

ONLY IN NEWSDAY WILL LOSS OF BIDS AFFECT BLAKEMAN? County plans at risk as reelection campaign nears

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In April 2023, Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman stood next to Las Vegas Sands CEO Robert Goldstein before members of Long Island's business and construction community announcing an agreement to bring a casino resort to the Coliseum site.

A month later, Blakeman used the Nassau Community College commencement ceremony to announce a tentative agreement with NYU Langone to build a teaching hospital on the campus.

The two projects - a \$6 billion casino resort and a \$3 billion medical center - would bring thousands of temporary and permanent jobs in construction, trades, health care and hospitality, contributing to the tax base and stimulating the local economy, Blakeman said.

Now, two years later, both proposals and the nearly \$9 billion of private investment that would bring jobs in Nassau County is threatened six months before Blakeman, a Republican, asks voters to reelect him to a second term. While some stakeholders say it may be too soon to tell whether it will have a major impact on the county executive's race, others say Blakeman could be perceived as not fulfilling his promise of bringing "transformative" development to the center of the county.

Blakeman in his first term has held the line on county property taxes and has brought international attention and tourism dollars by hosting large-scale events such as the Cricket World Cup at Eisenhower Park.

"When you have a one-two gut punch like this right before an election, it looks like Blakeman has lost his potential promises to voters that he's making good on economic activity," said Christopher Malone, political science professor and associate provost at Farmingdale State College. "Going into an election, the perception is that he's not going to be able to deliver the goods." Mixed opinions on impact Malone said "it's not a good position for Blakeman to be in," particularly when coupled with his staunch support of President Donald Trump, who is polling lower among independent voters. He says Blakeman's "momentum has really slowed down when compared to the 2021 election when Republicans were really on the upswing on Long Island." Blakeman won the county executive's race that year, securing 50.5% of the vote, unseating incumbent Democrat Laura Curran.

Political consultant Michael Dawidziak said he doesn't believe the fate of these development projects means much to voters.

"People vote on their quality of life. It's hard to see how these projects really affect directly somebody's quality of life," said Dawidziak, who has worked on several Republican campaigns including Blakeman's unsuccessful bids for New York City mayor in 2008 and U.S. Senate in 2010. "Sure, if you're in the building trades or something like that, you might be disappointed that this didn't happen, but other than somebody who's directly impacted it seems like

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these just aren't issues that come up."

Blakeman in late March issued a statement saying the county and NYU Langone "mutually agree to pause further negotiations as a result of external factors that have presented issues that may prove to be too burdensome to overcome." Losing NYU at NCCNYU Langone, a major Manhattan-based health system with several outpatient facilities in Nassau and a 591-bed hospital in Mineola, had been looking to build on a 40-acre parcel on the campus, providing educational and internship opportunities to students pursuing allied health and nursing degrees. Billionaire Ken Langone, chairman of the health system board, previously told Newsday they were surveying other properties in Suffolk because the NCC site was "too complicated."

In a statement to Newsday, Blakeman said he remains "open to any proposal to improve the area surrounding Nassau Community College, and to provide opportunities to NCC students and graduates."

Last month, Las Vegas Sands president Patrick Dumont told investors in an earnings call that the company would no longer pursue a New York State gaming license and is looking to a third party this month to replace them in the June application process in developing the county-owned, 72-acre Coliseum property in Uniondale. Dumont said the company felt the threat of online gambling and would subsequently buy back stocks and invest more in its resorts in Asia, aiming for better returns for the company's shareholders.

The Nevada-based company had billed the "integrated resort" it was planning at the Coliseum as its return to the U.S. market with a New York flagship property that would produce \$2 billion in annual revenue from some 20,000 visitors daily. Millions were to go into the county budget and to surrounding community programs.

Many who have watched the Coliseum site and surrounding area, including NCC, know there are complex challenges.

Kyle Strober, executive director of the regional development group Association for a Better Long Island, said the property "has been buffeted by a wide spectrum of issues," including regional and national economics and "the reinvention of business models within sectors ranging from health to sports to gaming."

"When you look at these dynamics, all of which are out of the control of any county administration, it should come as no surprise that we may be starting with a clean sheet of paper at The Nassau Hub," Strober said.

Phil Andrews, president of the Long Island African American Chamber of Commerce, said he is "hopeful" that the Blakeman administration will develop the area.

"I don't think anyone will hold it against him. I think there will still be something in that spot. We need it. Long Island is unsustainable without building something big there," Andrews said. Awaiting an outcome Blakeman in a statement to Newsday remained confident in the Coliseum's future, calling the site a "valuable piece of real estate that many are clamoring to develop."

"As I stated before, the Sands project remains on the table both as a casino and without. Either plan, when completed, will be exciting and will create jobs and revenue," he said.

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Nassau County Republican Committee Chairman Joseph Cairo said he doesn't see any of the change of direction as political "negatives" for Blakeman. He said Blakeman's campaign will highlight issues voters care about: keeping property taxes and crime low.

"Generally speaking, major developments in Hempstead and large municipalities - they change," Cairo said. "That's normal that these changes take place. Do I think it will hurt Bruce? Not at all. You want to know why? Because Bruce approaches things from a business point of view. . . . He's very creative and I think working with someone of the stature of the Sands or whomever they bring in will ultimately be a success."

Blakeman's Democratic challenger seized the spotlight the morning after Sands announced it would be pulling out of Nassau.

Seth Koslow, the county legislator from Merrick running against Blakeman in November, called it a "collapse of another multimillion dollar deal" and "more smoke and mirrors."

"Even if they find a new casino operator, that company isn't bound to honor a single promise Sands made. Anyone saying otherwise is either misinformed or lying," said Koslow, who in August joined all but one Democrat in his caucus in approving a 42-year lease giving Sands the authority to operate the Coliseum and rights to the property.

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