

# The New York Times

## *Reinventing Rye Playland Ignites an Unexpected Battle*

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Photo



A plan for Rye Playland in Westchester County is opposed by neighbors, partly because of a proposal to construct a field house. CreditHiroko Masuike/The New York Times

RYE, N.Y. — It seemed, on its face, an unassailable approach to reinventing Rye Playland, the Art Deco amusement park in this wealthy shore town, for the 21st century — innocuous even. Spiff up the amusement rides, expand the green space, and draw year-round visitors to the county-run park with new playing fields and restaurants.

But the park's neighbors and Westchester County lawmakers have been battling the plan almost since it was announced — and a key player now threatens to drop out.

In 2010, the Westchester County executive, Robert P. Astorino, solicited proposals to reimagine Playland, a 100-acre amusement park built in 1928 and perched on the shores of Long Island Sound. One of the few parks in the nation owned and operated by a local government, Playland has been losing \$3 million to \$5 million annually, with the number of visitors dropping each year. The park encompasses 50 rides, an ice rink, a swimming pool, a boardwalk, a lake and a beach.

Mr. Astorino, a Republican candidate for governor, selected a plan put forward by a group of Rye residents who formed a nonprofit group called Sustainable Playland Inc. They envisioned an amusement park with more park and fewer amusements, as well as year-round attractions including a large field house for lacrosse and soccer, and three outdoor athletic fields.

Photo



Planned features like a big field house upset some neighbors of the county-run attraction. A sign refers to the proposed square footage of the field house. CreditHiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Sustainable Playland's proposal was modeled on the Central Park Conservancy, which manages the park for New York City. And the group enlisted the services of Daniel A. Biederman, a Westchester resident who [pioneered the private management of public spaces with the successful restoration of Bryant Park](#) in Manhattan.

But no sooner had Mr. Astorino decided to turn the reins over to Sustainable Playland, through a management agreement, than critics pounced. A county lawmaker, Kenneth W. Jenkins, Democrat of Yonkers, sued the county executive, arguing that Mr. Astorino had improperly ceded control of Playland to a third party without seeking prior approval from the county's Board of Legislators.

The lawsuit was dismissed, but Mr. Jenkins plans to appeal. He also filed a second lawsuit against the county, this time naming Sustainable Playland as well.

Meanwhile, the City of Rye has written threatening letters to the county, insisting that any changes at Playland must be reviewed by its planning commission and City Council.

“The City of Rye ought to have review approval on this project, just like we would with any other project,” Mayor Joe Sack, a Republican, said. “The fact that it’s a piece of county-owned property doesn’t make any difference.”

Many objected to the group’s plan to shrink the amusement-ride area by a third, even though the plan calls for keeping some of the old favorite rides, including the Dragon Coaster. Others balked at the 95,000-square-foot field house planned for a corner of Playland’s vast parking lot, saying it would bring more traffic, block neighbors’ views and worsen flooding.

Still others faulted the proposal to reduce the parking area to accommodate the field house and outdoor fields. More parking spaces, not fewer, are needed, they argued, especially after the improvements are made, including a plan by another group to build a children’s museum on the boardwalk.

“There’s a sad irony to all this,” said Geoff Thompson, a spokesman for Sustainable Playland. “Pretty much everybody agrees that Playland is an important and unique property that should be preserved. You’d think it would be easy to come up with a way to do it. But it has been a cacophony of differing opinions.”

In response, Sustainable Playland agreed to keep the amusement-ride area at the current size. It also reduced the size of the field house to 82,500 square feet and eliminated one of the three playing fields.

With the threat of litigation hanging over Playland, however, and the intensifying dispute between Westchester and Rye over jurisdiction, Sustainable Playland recently said it would no longer take part in a review of the project by a committee of the County Legislature.

In a letter to Mr. Astorino in late March, Sustainable Playland’s president, Kim Morque, said “unresolved issues” threatened the viability of the group’s plan. “We are not a deep-pocketed private corporation,” Mr. Morque wrote. “We are private citizens who came together with a civic mission to preserve one of the county’s greatest assets.”

The group has already spent \$500,000 in privately raised funds on traffic and engineering studies and says it cannot afford to be involved in years of litigation.

Although he has expressed sympathy for Sustainable Playland’s frustration, Michael B. Kaplowitz, chairman of the Board of Legislators, gave the group a deadline of Thursday to return to the table. He asserted that the county had sole authority over the review process at Playland, since it is county property.

“They can’t drag this out forever,” Mr. Kaplowitz said, referring to Sustainable Playland. But nor can Rye hold things up, he said. “The City of Rye is an interested party and one

we want to include in the process,” Mr. Kaplowitz said. “But they don’t have veto power over a county park.”

Nearby residents, however, say they are the ones who would be most affected by the proposed changes, including the 35-foot-tall field house. “Save Playland” lawn signs have spread in Ryan’s Park, the section of Rye adjacent to Playland’s parking lot. The signs feature a red line through “95,000,” the original number of square feet in the plan.

“When I open my front door, I don’t want to see the back of a big box,” said Elizabeth Antinozzi, a special education teaching assistant. “And I’m not going to be happy listening to whistles at 8:30 in the morning. Something needs to be done with Playland, but not at the expense of our neighborhood.”

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