

Gyrodyne focus of St. James forum



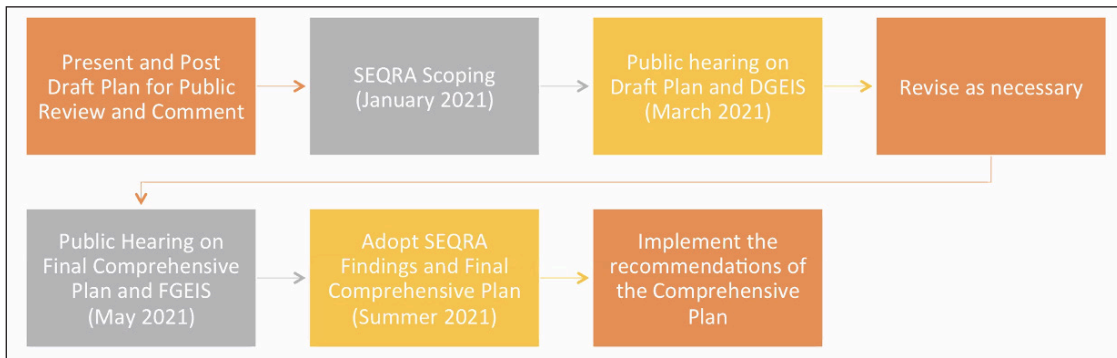
Talking: Allyson Murray - Smithtown...

Revitalization status

- Water main replaced – 2020
- Sewer main installed – 2020
- Curbs and sidewalks – 2020
- ~70 street trees planted

Lake Avenue Revitalization

Graphics from the town's master plan update presentation last week.



Village officials ask for moratorium, zone change

By DAVID AMBRO

The controversial proposal to subdivide the 75-acre Gyrodyne property for light industrial development was a central topic of discussion during the Town of Smithtown's comprehensive "master" plan outreach meeting for St. James Thursday, January 28.

About 35 people attended the event, which was held via Zoom due to coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions. Town officials made a presentation about the draft master plan update and the forum was then opened up to the community for comments and questions. A lively exchange ensued between town officials and residents.

During the forum, Head of the Harbor Village trustees urged the town to impose a moratorium on development applications until the master plan update and a related generic environmental impact statement (GEIS) are completed; to change the zone classification of the 75-acre Gyrodyne property from light industrial to residential; and, to specifically address in the master plan the Route 25A corridor through St. James. They also asked that the village governments be more

involved in the master plan update process.

In addition, St. James residents raised questions about the sewer plant proposed to be built on the Gyrodyne property. And, they inquired about what the town plans to do with the \$4 million sewer line installed on Lake Avenue last year. *(See related story, at right.)*

The master plan was enacted in 1957 and has not undergone a comprehensive update since. It is a document that embodies zoning regulations and serves as a guide to future land use and development in the town. After several years of on-again-off-again efforts, the town hired a consulting firm, H2M, of Melville, to assist with the master plan update. H2M and the town released a draft master plan update December 15. It is now the subject of community outreach efforts. The St. James forum last week was the fifth of six community meetings held by the town. The document and videos of the public forums are available on the town website, smithtownny.gov. Scroll down and there is a section on the homepage for the master plan.

Gyrodyne, LLC, which owns 75 acres of land zoned light

industrial (LI) at the southeast corner of Route 25A and Mills Pond Road in St. James, has applied to the town to subdivide the land to build a hotel and convention center, two medial office buildings, two assisted living facilities, and a wastewater treatment plant on the property. The application has received a positive declaration under the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), which means that an environmental impact statement (EIS) has to be prepared prior to a vote.

Head of the Harbor Village Trustee Jeffrey Fischer, who had once served as chairman of the Village Zoning Board of Appeals, asked the town to acknowledge that the Gyrodyne development proposal to be in conflict with the draft master plan. He urged the town to impose a moratorium on significant development projects until the comprehensive plan is finalized and adopted.

