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Sands casino development sparks environmental concerns

Posted January 17, 2025



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The Francis Purcell Preserve, a part of the Hempstead Plains, behind the Marriott hotel in Uniondale. The South Shore Audubon Society is concerned about the potential impact of the Sands casino project on the grasslands.

COURTESY FRIENDS OF HEMPSTEAD PLAINS



By Kelsie Radziski (<mailto:kradziski@liherald.com>)

The proposed \$6 billion Sands development on the 72-acre Nassau Coliseum site has sparked new discussions about balancing economic development with environmental preservation, with the focus on one of Long Island's last remaining undisturbed ecosystems.

Environmental organizations are working with county officials and Sands to address the project's potential impacts on the Hempstead Plains, a 100-acre natural habitat adjacent to the Coliseum site that houses diverse wildlife and plant species. The Sands proposal includes a 400,000-square-foot casino, hotels, restaurants, retail outlets and a convention center, and is expected to create over 8,500 new construction jobs and over 5,000 more permanent jobs.

The South Shore Audubon Society held a virtual presentation on Jan. 9 that outlined its concerns about the planned development. The issues it highlighted included bird mortality from collisions with building, light pollution affecting migration patterns and water resource management.

Sands, which has committed to building a LEED-certified resort, says environmental stewardship is central to its development approach. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is a green building rating system used around the world.

"We have a long, well-documented history of environmental achievements and excellence across our worldwide properties," a Sands spokesperson, told the Herald. "We look forward to continuing to collaborate with Long Island's environmental community to create a world-class resort that provides new entertainment, jobs and opportunity in the most sustainable way."

A 28,000-page draft environmental impact statement for the project, submitted by Sands last November, outlines the Las Vegas-based gaming company's plans to address potential environmental impacts. Local environmental groups, however, say that additional protections are needed for the unique habitat of the Hempstead Plains.

“We thought that not everything was covered (in the DEIS), that there’s going to be some environmental impacts on two of (the development site’s) closest neighbors, Hempstead Plains Preserve and Francis Purcell Preserve, as well as on the East Meadow Brook,” Russ Comeau, president of the South Shore Audubon Society, said during last week’s presentation.

The Hempstead Plains support as many as 30 different plant and animal species — some either endangered, threatened or of special concern in New York state — but over the years have been significantly reduced in size from their original 40,000-acre expanse across central Nassau County.

According to Comeau, over 100 species of birds migrate through Long Island, and some aspects of the proposed structures could increase the risk that birds will fly into them.

Paul Van Wie, president of the Friends of Hempstead Plains, noted the area’s significance as both an ecological treasure and a historic site. The plains played a crucial role in aviation history and suburban development while maintaining their importance as a critical natural habitat.

Water use has emerged as another focal point in the debate over the Sands proposal. The draft environmental impact statement indicates that the development would draw nearly 2 million gallons of water per day from Long Island’s aquifer. Comeau also expressed concerns about the potential pollution of the East Meadow Brook, which he said already faces challenges from stormwater runoff.

Sands has indicated that it will address all of the environmental concerns raised during the public comment period in its final impact statement. The project requires multiple approvals, including a development lease from Nassau County, land-use approval from the Town of Hempstead, and a competitive gaming license from New York state.

The public comment period for the draft environmental impact statement continues until Jan. 21 at 5 p.m. Comments can be submitted via email, to sandscomments@nassaucountyny.gov, or by mail, to the Nassau County Clerk of the Legislature, 1550 Franklin Ave., Mineola, NY 11501.

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