

'Empty Sky' still full of controversy

While NJ 9/11 memorial gets closer to completion, critics take issue

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Photo courtesy Ricardo Kaulessar Jersey City Reporter



Remembering 9/11 can elicit a variety of emotions, from sorrow to anger.

All those emotions are on display when it comes to the subject of "Empty Sky," the proposed statewide memorial to the 744 New Jersey residents who died on 9/11. The memorial is being built in Liberty State Park in Jersey City at the former site of the park's Public Plaza. The memorial includes two steel walls, 30 feet high and 200 feet long, inserted into a hill. The walls will have the engraved names of New Jersey's 744 victims.

However, the Friends of Liberty State Park (FOLSP), a non-profit advocacy group for the park, is currently engaged in a lawsuit to put a halt to the memorial project. The FOLSP have complained for several years that the hill and walls block panoramic Manhattan skyline views. They have called for the memorial to be relocated, preferably to an area near the existing 9/11 memorial in the park, the 750-tree Grove of Remembrance.

But members of the New Jersey 9/11 Memorial Foundation, who have been raising money for the memorial, are adamant that the memorial be built on the site chosen, and disagree with the FOLSP that the proposed memorial would block any views. They want to see the memorial completed by Sept. 11, 2011, the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

The two sides were scheduled to be in same location on Friday, as the Memorial Foundation held an afternoon reception in Liberty State Park. They planned to announce that the second phase of construction of the memorial has been completed. The second phase includes grading the memorial amphitheater, installing underground utilities such as irrigation and drainage, and planting two groves of memorial trees and flowers at the location of the future memorial walls. The FOLSP were going to hold a protest nearby to let Gov. Jon Corzine and other state officials know that they should keep in mind the opposition to the memorial at its current site.

Half empty, half full

Betsy Parks of Bayonne has been a constant force in wanting the “Empty Sky” memorial to become a reality on Sept. 11, 2011.

Parks is a founding board member of the New Jersey 9/11 Memorial Foundation and is currently its secretary. She lost her brother Robert on 9/11 as he was trying to leave 1 World Trade Center, where he worked on the 105th floor.

“While I can only speak for myself, to be on the memorial grounds and see some of the construction completed renews my hope and spirit to see the memorial completed as envisioned,” Parks said last week. “It is beautiful and powerful and honors my brother, and that is why the families voted unanimously for the design. Now we see that we were 100 percent right.”

Parks also feels that there isn’t “so much” controversy surrounding the memorial, the way it is depicted in the media. The Reporter newspapers have received numerous letters of protests regarding the memorial’s location.

“There is one very small group that says it blocks the view of the skyline, and it doesn’t,” Parks said. “It is an unrealistic and absurd point of view. See for yourself. You could say the trees and buses in the parking lot block the view.” (note from Sam Pesin - Friends has 900 member families and many non-members are also opposed to “Empty Sky” including JC Mayor Healy and Hudson County legislators).

Sam Pesin, president of the FOLSP, said his group along with others who support their position feel their fight is one still worth carrying on.

“On September 11, our democracy was attacked and the governor is refusing democratic public hearings on this memorial,” Pesin said. “And we are being forced to have this symbolic protest on this national day of mourning because the governor is dedicating the view-blocking hill.”

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