Trustee Fischer characterized the Gyrodyne plan as "massive development sprawl into what is essentially a quiet residential area, which is contrary to both [master] plan recommendations and smart growth principles." He urged that the master plan

(Continued on page 11)

Plan B for sewers a costly option

By DAVID AMBRO

The \$4 million "dry" sewer main installed by the Town of Smithtown under Lake Avenue in St. James last year without a sewer treatment plant to connect it to was a topic of interest discussed at a public outreach forum about the master plan update last week.

The forum was held January 28 on Zoom and was attended by about 35 people, many of whom expressed concerns about the proposed Gyrodyne development plan and overdevelopment in general in the hamlet *(see related story, at left)*. The St. James forum was the fifth of six public outreach forums the town is holding to discuss the draft master plan update. The master plan update about which the forum was held, is available on the town website, smithtownny.gov as are videos of the outreach forums.

After opening remarks and after expressing concerns about traffic from the proposed Gyrodyne development and the impact it will have on the surrounding community and on his home, St. James resident Michael Sassone asked about the Lake Avenue sewer main installation.

The sewer main runs along Lake Avenue from Patrick's Way, which is just south of Woodlawn Avenue, north to Moriches Road. It was installed last year as part of a project to completely reconstruct Lake Avenue.

"Where is the plan to dump that? Where is it heading to?" Mr. Sassone asked about the sewer main.

Smithtown Director of Environment and Waterways David Barnes said at this point it is "just a dry sewer line" that is not being used. "There is no plan yet for where the treatment will be," Mr. Barnes said.

"The Gyrodyne environmental impact statement does analyze if the flow from Lake Avenue went there and what the impacts would be, but currently that is not a plan and [Gyrodyne] is not approved," Mr. Barnes said.

"So what is plan B?" Mr. Sassone asked.

"I would say the plant location is to be determined," Smithtown Planning Director Peter Hans said. "I think the idea was with the town spending \$4 million on a roadway improvement they didn't want to have to rip it up at a later date and put the pipe in. So they put the pipe in hoping that someday a location is determined and we don't have to basically rip up everything that was just done."

Mr. Hans said town officials don't know where the line will connect to. "It could go over by Middle Country Road, it could go in a completely different location, but the idea was not to have to do the roadway twice," he said.

"Understandable," Mr. Sassone said.

Later in the meeting, a resident asked about wastewater disposal again and the conversation circled back to the uncertainty and difficulty of a "Plan B" for the Lake Avenue main. Town spokeswoman Nicole Garguilo, who was coordinating the meeting, said the town was recently exploring funding options to build a new standalone sewer plant and the cost was estimated at \$157 million.

"It is definitely easier to pipe it to a really far away place than it is to build a whole new one," Mr. Barnes added.

According to Mr. Barnes there was some people who proposed to pipe the St. James sewage south to a site on Southern Boulevard, which the town did cost estimates on and it was over \$100 million. He noted that in 2017 Suffolk County received grant commitments from the state for \$20 million to install sewers in downtown Smithtown and \$20 million to install sewers in downtown Kings Park, neither of those projects yet to be undertaken. He also said the town is trying to get a grant from the state for the \$4 million for the Lake Avenue dry sewer main.

"These things do get expensive really fast," Mr. Barnes said.

Suffolk County Legislator Robert Trotta then interposed and accused the administration of County Executive Steve Bellone of raiding the wastewater treatment funds.

Ms. Garguilo concluded the conversation by saying that the local government needs the support of the state and federal government to support projects of this magnitude. She said sewers take a lot of time and money but they are effective environmentally, which is why the town has been moving forward with sewer projects in St. James, Smithtown and Kings Park.

Editorials & comments

Consider moratorium in advance of master plan

Head of the Harbor Village Trustee Jeffrey Fischer is right, the Smithtown Town Board should impose a moratorium on land use applications until the town completes its master plan update.

