

Billionaire pushes for golf course expansion into Liberty State Park despite proposed ban

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View from Caven Point of New York harbor at Liberty State Park James M. O'Neill/NorthJersey.com

The billionaire owner of a New Jersey golf club for millionaires still has his sights set on expanding his golf course onto a waterfront portion of Liberty State Park in Jersey City used mostly by children to learn about the ecology of New York Harbor.

The renewed push by Paul Fireman, owner of Liberty National Golf Club, to build three holes on undeveloped Caven Point comes at a time when state lawmakers may ban such projects from New Jersey's most visited park.

The Legislature is considering a bill that would prohibit large developments at Liberty State Park after 40 years of attempts by developers to build everything from a hotel to an amusement park on land coveted for its panoramic views of Manhattan.

A section of the bill would appear to quash the golf course expansion. It contains language that prohibits "any concession, conveyance, or lease" at Caven Point, a peninsula that juts out into the harbor near the Statue of Liberty.

But a lobbyist for the golf course who has ties to Gov. Phil Murphy asked lawmakers at a recent Senate committee hearing to consider amending the bill to take out the language protecting Caven Point. Eric Shuffler served on Murphy's "Transition Leadership Team as a senior adviser for strategic communications," according to his firm's website.

The committee declined to make amendments but told Shuffler that there "will be continuing discussion."

Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, called the golf proposal "an obscene giveaway to the 1 percent."

Chris Donnelly, a spokesman for Fireman, said the billionaire and former CEO of Reebok sneakers has the "highest regard" for advocates like Pesin but believes the golf course expansion would benefit the entire park.

Story continues below the photo gallery.

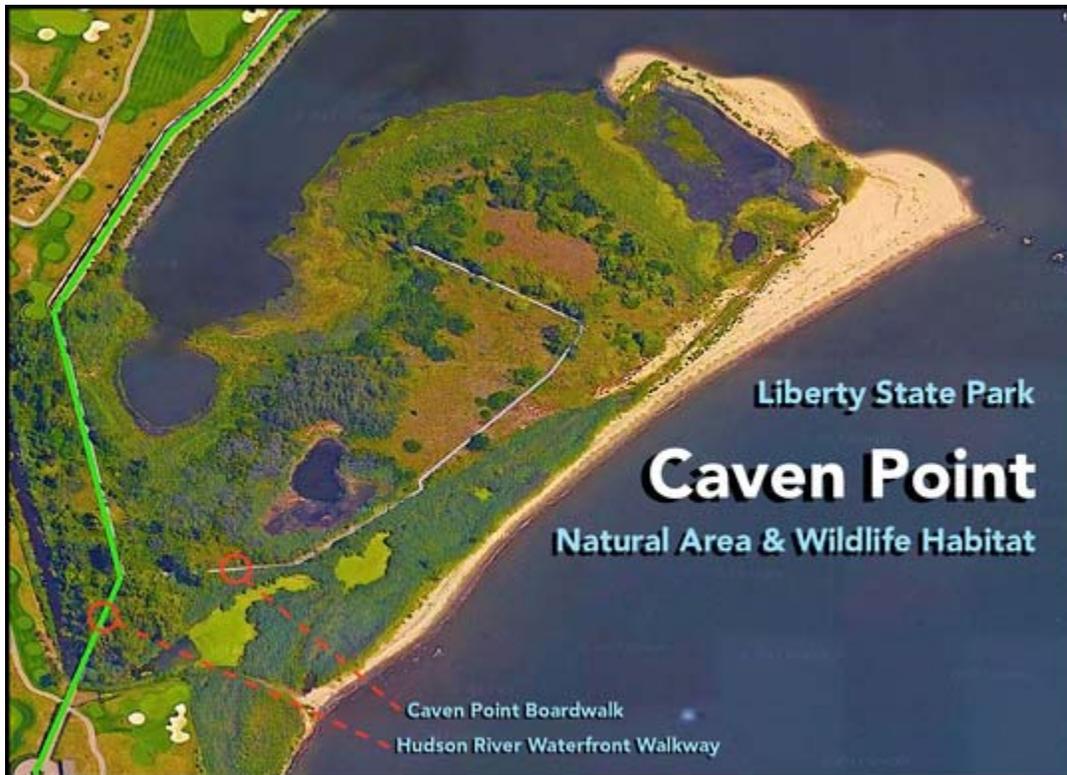
The expansion suffered a setback last year when the Murphy administration appeared to turn down the project.

But supporters have long feared that it would be resurrected. They say a May 2018 letter from the Department of Environmental Protection left the door open for future consideration when it told Liberty National it would not pursue the project "at this time."

A spokeswoman for Murphy did not respond last week to a request for comment.

The issue dates back to the waning days of Gov. Chris Christie's administration, when Liberty National submitted plans in 2017 to build greens for three holes on 21-acre Caven Point.

The site, a prime habitat for migrating birds, has marshland and a sandy beach where 500 to 600 students each year capture and release fish, crabs, seahorses and other marine life found in local waters.



The Caven Point peninsula of Liberty State Park where the exclusive Liberty National Golf Club wants to build three holes. (Photo: Friends of Liberty State Park)

The proposal generated fierce opposition from park advocates, who said it was another attempt to take away open space from the public and give it to an exclusive golf club that reportedly charges its members \$450,000 to join.

Liberty National was built for \$150 million by the Fireman family. It sits adjacent to the park on a former landfill and industrial wasteland. It opened in 2006 and has hosted some high-profile tournaments, including the Presidents Cup in 2017, which drew President Donald Trump along with former Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

Donnelly said the Fireman family "shares the goal of protecting and enhancing Liberty State Park."

He said the project would clean Caven Point and generate revenue to improve the entirety of Liberty State Park. The project would also create a golf center "to help support underserved youth in Hudson County."

Park advocates say Caven Point is fine the way it is and a golf academy is window-dressing for a raid of parkland already used by underserved youth.

"To me and my family it is our playing field as well as our backyard," Rafael Torres, a retired Jersey City firefighter, told a Senate committee last month. "And one thing we don't like is someone coming to our backyard to privatize our Hudson home."

Park advocates worry that Fireman may have an outsized influence on decision-makers.

Fireman and his wife, son and daughter-in-law have given almost \$400,000 to state lawmakers of both parties, local officials and political parties over the past decade, according to a NorthJersey.com review of campaign finance data.

Among the recipients have been Senate President Steve Sweeney and Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, political rivals who had joined together to fight against development plans at Liberty State Park during the Christie years.



Sign outside the Caven Point area of Liberty State Park denoting it as a seasonal bird sanctuary. (Photo: Friends of Liberty State Park)

Shuffler, the lobbyist, said his connection to Murphy's transition team has little impact because the bill, called the "Liberty State Park Protection Act," is in the hands of the Legislature. Governors often try to shape legislation as it winds through the Assembly and Senate and have the power to send it back with recommendations after it is passed by the Legislature.

"We believe that our plan to both preserve Liberty State Park and remediate Caven Point with a low-impact green space to green space golf use will allow investment in improved park access and improved park amenities, which will create a better overall visitor experience," Shuffler said.

Despite that, the bill opposing such development has moved through Assembly and Senate committees. The Senate Budget Committee is expected to hold a hearing on it Thursday.

Pesin said he has hope that the Legislature will pass the bill and Murphy will sign it without any concession to Fireman.

"We have faith [they] will do the right thing for social justice, urban people and all New Jerseyans," he said, "and sign this epic, historic bill into law with essential protections of this New Jersey and American sacred public land behind Lady Liberty for future generations."