About 100 opponents of the Heartland Town Square development proposal gathered in Dix Hills on Saturday in a show of resistance to the controversial project, which they said would negatively impact local schools, roads and quality of life.

The protesters faced off against about 30 supporters of the immense mixed-use development proposal, who argued it would bring much-needed housing and jobs to the area.

Boosters and opponents waved signs and led chants across the street from the planned Heartland site, the former Pilgrim State Psychiatric Center in Brentwood, where developer Jerry Wolkoff wants to build 9,000 apartments and millions of square feet of office and retail space.

“This is going to change the face of Long Island,” said James Ptucha of Dix Hills, president of the 4 Towns Civic Association, which organized the rally.

Ptucha said the density of the project — which could include up to 10-story buildings — would clash with surrounding neighborhoods of single-family homes and overwhelm local roads with traffic.

He said he would support development at the site on a smaller scale.

Michael Capuano, president of Citizens for a Better Islip, came out to voice his support for Heartland.

“This is the answer to all the problems in this area,” said Capuano, of Oakdale.

Capuano said the development would boost the local economy, and create the type of dense, walkable neighborhoods Long Island requires to keep young people from moving away.

“People need a community like this,” he said.

The Islip Town Board signed off on the first phase of the project in July. In November, the Brentwood school district, the 4 Towns Civic Association and a local attorney sued the Islip Town Board and the Heartland developers to prevent the project from moving forward.

Robert Feliciano, president of the district Board of Education, attended Saturday’s rally. He said Wolkoff had “grossly underestimated” the number of school-age children the development would bring, and that the school district did not have the resources to properly accommodate all of them.

The opposing demonstrations grew contentious, and some Heartland supporters complained that opponents told them to “go back to Brentwood.”

“I feel like there’s some racial undertones to that,” said Patrick Rodrigues, 21, a Heartland supporter, noting Brentwood’s large Hispanic population.

Justin Marino of Dix Hills, board counsel to the 4 Towns Civic Association, said any such taunts were “completely unacceptable” and not representative of the association’s views.

Wolkoff defended his development proposal in an interview Saturday, saying it will benefit the region.

“This is for everybody? No,” he said. “But people want this.”

Wolkoff said he hoped construction would begin in 2020.
Mansa Munshi, a genetics graduate student at Stony Brook University, views fungal pathogens in the Del Poeta lab at the school.

in organ transplant recipients, people infected with HIV, and others with a compromised immune system, Munshi said. Infection occurs upon inhaling fungal spores, which are in the environment. Worse, current treatments are not always effective. Among immunocompromised patients the troublesome issue with this organism is not drug resistance by the fungus but its persistence in people who have lost all shields against infection.

"In a lot of patients with lowered immunity, their bodies are not strong enough to control the infection. This pathogen can survive in the blood and spread to the brain," Munshi said.

About 220,000 new cases of the infection are reported annually worldwide in patients with full-blown AIDS, the disorder that emerges in those with HIV who become vulnerable to a range of invasive fungi, bacteria and viruses. C. neoformans and the broader family of cryptococcal fungi infections are so burdensome in developing countries that the World Health Organization created guidelines in 2011 stressing rigorous methods of diagnosis, prevention and patient management.

"We are trying to find a drug that can control the activity of this gene, something that will make C. neoformans totally debilitated so that it won't be able to spread throughout the body," Munshi said, noting that all fungi pose treatment difficulties — even toenail fungus, which can be persistent.

Fungi, which are yeasts, increasingly are characterized by problems of multidrug resistance, an emerging health care crisis that affects hospitals globally.

In New Jersey, Dr. David S. Perlin, executive director and professor of the Public Health Research Institute at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, said he welcomes new approaches to potentially deadly fungal infections, especially C. auris.

"Candida auris . . . persists on skin and on environmental surfaces, and it can be easily transmitted from person to person. This is highly unusual, which makes C. auris dangerous to high-risk patients in hospitals, especially when strains become multidrug resistant," Perlin said.

Most fungi are not passed person to person, but such is not the case when it comes to C. auris.

"Candida auris . . . persists on skin and on environmental surfaces, and it can be easily transmitted from person to person. This is highly unusual, which makes C. auris dangerous to high-risk patients in hospitals, especially when strains become multidrug resistant," Perlin said.

Del Poeta, meanwhile, noted that dozens of compounds are being screened to determine their capacity to block Cer1 gene activity.

A problem with some existing antifungals, Del Poeta said, is their high level of toxicity, something the Stony Brook scientists aim to avoid. He said the thrust of the research is to find a compound that is active against a very specific target.

"We are going after a single lipid pathway," he said. "We have been using the same antifungals for the past 20 years. It's time to come up with something new."