

ABTS Sets Agenda For 2008 - YMCA, Stop & Shop, Transit Center On Tap

Phase I Infrastructure Complete, RBB Extension, Closing Of Freeway Next

By Howard Schwach



Rockaway Beach Boulevard in May of 2004.

Drive east of Beach 73 Street on Rockaway Beach Boulevard and you will quickly see that Arverne By The Sea (ABTS), the massive development program that began more than two years ago, has so far kept its promise.

Dozens of new homes have sprung up out of what were, only three years ago, empty lots. Signs promise a new home for a YMCA and a Super Stop & Shop supermarket. A new four-lane Rockaway

Beach Boulevard beckons to motorists. All and all, officials say, the development project is right on schedule.

"I hate to pat myself on the back," says Gerard (Gerry) Romski, an executive with the Benjamin-Beechwood consortium, "but you have to admit you never believed that this would happen."

Romski and his partner, Omar Ventegeat, came to The Wave this week to talk about the project and where it was going in the coming year.

They both praised their bosses, Alvin Benjamin and Michael Dubb, for "giving them their heads to make the project the best it could be."

Romski said that the infrastructure for Phase I of the project, the area from Beach 73 Street to Beach 67 Street, has already been completed, with new storm and sanitary sewers, underground electrical service, new water mains, an enhanced Rockaway Beach Boulevard and a new road connecting with Shore Front Parkway that runs along the beach, which the city has named "Beach Front Road."

That work cost ABTS more than \$40 million, Romski says, adding that it is only about one-half of the total cost when the project is completed in a few years.

And, while Phase I brought lots of new homes and apartments, the coming Phase II, which runs eastward to Beach 69 Street, will include several retail stores, including an upscale restaurant, a new transit plaza centering on the present A-Train station, and another section of four-lane road for Rockaway Beach Boulevard.



The same view, May of 2007.

There are a number of plans for 2008 that Romski and Ventegeat wanted to highlight for the Rockaway community.

Trailers on Beach 67 Street: There have been many questions about the large trailers that were installed recently on Beach 67 Street between Beach Front Road and Rockaway Beach Boulevard. They are the temporary home of the Peninsula Preparatory Academy, a charter

school begun by State Senator Malcolm Smith and that is now housed at Middle School 53 in Far Rockaway. Will the PPA then take over the new school that is going to be built within ABTS?



Artist's rendering of the Super Stop & Shop supermarket planned for Beach 73 Street and Rockaway Beach Boulevard.

We are in discussions, but nothing has been finalized," Romski said. "There is no final agreement except that it will most likely be an elementary school."

The Transit Plaza: Scheduled to be the centerpiece of the ABTS plan, the Transit Center from Beach 69 to Beach 67 Street will contain a dozen new stores, anchored by a large, upscale restaurant. "We are engaged in a number of discussions with a number of retailers," Romski said. "The majority of the stores will be filled with "staples" of the trade - a bank, cleaning store, grocery, but we are taking our time in finding a restaurant to fill the 5,000 to 6,000 square-foot facility that will anchor the stores. We want something special for Rockaway in that spot."

The street that will run from the Transit Plaza to the beach, called "Ocean Way," will be lined with shops and low-rise housing units.

Super Stop & Shop Supermarket: The test pilings have been completed, Ventegeat said, and the company is "pricing out" its construction costs. Construction should begin, he said, in spring of 2008. The facility may well include such amenities as a bank, pharmacy and even a Starbucks.

Rockaway Freeway: The Rockaway Freeway will be permanently closed down from Beach 67 to Beach 73 Street, sometime in 2008. The road will eventually be utilized for parking for residents and visitors to both the houses in ABTS and the beach. Eventually, Romski said, the entire Freeway will be closed for parking.

YMCA: The most confused and contentious portion of the project, the YMCA is planned for Beach 73 Street, north of Rockaway Beach Boulevard. Romski said that the company's mandate was to build a "community center." There was no mention, he said, of a pool or a gymnasium. As the plan developed, he said, a pool and then an aquatic center were added. The addition of the aquatic center crowded out the planned gymnasium, which was moved outdoors. Recently, a local adhoc group has been looking for additional money to build a larger swimming pool and an enclosed gymnasium.

Romski says that he has reached out to the funding sources, but has learned little. He hopes that word that the extra money is available comes soon. "I want to have the shovel in the ground in the spring," he said. He added that he had to begin by the end of January in order to meet his internal deadlines.

"I am confident that we'll build aY that will meet Rockaway's needs," he said.

Rockaway Beach Boulevard: Within the next few weeks, the former Loeb and Mayer Meats site will be demolished to make way for the extension of the four-lane Rockaway Beach Boulevard. "The road will go right through Red Castle [the latest owner of the site] and connect with the present Rockaway Beach Boulevard further east," Romski said, adding that the present Rockaway Beach Boulevard will not be closed to allow for the new construction.

Sales: There are many in Rockaway who believed that the ABTS project would never be built and, if it were, nobody would buy the homes that are so close to public housing.

They nay-sayers were wrong, according to the duo.

"Sales have been much better than we predicted," Ronski said. "The Breakers [neighborhood] is 85 percent sold. The larger homes along the water are being sold for \$995,000, and we still have a few of those. The others average about \$640,000 and they are going well."

He added that sales in "The Dunes" neighborhood would begin in February.

"We are excited about the coming year," Ronski added. "New stores, new roads, new homes. The beginning of a large supermarket and a Y.

"All in all," he concluded, "maybe we do deserve that pat on the back."