The idea of a moratorium is not new. The civic association We Are Smithtown advocated for a moratorium more than a year ago. It was ignored by the town board.

At a master plan outreach forum for St. James last week, however, Trustee Fischer renewed the proposal and made a strong case for a moratorium in the context of a controversial application to develop the 75-acre Gyrodyne site on Route 25A and Mills Pond Road.

It is a massive development proposal, a hotel and convention center, two medical office buildings, two assisted living facilities, and a sewer treatment plant, one that the town wants to see sized for regional capacity. If approved by the Smithtown Planning Board, the Gyrodyne development plan is one that will change the bucolic face of St. James forever, and that would be a shame.

The Smithtown Planning Board has the Gyrodyne application under review. That significant decision, with such far-reaching ramifications, should not be made until the Smithtown Town Board has had a chance to consider and approve the update of the master plan. That's why a moratorium, perhaps for only three to six months, is a good idea.

The master plan is a comprehensive manifesto for land use in the town moving forward. It has not been updated since first being enacted in 1957. The town is now undertaking a comprehensive analysis and update of the master plan. It would be inappropriate to approve a development on the scale of the Gyrodyne plan, and then complete the review of the master plan, especially since the master plan and the Gyrodyne plan appear in conflict in several areas of land use policy.

Although it is unlikely that the town board will impose a moratorium, if one were to be enacted the town board should use that time to consider rezoning the Gyrodyne property back to residential from light industrial (LI).

The land was changed from residential to LI in 1960, a decision that was controversial at the time and resulted in litigation. It is land that should be residential. It is adjacent to one of the town's most significant historic districts on one side and one

of the town's most significant agricultural areas on the other side. And, it is a site that buffers St. James from the institutional and light industrial developments on the other side.

This is a key piece of property in Smithtown and, for St. James, what becomes of it is critical.

Obviously, any decision that is made regarding this property should be in conformity with the principles set out in the master plan update. So, a moratorium is in order. A change to residential zoning is a bigger ask, but it seems reasonable given the surrounding environs.

Editor's note

Instruction should be on par with sports

By DAVID AMBRO

How is it safe under coronavirus (COVID-19) protocol for two students to get on a wrestling mat and engage in hand-to-hand combat for six minutes, three two-minute periods, but it's not safe for those same two students to go to in-person math class full time?

How is it safe under coronavirus (COVID-19) protocol for two young women to face-off for an hour of basketball, running end-to-end on the hardwood of an enclosed gymnasium, but those same two young women are prevented from going to social studies or English class on a full-time basis?

School officials have answers to these hypothetical questions that make it seem logical. The infection rate metric, hospitalization, ICU, and death rates; the close-contact quarantine metrics; critical impacts on the instructional and non-instructional staffing, etc., could all result in school closings, which they are trying to avoid.

It's flawed logic, though. If students can return to "high-risk" sports safely, as was approved this week, they should be able to return to the classroom full time. Conversely, if it is unsafe for children to be back in the classroom, it's likewise unsafe for them to be engaged in indoor athletics—referred to by the government under COVID protocol as "high-risk sports."

