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Island Park: Sandy as Mother of Reinvention

By MARCELLE SUSSMAN FISCHLER

Last year, two days after Hurricane Sandy walloped the islet of Island Park, Rosmarie T. Bovino, the school superintendent, along with her principals and teachers, walked the square mile of the school district to see what each of its families needed. Though the two schools, the administration building and the public library had been devastated, Dr. Bovino, who calls the schools “the heart of the village,” wanted to “make sure the children had food to eat.”

Most of the \$11 million in repairs to the schools have now been done; the children returned to their classrooms at Francis X. Hegarty Elementary for the fall term, and the public library recently reopened. “We’ve had a miraculous recovery,” Dr. Bovino said.

Though 95 percent of the islet’s 1,000 homes were also damaged, Michael Scully, the broker-owner of Century 21 Scully Realty, said Island Park — one of Nassau County’s more affordable enclaves — had benefited from its network of close-knit, multigenerational families and had begun rebuilding and rebounding right away. Of the eight homes in contract at the time of the storm, seven sold, regardless of their condition. “People invested back in this community,” Mr. Scully said.

Michael and Gabrielle Fehling’s 1930s home on Barnum Island took in five feet of water and was beyond repair. On its footprint — but lifted on pilings seven to eight feet off the ground — rests their new \$400,000 three-bedroom two-and-a-half-bath modular home. It’s less drafty and has “a better water view for sure,” Mr. Fehling said.

Matthew and Jillian Palazzolo, renters from Long Beach with their 18-month-old daughter, Minka, in tow, had looked at homes from Oceanside to Massapequa. In August they paid \$270,000 for a two-bedroom two-bath 1951 split-ranch with a large unfinished attic and “a lot of potential” for expansion on a 60-by-80-foot lot in Harbor Isle. It came through the storm unscathed.

“If this house didn’t flood out in Sandy, it never will,” said Mr. Palazzolo, a carpenter. They were also drawn to Island Park by the proximity to the train station, the family movie nights at the library and the two-minute walk to the water — especially to Masone Beach on Hog Island Channel, where generations of Island Park children have learned to swim.

“We feel like it is a very safe neighborhood,” where children can run around outdoors and you don’t have to worry “if you forget to lock the door,” Mr. Palazzolo said.

And the village may further raise its residential profile. To go up on the site of the storm-damaged Paddy McGee’s and Coyote Grill — restaurants along a stretch of Barnum Island long known for its packed summertime night life — the owner of the two-and-a-half-acre waterfront site, John Vitale, is seeking Town of Hempstead approvals to build a gated hamlet of 85 luxury rental townhouse apartments.

“The storm gives you a chance to sit back and look at it as a new opportunity,” said Mr. Vitale, emphasizing the allure of housing designed to keep young people from fleeing and give downsizers a place to go. “We are working on reinventing Island Park.”

What You’ll Find

Tucked away on the South Shore in the Town of Hempstead, Island Park consists of the incorporated area of the same name as well as the flanking unincorporated areas of Harbor and Barnum Isles; total population is about 8,500, according to census figures. Oceanside’s strip malls and chain stores are to the north over Barnum Island Channel. To the south, via a span over Reynolds Channel, is Long Beach, with its newly rebuilt boardwalk and Atlantic beaches. Uninhabited salt-marsh islands like Garretts Marsh provide pastoral sunrise and sunset views over the bay waters to the west and east.

The Long Island Rail Road tracks bisect Island Park from north to south, with the Island Park station at the south end of Long Beach Road, the village’s walkable main thoroughfare. Two-thirds of the shops, restaurants, delis, a dental office, banks, the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish Center of Island Park have reopened.

Village officials, however, still work out of trailers behind the white clapboard village hall, which took three feet of water. (Most documents were sent out to be freeze-dried and salvaged.) Mayor James Ruzicka said the village was hoping to receive enough federal funds to tear down its 1920s village hall and rebuild on a raised elevation. “The old one was running out of space,” Mayor Ruzicka said. The village is also looking to rebuild its infrastructure “to stop the flooding as much as we can and make our village more resilient to future storms.”

Many of its 20th-century vintage ranches, Capes, bungalows and two-family homes are still undergoing repairs. About 40 homes in the incorporated village had to be torn down. On Harbor Isle, accessible by two tiny bridges, the split-levels and colonials tend to be slightly larger, with some grander homes on waterfront lots. Owners of the 130 townhomes at the Yacht Club, a gated community on Barnum Island that had flood insurance, were displaced for six months while the units were repaired.

What You'll Pay

"It doesn't have the panache of Long Beach," said Thomas Tripodi, an agent at Douglas Elliman, "but you can get great value in Island Park." One reason for the relative affordability of taxes is the presence of a Long Island Power Authority power plant. Buyers from Long Beach and Queens are also drawn by the recreational lifestyle and easy commute, Mr. Scully said. The average sale price is about \$305,000.

In June, Anthony and Marie Battaglia sold their Howard Beach home for \$675,000 and downsized to a \$350,000 three-bedroom two-bath ranch on Harbor Isle. Their reasons were various: their daughter and two grandchildren live five blocks away; the Battaglias no longer have a mortgage; and their utility bills are one-third the amount they paid in Queens.

Seventy-six homes are on the market. The least expensive is a storm-damaged three-bedroom one-bath cottage, which has been gutted and is listed as a short sale for \$110,000. The most expensive is a five-bedroom two-and-a-half-bath waterfront contemporary listed for \$825,000.

From January through October, 47 houses sold. Last year that number was 43. Because of the damage, 15 to 20 percent of houses this year sold to investors or developers, Mr. Tripodi said.

What to Do

Year round, kayakers and paddle boarders can rent equipment to explore marshes and bird life on Middle Bay from the private launch at Empire Kayaks. At Jordan's Lobster Farm, lobster bakes can be picked up at the takeout window and enjoyed on picnic tables or inside. A playground was recently installed at Masone Beach. Shell Creek Park, a Hempstead town park in Barnum Island, has playing fields, basketball, paddle ball and outdoor tennis courts, a playground and fishing.

The Schools

The Island Park school district, the smallest in Nassau County, has fewer than 700 students. Francis X. Hegarty Elementary runs through Grade 5. Lincoln Orens Middle School runs through Grade 8. The two public options for high school are Long Beach (SAT averages 495 in reading, 508 in math and 488 in writing) and West Hempstead (472, 487 and 454). State averages were 496, 500 and 475.

The Commute

As the second stop on the Long Beach branch of the Long Island Rail Road, Island Park usually has seats for commuters making the 53-minute trip to Penn Station. A monthly pass is \$276. By car, the 27-mile ride to Midtown via the Belt Parkway to the Van Wyck and the Long Island Expressways can take about 48 minutes.

The History

The first European settlers raised hogs, and from 1665 to 1874, Island Park was named Hog Island.