Acknowledgments

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Suffolk County Industrial Development Agency
The Suffolk County Industrial Development Agency (IDA) is a public benefit corporation of the State of New York. The Suffolk IDA was created to actively promote, encourage, attract and develop job and recreational opportunities throughout the County. The Suffolk IDA is empowered to provide financial assistance to private entities through tax incentives in order to promote the economic welfare, prosperity and recreational opportunities for residents of the County.

The Suffolk County IDA works in synergy with Suffolk County Executive Steven Bellone, the Deputy County Executive and Commissioner of Suffolk County Economic Development and Planning to foster positive economic development within the County.

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Regional Plan Association’s work for the Suffolk County Industrial Development Agency (IDA) has been carried out in support of the Connect Long Island plan set out by County Executive Steve Bellone. With this transportation and development plan in mind RPA has focused on connecting local needs with regional opportunity. Working with the IDA, municipalities, and local communities, RPA’s work will:

- Connect Suffolk County’s assets to the New York region’s economy
- Unlock and capture value in and around downtowns
- Enhance downtown live-work-play experience
- Identify key actions needed to promote economic development
The transformation of the area surrounding the Ronkonkoma Long Island Railroad station from a sea of parking lots into a mixed-use, multi-modal destination is an ambitious and important initiative. To that end, as part of an on-call services contract with the Suffolk County IDA, Regional Plan Association (RPA) has been meeting with the Ronkonkoma Civic Association (RCA) to make sure that the Ronkonkoma community’s objectives are understood and are incorporated into the planning process. In addition to several site visits and extended conference calls, RPA has assisted the Ronkonkoma community in hosting community planning sessions to gather input on what the community’s wants and needs are for Ronkonkoma, led an informational workshop to learn about what is working in similar communities across the country, and organized a walking tour of Downtown Patchogue with Mayor Paul Pontieri to learn more about the revitalization of their community.

Everyone in the community, even those that did not directly participate in the process, were kept in the loop on the progress made through civic meetings, Facebook messages, and e-mail blasts. There were three newsletters mailed to 8,000 homes in the community.
Overview and Planning Framework

Initial meetings with the Ronkonkoma Civic Association resulted in the development of an overall Planning Framework which was used to guide the discussion at each of the community visioning sessions. The community’s Planning Framework includes:

- Link Ronkonkoma Station Area to the transition zone ("Crossroads") located along Ocean/ Lakeland
- Public space linkage across the train tracks
- Public spaces and walkable streets incorporated into development on south side of tracks
- Community supporting uses incorporated into development on south side of tracks, such as:
  - Indoor/Outdoor performance space
  - Supermarket
  - Arts Center
  - Ballfields
- Include Crossroads in development of Ronkonkoma Station Area

The table discussions at the community visioning meetings both validated and qualified these big ideas in various ways.

Cutting across all of the potential futures are concerns about traffic. Suggested solutions range from the modest, such as preferential parking rates for residents and improved pedestrian experience at the station parking lots, to the very ambitious such as a new connecting road from the LIE to the Ronkonkoma LIRR Station area. Residents are concerned about safety and efficiency issues at the Ocean Avenue grade crossing especially since service may be more frequent once the station area is built out. Some residents even wondered whether a grade separated crossing should be considered but there does not seem to be enough space between the tracks and the new Crossroads to accomplish this.

New residential development raises a number of concerns about affordability, overcrowding and traffic.

