulting with developers about infrastructure and feasibility. He draws inspiration from revitalized areas like Patchogue, Greenport and Babylon village — "cool" places where "young people want to be," where they can get off the train, walk to a restaurant for dinner, listen to music or hang out in a central plaza.

"We want some character and a flair," he said, evoking a public place that's "funky" enough to have a strong identity. "I don't want to see a McDonald's or a 7-Eleven." And he envisions

multifamily housing, some designated as affordable or work force, in areas to the north and east.

Mr. Lesko seeks to differentiate his proposal from the various megaprojects born in Long Island in recent years to reinvent suburbia but doomed from the start by their size. He cited Legacy Village, a failed effort by Steve Levy, the Suffolk County executive, to create a mixed-use development on 250 acres in Yaphank, and the scaled-back Lighthouse mixed-use project for 70 acres by the Nassau Coliseum. Another big project, Heartland, a proposed 452-acre town center on the site of the former Pilgrim State Psychiatric Center in Brentwood, has been languishing in the approvals process for years.

To help avoid the pitfalls that foiled the other plans, Mr. Lesko said, he is using what he calls “form-based zoning,” which emphasizes design rather than density, and which elicits community engagement from the outset, “building from the ground up as opposed to top down.” And, in this instance, “the town controls land use,” steering the way to zoning and building approvals rather than passively awaiting a developer’s approach with a concept already in hand.

Jim Morgo, the economic development coordinator for Brookhaven, said the new project, which is expected to cost at least \$100 million, would be “market-driven,” citing “a great deal of private-sector interest” so far in land acquisition and development. The idea involves infrastructure improvements like a new county- and state-funded sewage treatment plant costing \$30 million to \$35 million. Also, he said, if Jet Blue — which Islip is trying to woo to MacArthur Airport— decides to build a terminal on the north side of the tarmac, a “people mover” can shuttle travelers from the plane to the train.

Eric Alexander, the executive director of [Vision Long Island](#), a “smart growth” advocacy group, said that over the last five years — despite the failure of the megaprojects and the poor climate for financing — approvals had been granted for 4,100 individual residential units in small- and medium-scale transit-oriented housing developments. Sites already built or under construction include Copper Beech in Patchogue, AvalonBay in Rockville Centre and Hawthorne Court in Valley Stream, he said, adding that 5,000 more units were in the planning stages in places like Glen Cove and downtown Hempstead. “Most of these are downtown infill,” he said. “The public has an appetite for that.”

George Schramm, the president of the [Lake Ronkonkoma Civic Association](#), said there was “definitely a cooperative effort to move things forward” in the Ronkonkoma station area, with plans over the last five years having evolved — from a modest revitalization of the main street by the station, to something along the lines of mixed-use transit-oriented development. “The goal is to attract a younger work force that would find living near a train station with relatively

quick access to Manhattan appealing,” he said, adding that such changes would also benefit the downtown area about a mile away.

After a tour of the potential site on a recent morning, Jason Duckworth, a consultant and developer based in suburban Philadelphia who specializes in transit-oriented design, said that Ronkonkoma, with more than 5,500 parking spaces and quick access to the Long Island Expressway and MacArthur Airport, already had “extraordinary urban infrastructure” in place, which gave it an advantage over many other suburban settings looking to remake themselves.

“This area is starved for this kind of walkable, urban product,” Mr. Duckworth said, adding, “The design challenge is to lay it out in a way that promotes that kind of village, pedestrian-oriented atmosphere,” instead of the typical suburban instinct “to jump in your car and go to the nearest shopping center.”