

# Staten Island's Abandoned Farm Colony Could House Seniors

By [Evan Bindelglass](#) | [@evabin](#) | Oct 1, 2014, 12:50pm EDT | 10 comments

One of New York City's most enigmatic, mysterious, beautifully decrepit places is headed for an total makeover. Staten Island's former **New York City Farm Colony**—which is, as photo essayist Nathan Kensinger [put it](#) "**a 45-acre campus of abandoned, crumbling buildings** ... Photographers, paintballers, graffiti artists, ghost hunters and other curiosity seekers have made this their playground for nearly 40 years, climbing through gaping holes in the surrounding chain-link fence to explore its **century-old dormitories**. But that playground may not be long for this world, as the farm colony's fate was presented (aided by a massive amount of renderings) and discussed before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission on Tuesday. No decisions were handed down, but wheels are in motion for **complete redevelopment**.

Back in the day, the New York City Farm Colony was really a **poor farm**. That meant an able-bodied indigent could live there in exchange for their labor. The sprawling site also housed rehabilitation facilities for the needy. The site's use as a farm **dates back to the 1600s**, but the County of Richmond took over operations in 1830. It was managed by the consolidated city government until 1975, when the last residents were moved to Seaview Hospital. It is still **owned by the city**.

As for the new plan to **convert the whole shebang into senior housing**, here's who's behind it: NFC Associates is the developer, Pablo E. Vengoechea and Timothy G. Boyland of vengoechea + boyland ARCHITECTURE/URBAN PLANNING LLP are the architects (with Boyland having presented at the LPC), and Nancy Owens of Nancy Owens Studio is the landscape architect. The entire team has worked with the New York City Economic Development Corporation on the proposal.

The plan for its future is a **sprawling senior community** known as Landmark Colony with **350 units** of housing. **Six of the historic buildings will be saved**, with three of them being used as residences, one for "mixed use," one for storage, and one simply being stabilized for posterity.

Pieces of other structures, which would be completely demolished from their present state (since [nature has reclaimed quite a lot](#)), would be **salvaged for use in new construction** and for additions to existing structures. The plan also includes stabilizing the property's **potter's field**, which would be used as **green space**.

There would be activities for the residents and even some retail. During the day, the campus would be **open to the public**, and there would be parking for that purpose. There are over 3,000 trees (of 36 species) on the site; some of them are 150 to 200 years old. Many of those are invasive, though, and those would be removed. All new trees would be native species.

The Landmarks commissioners, who have been asked to issue **an advisory report on the demolitions** and a binding report on the stabilizations, additions, new construction, and landscape alterations, all seemed **excited by the prospect** of actually developing this historic site and chair Meenakshi Srinivasan immediately commended the team. In fact, there were so many renderings and so much detail included in the redevelopment presentation, with so much yet still to hear (and no quorum by the end of the day) that **no decisions were made**. But here are the commissioners' thoughts.

Commissioner Adi Shamir-Baron called the proposal "really strong," but wondered if **more of the ruined buildings could be stabilized**. The team said it would be difficult, but a system of fragments or markers could be implemented. Baron also asked why the name was changed from "New York City Farming Colony" to "Landmark Colony," which she thought sounded "**Orwellian**." The answer? They thought it would **sound better** and people would say things like "I live over at the Landmark."

When the team referred to this campus as a "village," commissioner John Gustafsson pointed out that Staten Island developed as a series of villages. He said that in an ideal world, none of what is left would be destroyed, but in this case some death will mean new life for the rest of the site. Of the proposal, he said there was "so much to be respected." Commissioner Michael Goldblum said the "team should be greatly congratulated." He wondered just how deep the commission should go on a proposal as massive as this. He also thought there seemed to be **too many building vocabularies** going on in the design. Commissioner Roberta Washington said she was getting a better "understanding of urban decay and landscape."

City Councilmember Steven Matteo's chief of staff, David Carr, spoke on behalf of his boss, saying, "Landmark Colony is the right project for the right place at the right time." John Kilcullen, president of the Preservation League of Staten Island, said he supported the "**sensitive approach**." Barbara Zay of the Historic Districts Council said her organization was "very glad to see that after a long hiatus, the **sadly neglected Landmark Colony will be returned to its rightful place as a vital and thriving part of the community**, Staten Island and the city as a whole." HDC did have some concerns, which [are detailed in their statement](#). Christabel Gough of the Society for the Architecture of the City stood up in joy, saying she "**never believed anyone would find a way to bring it back**."

Here now, have a gander at the **entire proposal** for the site:

What happens now? The design team will **rework their presentation** to give the commissioners an even clearer picture of what they want to do, and may even tweak their proposal. Then they'll return before the commission for another go-around. Still, all signs point to the end of [the abandoned farm colony as we know it](#).

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