During the concluding plenary discussion, the President of the Ronkonkoma Civic Association, reminded community members to be realistic: that the community oriented uses -parks, performance venues, cultural resources – will need to be supported at least in part by leveraging private development at the Ronkonkoma LIRR Station area which will almost certainly include mixed-use.
Transform the commercial strip: streetscape improvements and pedestrian-oriented redevelopment

“Complete street” connections between the Hub and Crossroads: sidewalks, landscaping, bike lanes, transit accommodations

The bridge over the tracks can also be public space

New development needs to include attractive public spaces and walk-able streets

Include new civic uses

Create a connected street and block network

New development should include community-supporting uses, such as grocery store or multipurpose venue

Create seamless intermodal connection between the LIRR and the airport
Regardless of how the Ronkonkoma LIRR Station area is ultimately developed, there are some considerations that should be addressed:

1. Manage the Transition in scale between the Ronkonkoma LIRR Station area and the surrounding neighborhoods
   Acknowledging that the scale of development at the station area will be larger than the typical development pattern elsewhere in the hamlet, the RCA wants there to be an appropriate transition in scale and land uses between the new developments and the adjacent areas. Transition in scale and use is already an issue elsewhere in the hamlet, especially between industrial uses and residential neighborhoods. Transition between the future station area and where the RCA imagines a future hamlet center might be located should have a transition zone between the two. (see #3 below).

2. Enable more commercial uses
   The existing Town of Islip zoning and economic development policies prioritize industrial uses. The RCA would like some loosening of these policies to enable more commercial uses in selected portions of the hamlet. In particular, are places such as Veteran’s Highway where some commercial uses would be appropriate. This would enable some of the community-supporting uses that residents currently have to leave the hamlet to access such as eateries and, especially, a supermarket.

3. Revitalize the Ronkonkoma “Crossroads”
   When the redevelopment of the Ronkonkoma Station Area is fully realized, it can serve as the “downtown” for Ronkonkoma and other surrounding communities that do not have a traditional transit-oriented downtown. But in addition, the RCA would like to see the area around the intersection of Ocean Avenue and Lakeland Avenue revitalized. This is where most of the neighborhood-scale commercial uses are located currently as well as the fire department which is often used as a community meeting space.

   The wholesale transformation of this Crossroads into a complete downtown is not realistic and would be unprecedented in the region. Having said that, it is possible for the Crossroads to become a more pedestrian-oriented place including 3 and 4 story sidewalk-oriented mixed-use buildings. This can be complementary with a larger-scale “downtown” at the Ronkonkoma Station Area itself. Depending on the level of additional development at the Crossroads, potential sewer access will need to be evaluated.

   Finally, it will be important to manage traffic issues, including safety issues related to the LIRR grade crossing, especially since service would be much more frequent after the Ronkonkoma Station Area is built out.

4. Connect the Crossroads to the Station Area
   Because the Crossroads is less than a half mile from the station area, RCA wants there to be a strong, multi-modal connection between the station area and the Crossroads so that it can capture some of the development energy that the station area represents.

   This means paying particular attention to the design of Lakeland Avenue which, as it becomes Johnson Avenue, goes directly into the future station area. This road should be designed to work not just for cars, but for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit and with better landscaping and lighting. It should be a clear and inviting link between the two. Easton Avenue should be thought of the same way, although the right-of-way is narrower and therefore less flexible. One idea discussed was to make Easton more of the pedestrian/bicycle corridor. It was pointed out that there is a now remediated county-owned brownfield site at the corner of Easton Street and Raynor Street known as the “Ronkonkoma Wallpaper” site. The RCA would like to see this become a civic space that is part of the connection along the Easton Avenue corridor. Some residents would like to see those improvements extended farther west to the school.

5. Incorporate community-supporting uses
   In addition to the larger scale redevelopment programs listed below, there are certain amenities and uses which the community would like to be part of the Ronkonkoma Station Area redevelopment.

   This list includes the following:
   - Indoor/outdoor performance space such as a band shell
   - Public open spaces(s)
   - Walkable/bikable streets
   - Supermarket
   - Brewery
   - Arts center
   - Dog park
   - Ballfield
6. **Link across the tracks**

The two sides of the tracks need be linked at the Ronkonkoma Station Area. One idea brought to light during the process, is to create a public plaza that bridges the tracks. This space would be big enough to be programmed in some way and would be framed by whatever new development is on the south side of the tracks. There would be escalators and stairs to get from the existing street level on the north side of the tracks to the plaza elevation. The existing pedestrian connection farther east can remain and provide another link across the tracks.