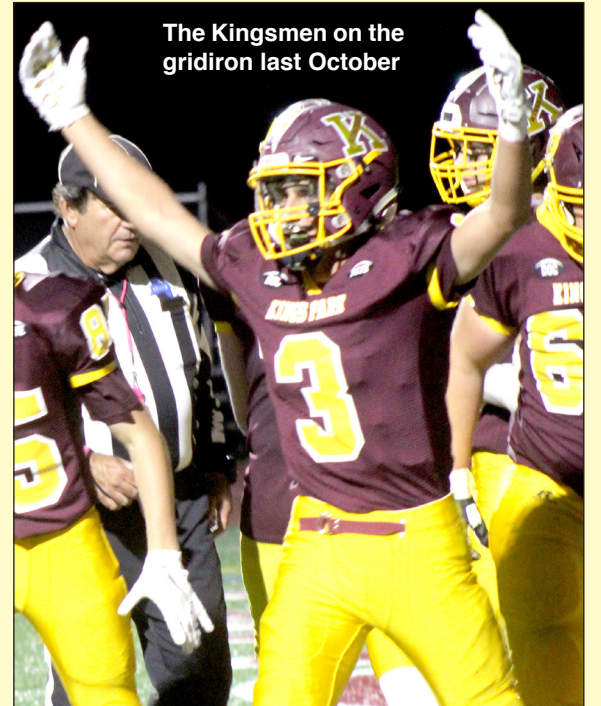
One of my favorite assignments at **The Smithtown News** is to cover high school sports. I've done it for 40 years and during that time I have witnessed and written about some of the greatest wrestling matches, football games, lacrosse games, volleyball matches, basketball games, etc. ever played. I have a habit of showing up at Kings Park football games that are thrilling, especially against Islip in the post season. I've been to Smithtown Battle of the Bulls volleyball matches that are classics, the bleachers packed with red and blue fans erupting at every point. And, I've been to Hauppauge wrestling matches that have been epic, watching head coach Chris Messina build a dynasty, including titan dual meets clashes against Huntington.

There is nothing better than covering a great girls' lacrosse game and then interviewing the coach about how her team won or lost, and the freshman dark horse who scored a career high number of goals. I've been there.

There is nothing better than walking across the field with a senior soccer star after her team just had the Long Island championship stolen from them, yet she offers up the greatest interview, about what went wrong, what was great about her career on the high school pitch, and where she is going from here. I've been there, too.

There is something true about high school athletes, kids driven by a competitive spirit and will to win for their school and their hometown. It engrains within them a sense of community and it can offer many of them relationships that last a lifetime.

Like everyone else, this pandemic has caused



The Kingsmen on the gridiron last October

high anxiety in my life, and one of the things I have missed the most is covering high school sports. It offers me a place to do good work for a community newspaper while at the same time providing a respite from the day-to-day pressure of the newsroom.

I love covering high school sports, I have missed doing it greatly during the pandemic, and so it was heartwarming last week for **The NEWS** to be reporting that sports is going to start back up.

At the same time, though, I watch superintendents of schools here and in other communities herald the return of sports but at the same time delay the full return to the classroom as unsafe because of the potential for COVID-19 to spread and for schools to close if it does.

There is something askew about that. The mission is education and by many accounts remote virtual learning isn't getting the job done for a lot of students. For them, getting back to the classroom is critical before getting back to athletics. The mission of schools is also to foster the social and emotional well-being of young people, and by many accounts COVID is wreaking havoc in the fulfillment of that objective. Athletics is the answer for some kids, but not all of them.

Students have to be back in school full time. And if you talk to the parents who are advocating the loudest for that, there is an urgency to get the schools fully reopened. What the government signaled this week by resuming high-risk sports is that there is a way.

Again, if you can wrestle you should be able to go to math. If you can play basketball you should be able to go to social studies and English. If you can have athletics, you should be able to get students back into the classrooms. And, if that can't all be done safely because of COVID, the government just made a big mistake starting sports back up.

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End of the line for Superintendent O'Hara

By DAVID AMBRO

Dr. Dennis O'Hara's tenure as the Hauppauge School District superintendent appears to be coming to an end.

The Hauppauge Board of Education voted unanimously January 26 to engage Eastern Suffolk BOCES to conduct a search for a new superintendent to replace Dr. O'Hara. The resolution says that Eastern Suffolk BOCES will conduct the search at no cost to the district except the reimbursement of incidental out-of-pocket expenses for printing, advertising, etc. for approximately \$9,000.

Eastern Suffolk BOCES posted an ad for the job this week setting the application deadline for February 26 and the new superintendent will start at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year effective July 1. Applications are to be sent to Dr. Julie Davis Luts, chief operating officer of Eastern Suffolk BOCES.

