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Long Island Envisions Life After the Islanders

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Once the nonpareil of suburbia, Long Island has been losing jobs and drawing crime. Taxes are among the highest in the country, yet here in Nassau County finances are so bad that a state-appointed committee must oversee them.

Infrastructure in some parts has crumbled to the point where raw sewage has started bubbling up into basements. And now, of course, its winding coastline is under sustained assault from [Hurricane Sandy](#).

But to some, the worst of the news arrived last week, with the announcement that the professional ice hockey team, the New York Islanders, would be moving to Brooklyn in 2015. Despite the team's chronic losses on the ice and in the bank, the abandonment by the island's lone major league sports franchise for New York City, of all places, carried a special sting.

"It's a big pride thing," said Barbara Calame, 52, a medical assistant from East Meadow. "The Islanders are from Long Island. I think it's terrible that they're moving to Brooklyn. Brooklyn isn't Long Island."

Indeed, no matter what the geographic literalists might claim, Brooklyn, with its chic cafes, hip-hop royalty and growing international fame, could not seem further from Long Island these days. Just compare the Islanders' old home with its new one.

With its weathered, beige facade and outdated amenities, the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum here in Uniondale lacks the high-tech appeal of the [Barclays Center](#) in Brooklyn. Opened 40 years ago, the coliseum marked the height of a golden age. Now it has become emblematic of decline.

The decision last week marked the culmination of a struggle, lasting years, to keep the team here by revamping the arena along with the 77-acre plot of mostly undeveloped land it sits on. Called the Nassau Hub, it was hoped that development would inject some vitality into the region's lethargic economy.

Last year, the owner of the Islanders, Charles B. Wang, submitted a proposal to spend \$400 million on a makeover that would have rebuilt the coliseum and added a minor league baseball park and convention space. Voters rejected the plans, fearful of tax increases, and Mr. Wang entertained offers to move the team to other cities.

Other projects have been debated, but most have centered on the Islanders as the principal tenant and main revenue source. Now with the announcement of what Mr. Wang called an “ironclad” 25-year lease with the Barclays Center, the county’s plans for the area must be rebuilt from scratch.

The Nassau County executive, Edward P. Mangano, appeared to be blindsided by the announcement. He promised to immediately create an economic development team to serve as a “catalyst” for new ideas for building up the Hub. “I believe the depth and experience of our team will allow us to reinvent this strategic acreage quickly,” he said in a statement.

It is not clear if the move by the Islanders, who play in the National Hockey League, will have any immediate effect on the local economy. Officials have until 2015, when the team’s lease runs out, to draw up new plans.

George Maragos, the Nassau County comptroller, said that while he was disappointed in the decision, studies conducted during the 2004-5 N.H.L. lockout indicated that there would be little material effect from the team’s exit.

“If we don’t have hockey games like now, then the operator substitutes concerts for those dates,” he said. “Strictly from an economic point of view, sometimes it is better not to be locked into one team and have the ability to schedule more events that could bring in more attendance at higher ticket prices.”

Kevin S. Law, the president of the Long Island Association and a co-chairman of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s Long Island Regional Economic Development Council, pointed out that most of the jobs provided by the coliseum were low-paying ones. He said that the team’s departure could free the county to explore options that would attract new businesses and higher-paying jobs to the area.

But the Islanders offered other intangible benefits beyond revenues, said Kevan Abrahams, the county’s Democratic leader.

“It’s a great opportunity for us to think out of the box,” he said in an interview. “But if you’re asking me the question of whether I thought the Islanders were vital to the county’s overall ambience in terms of it being positive, I think from that standpoint I don’t know how we’re going to replace that.”

For many here, the glory days of the Islanders, who won the Stanley Cup four straight years, from 1980 to 1983, have faded. Last season the team finished last in the Atlantic Division and fifth from the bottom in the N.H.L. with 34 wins in 82 games.

And attendance for games has been dropping for years. Last year the team was second to last in attendance, with an average of about 13,000 people a game for the 16,000-seat arena. Reaction to the move has ranged from grief to good riddance.

“Won’t affect me in the least,” said Randy Kamen, 62, the owner of Coliseum Liquors across the Hempstead Turnpike from the Islanders’ arena. “Let them go early, knock the thing down and start developing.”

Still, as with any team, the die-hards are still there. Dee Karl, a Suffolk County resident who writes about the Islanders for the hockey [blog HockeyBuzz.com](#), said she attended most of the team’s home games each season. But she said the \$25, hour-and-a-half-long train ride to Brooklyn could mean that she will now cover games from her living room.

For others on the far end of the island, she said, it could signal the end of a relationship with the team that has lasted decades.

“My husband always said that if the Islanders move to Brooklyn, they’re dead to him,” Ms. Karl said. “There are many other fans who feel the same way.”