7. **Electrify and generally improve service on the Port Jefferson Branch.**

While it is beyond the scope of this initiative, the RCA is aware of the regional transportation issues which affect their hamlet. Improvements in the Port Jefferson Branch are part of the larger context that should be addressed. Better service would divert some of the commuters to the Port Jefferson Line so that less traffic and parking would need to be accommodated at the future Ronkonkoma Station Area.
Several redevelopment programs were discussed at the visioning workshop. In the spirit of the open-ended brainstorming, these were explored without regard for traffic impacts, market support and fiscal impacts which would have to be accounted for in any final proposal. Any of these developments would need to address Planning Framework and Issues and Opportunities previously discussed. Although these development are listed below as distinct and separate ideas, in reality, the site is probably large enough to accommodate several of these programs.
1. The Multi-modal Hub

MacArthur Airport is literally adjacent to the Ronkonkoma Train station at the center of the future Station area, but at the moment these are completely disconnected. The RCA supports the idea that has been discussed of moving the existing terminal to this location where there would be a seamless connection between the airport and the train. It was observed that the need to go up and over the tracks suits the two-level airport terminal model in which departures are at an upper level, which could be aligned with a new plaza over the tracks, and arrivals are at grade.

During the session, several variations of this were considered: In one version, the terminal is immediately adjacent to the train station, a standalone project bounded by Railroad Avenue and the tracks. In the other alternative, the terminal would be on the south side of Railroad Avenue and there could be a zone of complementary mixed-use development between the terminal/Railroad Avenue and the tracks. The same model of a two-level terminal would pertain (see discussion above) as well as the idea of making much of the mixed use development at the higher plaza/departure level elevation (see discussion below).

A final variation was explored in which the existing terminal stays where it is and some kind of satellite facility is developed at the Ronkonkoma Station Area. This facility could provide baggage handling and ticketing remote from the terminal and the gates. It was pointed out that in many cities it is now possible to check your luggage downtown instead of at the airport. This could be the right-of-way for some kind of “people mover” or shuttle system to get passengers from the Ronkonkoma Station Area and this satellite facility to the main airport terminal.

The County and Town of Islip completed Transport Long Island: A Train to Plane Connectivity Study subsequent to the community visioning. The study included a detailed analysis of the preferred means to increase connectivity between the Ronkonkoma LIRR and LI MacArthur Airport in an effort to maximize access to the airport, railroad, and other regional destinations. Medium and long-term recommendations from the study align with variations considered by the community, including implementing a shuttle system and relocating the airport terminal.

At the workshop, most residents expressed interest in the concept of a multimodal hub with a relocated airport but this was also met with skepticism about whether there would be enough demand for flights at MacArthur Airport. It was pointed out that the terminal would not have to be immediately adjacent to the train station, but could be close by including using some of the space where the existing composting facility is located. This would allow more room for other kinds of activities. The suggested “people-mover” concept could be pursued even if it is to the existing terminal and airport parking lots which are currently underutilized.

As with the other potential redevelopment ideas, the traffic issues related to getting to and from the new facility would have to be addressed.
2. The Mixed-use Hub

In this scenario, the same kind of development pattern which is being set up on the north side of the tracks by the approved development would be extended south of the tracks: residential and mixed-use development organized around a well-connected street and block network and well defined public spaces, including possibly the proposed plaza over the tracks (see above).

Negotiating the changes in elevation between a plaza over the tracks and the new developments was brought up as an issue. The RCA suggested that it might be possible for most of the pedestrian experience to take place at the higher bridge plaza elevation (or, per above, the elevation of both the plaza and the departure level of a new airport terminal.).

