

Astorino holding Playland children's museum hostage, Democrats say

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Westchester Children's Museum: Democratic legislators call on the county executive to turn over the keys to the Westchester Children's Museum. (Video by Elizabeth Ganga/The Journal News)

RYE — Democrats on the Westchester County Board of Legislators on Thursday called on County Executive Rob Astorino to turn over the keys for the north bathhouse at Playland Amusement Park to the Westchester Children's Museum.

At a boardwalk news conference, the lawmakers accused the Republican county executive of holding the museum hostage to his plans for the larger redevelopment of the county-owned amusement park.

Legislator MaryJane Shimksy, D-Hastings-on-Hudson, said the museum would not only be great for children, but would also create jobs and add parking revenue to county coffers.

"There is only one person, one human being that is still preventing this children's museum from becoming a reality, and that person is County Executive Rob Astorino," she said. "This is a classic situation of hostage taking."

The lawmakers said there was no reason to tie the museum to Sustainable Playland, Astorino's pick for redeveloping the park. The earliest Sustainable Playland would take over the park is October.

But Ned McCormack, a spokesman for Astorino, said the news conference was orchestrated by a hyper-partisan group of Democrats who are trying to create a controversy that doesn't exist. The county, Sustainable Playland and the children's museum are partners, he said.

"Working together, their chances of success are greatly enhanced," McCormack said, adding that the county executive has made a strategic decision to fix the park overall before fixing components.

Bill Haley, treasurer for the Campaign for the Westchester Children's Museum, said it is not a political group and members are encouraged by the talks with the county.

But he said: "We're frustrated by the endless series of delays that have impeded our ability to move forward."

Once the museum gets control of the building, it can open its doors in 14 to 18 months, he said.

The nonprofit museum planning organization, which brought in nearly \$200,000 at a fundraiser last week, has been working toward building the museum in the north bathhouse for years. But despite support for the museum from all sides, it has become entangled in the political struggle over the larger effort for Playland.

Astorino has said Sustainable Playland, a Rye-based nonprofit that he chose last year from a group of 12 proposals, must get approvals from the Board of Legislators before it can come to an agreement with the museum. Until then, despite separate approvals for the museum from the state Legislature and the county board, the museum will not get to occupy the building.

But the Board of Legislators wants the museum to run on a separate track from the redevelopment of the larger park. And some board members have doubts about Sustainable's plans.

The county recently finished work to ensure the structural integrity of the 1928 bathhouse building.

The museum plans to invest \$6 million to build out the systems in the building, now an empty shell, and \$3.5 million more on exhibits.



Westchester County Legislator Judy Myers, D-Mamaroneck, speaks at Thursday's news conference on the boardwalk at Playland Park in Rye. / Elizabeth Ganga/The Journal News