"The Board of Education of the Hauppauge School District is accepting applications for this key leadership position in the 3,242-student K-12 school district," says the advertisement. It says the Hauppauge School Board is prepared to offer a regionally competitive compensation package to the new superintendent.

According to the ad, the board is seeking an experienced educational leader who has New York State School District Administrator (SDA) or School District Leader (SDL) certification.

Applicants for the job are asked to send a resume and letter of intent. There is a link to the application on the Eastern Suffolk BOCES website, where the ad is posted.

As an attachment with the BOCES advertisement, there is a brochure prepared by the Hauppauge School District. It says the seven-member school board is offering an

initial multi-year contract with a salary competitive with the eastern Long Island region and commensurate with experience and qualifications.

According to the brochure, the school board is seeking an enthusiastic, knowledgeable leader committed to the continued development of excellence in the school district. "The candidate must possess outstanding integrity, strong interpersonal skills, high moral values, and a high ethical standard," the brochure says. "The candidate should also be able to demonstrate experience in curriculum development, school finance, business management, advocacy, labor relations, budgeting, and community engagement."

The brochure provides demographic information of the district: 424 instructional staff, 217 non-instructional staff; a grade-by-grade breakdown of students enrollment and students demographics, 2,280 white,

479 Hispanic, 113 black, 370 other, 516 economically disadvantaged, 111 English Language Learners, and 494 students with disabilities; financial information, \$115.7 million budget, \$88.9 million tax levy, 2.3% tax levy increase and \$14 million state aid; and, an academic profile, 97% graduation rate, 77% with advanced Regents diplomas, 26 International Baccalaureate (IB) diplomas, 46 AP scholars, 26 AP scholars with distinction and three National AP scholars.

The job application is also attached to the BOCES advertisement. The applicants are asked to answer five questions on the application. The first four are about public education. The final question asks: The social-emotional well-being of students was a concern long before COVID-19, and the impact of the pandemic has yet to be seen. Describe how you would assess and respond to those needs in the Hauppauge

UFSD. Provide examples from past successes.

At the height of the pandemic in July, just weeks before the school district had to finalize its plan to reopen for the first time since March 13, Dr. O'Hara and the school board became embroiled in a dispute. After his contract was not extended beyond the 2020-2021 school year, Dr. O'Hara applied for the superintendent position in the Sachem School District, where he grew up and attended school. The school board alleged it was a violation of his contract to seek another job, and voted to approve a leave of absence for Dr. O'Hara.

Dr. O'Hara was sworn in to a new term for the 2020-2021 school year at the July 7 organizational meeting but he was not on the job or at board meetings for the remainder of July and August. He hired an attorney and threatened to file a lawsuit to get his job back, and was suddenly back on the job in September.

Residents highlight Gyrodyne development as master plan issue

(Continued from page 3)

be modified to acknowledge the inherent conflicts and inconsistencies between the expressed goals of the master plan and the Gyrodyne development proposal.

Trustee Fischer also suggested that the town consider rezoning undeveloped sections of the Gyrodyne site to "a more restrictive residential zoning classification with a mandatory cluster requirement." He said residential zoning with a clustered approach will ensure development that is consistent with the master plan's goals of preserving the character of the surrounding residential neighborhoods and concentrating multi-use developments to downtown areas away from traffic corridors; protect the town's natural and cultural resources; and, preserve, enhance and protect historic, scenic, cultural and architectural character of the community.

Referring to the Gyrodyne proposal as a "mega development," Head of the Harbor Village Trustee L. Gordon Van Vechten expanded on Trustee Fischer's remarks. He cites reasons why the Gyrodyne proposal is contrary to numerous recommendations of the draft master plan.

Trustee Van Vechten listed the components of the project, a 150-room hotel, a 150-seat restaurant, a 500-seat conference center,

130,000-square-feet of office space, 220 assisted living units, and 2,000 parking spaces. He said it will add a large amount of traffic onto an already heavily traveled Route 25A corridor and surrounding local roads, which he named. He said the traffic impact on the community is in conflict with the master plan.

