Liberty Park Development Corp. draws fire

By Jason Fink, Jersey Journal staff writer-July 24, 2001

Less than a month after Liberty State Park celebrated its 25th anniversary, a coalition of about a dozen regional and statewide organizations is preparing to fight a familiar battle over what members have called a new attempt to commercialize a portion of the state park in Jersey City.

The object of the coalition's wrath, spearheaded by the park advocacy group, Friends of Liberty State Park, is the Liberty State Park Development Corporation, which this past winter submitted proposals to the state Department of Environmental Protection to allow construction of a privately run amphitheater in the park.

The proposal, which would have brought a theater and up to 20 concerts to the park this summer, was rejected by the DEP on the grounds that there was not enough time to hold public meetings, commission traffic studies and complete a full bidding process for the project.

Since the plan was rebuffed in its early stages, few details of the proposed amphitheater - including its exact size and location - were ever specified, said Sharon Southhard, a spokeswoman for the DEP.

But Sam Pesin, president of the Friends group and a driving force behind recent efforts to seal off the park to commercial development, said the state must ensure that such proposals never see the light of day by abolishing the 17-year old Liberty State Park Development Corporation.

"This is further proof that they are the enemy of the park and the enemy of the people," said Pesin, referring to the Development Corporation, which operates the Liberty Landing Marina and has put on events such as the Cirque Du Soleil and the Andrea Bocelli concert. "They treat the park like their own private fiefdom."

While the DEP blocked the amphitheater proposal for this summer, officials have said the Development Corporation is free to come back with similar plans in the future, provided the original objections made by the state are addressed.

"Anybody can re-submit their proposals," said Southhard. "We still feel that a public hearing would have to happen." Pesin, whose father Morris Pesin was instrumental in persuading the state to create the park in 1976, characterized the amphitheater debate as the latest in a series of threats to the park's status as an open, green space.
According to the Friends group, which Pesin says has some 500 members, events like the Cirque Du Soleil and proposals that would bring private concerts hurt the very nature of the park.

"Liberty State Park is sacred ground," Pesin wrote in an e-mail message. "The park is scarce open space in this densely populated region."

The Friends have no problem with occasional free concerts, said Pesin, but commercial ventures - and the congestion he said they would bring to the park - are unacceptable.

He cited a proposal made in 1986 for a commercial amphitheater and plans for a golf course in the early 1990s - both of which faced large-scale opposition and were eventually rejected by the state - as evidence that the Development Corporation's interests are divergent from the population at large.

"They have dollar signs in their eyes when they see that green grass," said Pesin. "When people hear of this new obscene plan, their anger will reach a boiling point."

Officials from the Development Corporation, however, see themselves improving the park for its patrons. "We've done some very good things here and we're going to continue to do good things," said Peter Ylvisaker, president of the Development Corporation. Ylvisaker said his organization, which is working on a new amphitheater proposal that it plans to re-submit in the future - he could not say when - takes a number of factors into account when it comes to promoting private ventures in the park.

"We get lots of these ideas and 99 percent of them, we reject," he said. "(The amphitheater) was in line with the park's history (commercial amphitheater idea never had a public hearing - note by FOLSP)." According to Ylvisaker, the type of venue that the Development Corporation would like to see would be an amphitheater with approximately 5,000 seats, either near the South Overlook Lawn - where the rock band Radiohead will perform in August - or near the Central Railroad Terminal in the northern part of the park.

Such ideas are anathema to Pesin, who said the newly formed coalition - aptly named "Coalition to Abolish the Liberty State Park Development Corporation" - would be sending letters to gubernatorial candidates Jim McGreevey, the Democratic mayor of Woodbridge, and Bret Schundler, the Republican former mayor of Jersey City, asking them to commit to doing away with the organization.
Pesin said neither campaign has indicated its position yet on the issue and calls to both camps were not returned yesterday.