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OPINION

Developers, help preserve history

As businesses move Long Island into the future, they must not forget the past

BY JAN BURMAN
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It's time to save not just a piece of our region's aviation heritage but the vision of a Long Island business icon who set a standard for the development community to follow.

In 1997, the late retailing giant and developer Alan Fortunoff — Louis Fortunoff's father — unveiled a stunning stone statue that captured the trans-Atlantic flight of Charles Lindbergh on the 70th anniversary of that historic crossing.

Investing his own money, he commissioned the work from sculptor Chris Pelletieri to create what he thought would be a permanent, powerful and compelling tribute to a unique American aviation achievement that literally took off from his Westbury property. He understood that we needed to honor our past if we are to build our future.

His commitment to protecting that heritage is now at risk. Today there is legitimate concern that the artwork may be consigned to a trash heap, the way much of Pennsylvania Sta-

tion was carted off to a landfill when the original turn-of-the-20th-century structure was demolished in 1963.

The Source Mall, outside of which the carving was placed, has lost its way in a fiercely competitive retail market. Most of its tenants are gone, the Fortunoff department store was sold and then closed years ago, and the retail complex will, undoubtedly, be dramatically reinvented by its next owner, whoever that may be. The fate of a stone tribute to a 1927 aviator would be irrelevant to almost any developer closing on a multimillion-dollar deal in the midst of a recession. But it shouldn't be.

Much to their credit, Hempstead Town Supervisor Kate Murray is now leading an effort to have the statue landmarked, while a young man, Adam Sackowitz, has sought to galvanize the community into saving this essential part of our heritage.

The belief that developers have a responsibility to preserve our heritage is being heard and heeded by leaders of the Long Island real estate community. The Association for a Better Long Is-



Monument to Charles Lindbergh at the Source Mall in Westbury

land is seeking to purchase Fortunoff's stone tribute to Lindbergh from the investors who currently hold the note on the property, to ensure the stonework is not bulldozed into rubble. It is impossible to say what the property's next footprint will look like under new owners. But at least, under the worst case scenario, this purchase would allow the work to be moved to the nearby Cradle of Aviation, where it would re-establish the link to our region's history that future generations need to remember.

Developers must understand and respect the heritage reflected in significant buildings, monuments and pieces of art. While many legacies may not be formally landmarked or are impractical

to preserve, honoring what they represent is a developer's responsibility. Much the way the development community is compelled to respect the environment, so too should it honor our heritage — acting as steward of key sections of our past.

It is a challenge that is facing more than traditional developers on Long Island. The Federal Aviation Administration is finding itself in the center of this debate, in the wake of the decision by the State of New York to officially declare hangars of the American Airpower Museum at Republic Airport a landmark. If the FAA still insists the property upon which these hangars sit be free and clear, they will have to preserve the structures by relocating them

— and thereby save an important chapter in America's history.

Alan Fortunoff understood that concept. His Lindbergh tribute was not alone. In 1999, he made a significant contribution so that the Cradle of Aviation could acquire a rare and historically significant Bleriot monoplane. The Bleriot flew the nation's first airmail flight, a six-mile aerial odyssey from Garden City to Mineola in 1911.

This kind of quiet leadership reminds business executives that we all have an obligation to preserve, protect and honor our heritage. As Long Island builders and developers move forward in creating new economic opportunities for the region, we must remember where we have been by preserving those symbols whenever and wherever we can.



Jan Burman is president of the Association for a Better Long Island. Louis Fortunoff, the son of the late Alan Fortunoff, was an executive with Fortunoff and is now a principle in a real



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