He cited page 55 which recommends specific areas where mixed-use developments such as Gyrodyne is proposing should take place: downtowns, portions of Smithtown Boulevard in Nesconset, and selected nodes in the Hauppauge Industrial Park. He said Route 25A in St. James is an historic heritage corridor which cannot be widened and presents a glaring example of the inconsistency with the master plan recommendations related to development patterns.

"The Gyrodyne mixed-use development would be a great fit on a site bounded on three sides by four-lane highways, in an area where the existing character of the community would not be radically changed forever," he said. Trustee Van Vechten said the proposed Gyrodyne project is not viable on a site bounded by two-lane roads and residential communities with extensive cultural and historic resources that stand to be obliterated by the development.

Trustee Van Vechten also

cited a recommendation in the draft master plan to restrict assisted living facilities to multi-family residential zones with a special exception from the town board. By contrast, the Gyrodyne proposal calls for 220 assisted living units on an industrial zone.

Head of the Harbor Trustee Judith Ogden asked the town to include the three incorporated villages in the process to develop the master plan and she asked that the document include in-depth analysis and recommendations for the Route 25A corridor in St. James.

Trustee Ogden said villages, especially those with a common heavily traveled road within the town, have an important stake in the comprehensive plan and should be included in the planning process. She said Route 25A is a heavily traveled corridor shared by the town and the village.

"If we are not included in the planning process, decisions you make may adversely affect our community," Ms. Ogden said.

She said, therefore, that the village is suggesting an in-depth analysis of the Route 25A corridor be added to the master plan and the review in the GEIS from the train trestle at Woodlawn Avenue east through St. James to the Brookhaven town line. She said the winding, two-lane roadway in this area is designated as a heritage

corridor protected under state law.

She also pointed out that the Mills Pond historic district on the eastern end of the corridor, which includes her home and the town's Mills Pond House, has been ignored. She said it should be the subject of a detailed review to ensure that its character and resources, including open space, agricultural land and historic resources are protected and enhanced.

Joseph Bolhoffer, a Head of the Harbor resident with a law office on Lake Avenue in St. James, echoed what Trustee Ogden said. He called it "glaring" that the Route 25A corridor through St. James is missing from the draft plan. "Hopefully that oversight is going to be fixed," he said.

Calling it the "elephant in the room," Mr. Bolhoffer said the Gyrodyne property development plan has to be addressed in the master plan update.

Mr. Bolhoffer said the draft plan is neutral on the Gyrodyne development plan. He suggested the town take a stand and acknowledge that Gyrodyne development has the potential to conflict with the town's goals for commercial development.

Mr. Bolhoffer said there are comments in the draft master plan on page 245 saying the people who commented about the Gyrodyne development feel it is appropriate. He said that is inaccurate, that he was one of the commenters

and he didn't say that, and his comments were not included in the record on the website nor were those of Head of the Harbor Village. Mr. Bolhoffer said the proposed park (P) as it relates to the Gyrodyne property on Route 25A requires a 200-foot buffer from Route 25A.

"It's laudatory to rezone areas as parkland, but that doesn't do anything here. It is window dressing because you probably know that since 1960 there is a restrictive covenant on the [Gyrodyne] property and you can't do anything for 200 feet south of Route 25A, which would require removing the restrictive covenant," Mr. Bolhoffer said. Mr. Bolhoffer also hit on several other issues in the draft.

He pointed out that the draft said traffic at four key intersections will be studied. He called that insufficient, said 40 key intersections would be more appropriate in a town this size, and cautioned that evaluating traffic now will be misleading because of the coronavirus (COVID-19), which has significantly reduced vehicular volume throughout the town.

Mr. Bolhoffer also cited page 232 of the master plan update, which reports that St. James has the smallest share of open space in the town, 1.63% as compared to 18% in the rest of the town. He said the development of the 75-acre Gyrodyne property will impact the ratio dramatically.