



Island News

Village moving forward with 9/11 memorial near fire station

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If mellow Key Biscayne, with its quiet beaches and swaying palms, seems like an unexpected place for a memorial of the attacks that took down the tallest buildings in Manhattan, it shouldn't – the ties between the Village and one of the worst days in U.S. history run deep.

Several Key Biscayne firefighters responded to New York City to help with search and rescue at the World Trade Center site directly after September 11, 2001; while working at Ground Zero, they were able to see firsthand that a good friend of the local department with deep family ties on the island – who also happened to be a New York City firefighter – was safe and sound.

Now, that member of FDNY – Rob Senatore, whose parents, Charlie and Eileen, were well-known and much-loved Key Biscayne residents until their deaths in December 2011 and April 2012, respectively – wants to help do something to memorialize both his mom and dad and 9/11.

Fire-Rescue Chief Eric Lang, a Key Biscayne native and friend of the Senatore family, was eager to help when approached with the idea: not only would the project commemorate residents who always supported Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue and its members, it would help the community start a conversation about a vital event in U.S. history.

As Lang said, "I believe one of my responsibilities as the fire chief – or anyone

in the emergency services – is to be an ambassador to make sure we never forget. This is a part of our history."

Village Council members agreed, giving unanimous support to the project Tuesday, May 14.

A way to give back

Lang said the seeds for the memorial were planted in the horrible days directly after 9-11, when a team from Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue was working on the "pile," the massive mound of debris created by the World Trade Center's collapse.

But the story starts even earlier than that. In 1993, Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue was in its infancy, with brand new firefighters driving brand new trucks, operating out of Winnebagos on what is now their station's parking lot.

"Some guy with big arms and a tank top walks up, and he's looking at our fire trucks," Lang said. "He gets to talking with some of the firefighters, and before we know it he's in our kitchen, making us a spaghetti dinner – real authentic Italian-style."

The man was Rob Senatore, in town to visit his parents.

From that first meeting, the relationship between the Senatore family and the Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue Department would grow. Lang said Rob got to be close friends with a number of the local firefighters – even becoming godparent to one of the children of longtime lieutenant and original department member Dan Feeney.

At the same time, Charlie and Eileen took every opportunity to sing Key Biscayne

Fire-Rescue's praises, lauding it for providing more personal, prompt service than Miami-Dade County and making the Key a better place to live.

When terror struck the nation September 11, 2001, one of the earliest thoughts for many local firefighters was Rob's wellbeing. They tried to find out how he was doing, but in the confusion and horror of the days that followed the attacks, little information was forthcoming.

Eventually, it was Feeney, one of Rob's closest friends on the Key, who was working on search and rescue at Ground Zero when he suddenly saw a familiar face – Rob, also there to help try to get his city back on its feet. "It was pretty powerful," Lang recalls.

Through the years that followed, Rob remained close with a number of local firefighters, and as his mom and dad aged – and their health began to fail – he often confided how grateful he was to know Key Bis-

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Photo courtesy Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue Department

A rendering of a 9-11 memorial designed by local architect Tom Weber shows two steel beams representing the World Trade Center surrounded by bricks in the shape of the Pentagon and green space acting as the Pennsylvania field where a third plane crashed. Officials hope to build the project in time for dedication this September 11, the 12th anniversary of the terror attacks.



Architect Tom Weber promises something “subtle, tasteful, meaningful”

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cayne Fire-Rescue’s experienced paramedics were just a phone call away.

Eventually, Lang said, Charlie passed away, joined not too much later by Eileen.

Now, Rob and the rest of the family want to give back: they approached Feeney with an offer to cover the cost of a bench as a memorial, and Feeney brought the idea to his colleagues for input.

During the process, Lang reached out to local architect Tom Weber, whose The Weber Studio has worked with the Village in the past, about designing a memorial. Weber visited the fire station on several occasions; moved by the camaraderie and dedication of the men and women who work there, he came up with a concept that honored not only the Senatores, but the history of the September 11 terror attacks in New York as well as the Pentagon and Pennsylvania.

Vision for memorial

At the May 14 Council meeting, Weber described his concept for the memorial, explaining he wanted to do something that would be “subtle, tasteful and meaningful,” and fit in well with Lang’s and the Senatores’ suggested site – a small patch of green on the southeast corner the fire station, where some firefighters like to sit and enjoy the outdoors during downtime.

After looking at the site and considering the theme, Weber suggested a “subtle representation” with brick pavers in the shape of the Pentago, and two 22-foot-tall, 18-inch-square beams in the center representing the World Trade Center. “They would be painted and feel fresh and new, to remember the buildings as they were,” Weber said.

Green space in the middle of the bricks would represent the field in Pennsylvania where a third plane crashed after passengers were able to take control and divert it from

its intended target.

Low landscaping would complete the installation, and benches would encourage visitors to sit and contemplate the memorial and the events it represents – Weber said he’d like the site to feel like a sanctuary of sorts.

Weber added the project would be a true community undertaking:

Along with his studio’s design – which he completed with the help of fellow architect Mauricio Salazar Jr. – locals including CDC Builders owner Jose Ortega, Village landscaping consultant Mercedes Porcari and structural engineer Mauricio Salazar Sr. have offered their assistance, and the renderings of the project were created by Key Biscayner Jose Silva.

Lang added Key Biscayne firefighters have offered to help with the landscaping and installation of the brick pavers.

He noted, “We think it will be a powerful way to share a memory – not just for the firefighters, but for the entire community.”

Council support

Elected leaders were enthused about the project.

“I love the idea; I think it’s beautiful,” Council member Michael Kelly said; Council member Ed London credited Weber with doing a “beautiful, thoughtful job.”

Kelly did ask if there are any concerns the vertical beams would look like an unfinished construction project, and that passersby who were not aware of the memorial wouldn’t “naturally make the link that it’s the Twin Towers.”

Weber acknowledged the project is “abstract art,” but said his hope is people who aren’t sure what the sculpture is will be drawn to it – and, upon taking a closer look at the memorial and reading a plaque that will be installed at the site, will reflect on or learn about the terror attacks.

“Hopefully that would bring you to it,” he noted, “and it will be a powerful moment when you’re sitting there.”

Council member Michael Davey thinks that’s exactly what will happen.

He called Weber’s proposal a “subtle memorial” that can start a conversation with younger people who did not experience 9-11 firsthand. “I think the future generations need to ask, ‘What is this?’ and ask questions – that’s when you can really get into the story,” he said.

Local leaders ultimately threw their unanimous support behind the idea, and Vice Mayor Mayra Pena Lindsay asked if there’s any way to have the project completed by this September 11.

Lang said he’s hopeful, noting this fall also marks the 20th anniversary of the founding of Key Biscayne Fire-Rescue, so he would love to honor both occasions by debuting the project:

“We’re going to push pretty hard for this,” Lang told the Council, adding he’s heard from New York City firefighters who offered to travel to the Key to help dedicate the project. “The idea of trying to achieve this by September 11 is aggressive, but we’ll see if we can pull it off.”

Lang and Weber promised to keep the Council posted on their efforts.