Because this development backs up onto the airport, there is no need to manage a transition to smaller scale neighborhood streets. As in the approved developments on the north side, the mixed-use development can sit largely on top of parking garages. This eliminates, in most locations, the need for the more costly and complex strategy of “wrapping” the parking garages with street-oriented mixed-use development. In a few strategic locations, such as where the Easton Street corridor comes into the new developments, the wrapping strategy would still be important.

In terms of the mix of uses, high-value-added manufacturing space was discussed. The RCA has the impression that there is not a need for additional space but that linkages could be made from the hub to various industrial uses around the airport to re-fill existing underutilized buildings with high-value uses. The Ronkonkoma Station Area however could include the kind of incubator/shared work spaces that support manufacturing-oriented entrepreneurship and employment for a younger generation looking for these kinds of connected, mixed-use environments.

The notion of simply mirroring the development model that has been approved on the north side of the tracks to the south side of the tracks is not supported. This is not a matter of rejecting more mixed-use development on the south side, but rather a desire to see other kinds of uses and activities in the mix especially small and medium scale community-oriented commercial uses such as a supermarket, farmers market, movie theater, or performance venues were mentioned. There is a desire to see some 24/7 uses there so that the Ronkonkoma Station Area is still lively after regular business hours.

Some residents oppose new housing although in the concluding discussion it was acknowledged that there is a strong market for mixed-used development that may need to be leveraged to pay for the desired amenities and improvements.
There was discussion of several other larger scale destination uses that seem appropriate for a location that is so well connected to rail and air. These proposed uses should be further studied in terms of market support and physical scale.

**a. Sports and Entertainment Venue:** An arena should be explored as a possible use. Experience with these kinds of facilities shows that they do not have to be stand-alone, but can be part of a more diverse mixed-use development. It should be able to accommodate a variety of events so that it is active for most of the time. Performance arts could be part of the arena programing. It was discussed that Ronkonkoma is not a destination in the summer so this may be a way to attract people to the area.

**b. Conference/Convention Center:** As with the sports and entertainment venue above, this kind of use does not have to be stand-alone, but can be part of a more diverse mixed-use development. It was pointed out that such a facility could include meeting rooms for the community which they would like to be part of the programming for the south side of the tracks.

Not surprisingly, the idea of a “Destination Hub” was most appealing. There is support for the idea of a conference/convention facility at some scale, especially if it was suitable for community-oriented uses, but there is skepticism about whether the demand will materialize. Again, traffic generated by any destination use would need to be addressed. It was acknowledged that a market study should be completed to verify demand. Various civic and arts-related uses garnered the most support, especially a performance space or programmed outdoor space.

One group suggested something like the Holtsville Ecology Center coming to the site, which could maintain some of the existing compost uses, and have a beautiful public space that could be rented out for a profit.
Highlights of the Outreach Process

August 4, 2016: Kick off of community based process starting with an introductory call between leaders of the Ronkonkoma Civic Association, and members of RPA.

August 22, 2016: Site tour of the Ronkonkoma Station Area area with RPA. That evening, the entire Ronkonkoma Civic Association Board hosted a brainstorming session with RPA and discussed the desire for a transition in scale between new development and the adjacent areas.

September 12, 2016: First collaborative planning session between the Civic, community and RPA where civic members outlined principles important to the community and developed ideas for the Islip side of the Ronkonkoma Station Area area as well as the “Crossroads” area.

February 16, 2017: Second collaborative planning session was held to present the community’s ideas to additional members of the Civic and other interested community members. The Community’s ideas began to coalesce into three concepts for the south side of the Ronkonkoma LIRR — The Multi-modal Hub, The Mixed-use Hub and The Destination Hub.

May 25, 2017: A newsletter from RCA was mailed to 8,000 homes in the community containing an update on the planning process, and an invite to participate in upcoming community planning events.

May 27, 2017: RCA uploaded the presentation given by RPA at previous community planning sessions to their website including the community’s concepts for the Ronkonkoma Station Area.

June 10, 2017: The “Downtown Patchogue Walking Tour” to discuss revitalization efforts at several key locations.

June 28, 2017: The Ronkonkoma Civic Association hosted “Shaping Your Community”, attended by dozens of residents, stakeholders, agencies and elected officials. The evening featured a presentation on planning and walkable communities and break-out sessions where community residents discussed different concepts and ideas.

July 21, 2017: RPA creates a report to be released to the private sector to gauge interest in advancing the community’s concepts.

August 18, 2017: A second newsletter from RCA was mailed to every home in the community sharing information on the community planning process. The mailer encouraged community members to provide feedback on the concepts developed.

October 2017: The County in Partnership with the Town of Islip releases and RFQ to identify a master developer and concept for the study area. The RFQ includes information regarding the community’s planning process, development concepts, and overall vision.

March 14, 2018: Public workshop, attended by over one hundred residents and other stakeholders, to review the private sector responses to the community vision.
Outcomes

The work summarized in this report has had several significant outcomes.

Foundation for Request for Qualifications (RFQ)

The products of the public process were used in a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) issued by Suffolk County in partnership with the Town of Islip in the fall of 2017. This RFQ directly incorporated the essential elements of this initiative:

1. A comprehensive summary of the entire year and half long public process including a detailed list of all of the meetings, mailings, site visits.
2. A complete summary of the Planning Framework (see page 6)
3. A summary of the potential development concepts — The Multi-modal Hub, The Mixed-use Hub and The Destination Hub. (see pages 11 through 13 of this report)
4. Reinvigoration of the village-scale “Crossroads” at Ocean Avenue and Johnson Avenue.
5. A summary of the Issues and Opportunities associated with any future development at the Ronkonkoma Station Area including issues of transitions in scale, incorporation of community-supporting uses, and issues of traffic, parking and access.

Through this process the county selected JLL & Team as the master developer. The legislature approved a resolution authorizing the County Executive to execute a Memorandum of Understanding (MOA) for an eight month exclusive due diligence period to refine their concept to a formal proposal.

Building Civic Capacity

This community-based visioning process sought to keep the entire community informed every step of the way. Over the last 18 months hundreds of community residents have participated directly in the process by attending meetings, joining a downtown Patchogue walking tour, engaging on social media and providing written comments. Everyone in the community, even those not directly participating in the process, has been kept in the loop on the progress being made through civic meetings, Facebook messages, e-mail blasts and newsletters like this one mailed to 8,000 homes in the community.

By having a robust public process, this initiative firmly established the on-going role of civic organizations in the redevelopment process for the Ronkonkoma Station Area. The active partnership with the Ronkonkoma Civic Association (RCA) during this initiative, was leveraged to engage other civic organizations in the communities surrounding the station area. This larger group of participating civic organizations constitutes what is now established as the Ronkonkoma Visioning Implementation Committee. Also, in the interview process, respondents to the RFQ were asked to describe their process for ongoing community engagement.

Ronkonkoma Visioning Implementation Committee Organizations

Ronkonkoma Civic Association
Lake Ronkonkoma Civic Organization
Ronkonkoma Chamber of Commerce
Ronkonkoma Civic Association
Lake Ronkonkoma Historical Society
Rotary of the Ronkonkomas
Holbrook Chamber of Commerce
Ronkonkoma Fire Department
Connetquot Youth Sports Association
Connetquot PTA Council
Lakeland Fire Department / MacArthur Business Alliance

List as of July 2018
Regional Plan Association is an independent, not-for-profit civic organization that develops and promotes ideas to improve the economic health, environmental resiliency and quality of life of the New York metropolitan area. We conduct research on transportation, land use, housing, good governance and the environment. We advise cities, communities and public agencies. And we advocate for change that will contribute to the prosperity of all residents of the region. Since the 1920s, RPA has produced four landmark plans for the region, the most recent was released in November 2017. For more information, please visit www.rpa.org or fourthplan.org.

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