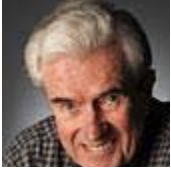


Ahearn: An over-the-top Sept. 11 memorial
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By JAMES AHEARN
RECORD COLUMNIST



DESPITE budget constraints that have forced deep cuts in spending for schools and public safety, Governor Christie's administration is going ahead with plans for an expensive, grandiose, view-blocking World Trade Center memorial at Liberty State Park.

The state Treasury Department is preparing to solicit bids in late October, with construction scheduled to start in November. His Nibs is doubtless planning to turn the first shovelful of dirt.

However, the mayor of Jersey City, Jerramiah Healy, and the entire Hudson County legislative delegation do not support the project. They agree with Sam Pesin, the president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, that the memorial will be misplaced and intrusive, forever ruining spectacular views from water's edge of the harbor, the skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

It need not be. Pesin has suggested moving the memorial back from the water, perhaps to a lawn next to the evocative Grove of Remembrance. Occupying 11 acres of a former brownfield, the grove is planted with some 700 trees, one for every New Jerseyan who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center Sept. 11, 2001.

The grove was created with a modest federal forestry grant of \$143,000 and with \$220,000 in cash and in-kind donations. In addition to the trees, the money bought a bronze plaque inscribed with the names of the dead.

Every year, there is an Arbor Day contest for which schoolchildren write a poem or a short prose piece. The winners read their compositions aloud, in a ceremony in the grove. Flowers and shrubs are planted. It is homey and nice.

Appropriate gestures

No one contends that the victims of the fanatical Sept. 11 attacks do not deserve appropriate remembrance. On Saturday, the ninth anniversary, there were heartfelt ceremonies in towns across the metropolitan area, including six in Jersey City alone, eight in other Hudson communities, and half a dozen more in Bergen and Passaic counties. New Jerseyans, and their leaders, do care.

But what is in prospect at the northeastern corner of Liberty State Park prompts concern. It is now a pile of dirt 20 feet high. Plans call for it to be compressed to a 10-foot-high, 1.6-acre mound. On it will be erected two parallel walls of concrete 16 feet apart, each 200 feet long and 30 feet high.

The memorial will be open at each end and on top. The gaze of visitors will be directed east to Manhattan where the trade center towers stood. But there is no break in the skyline to symbolize what was lost. Rather, what you see now from the park are shorter buildings that stood behind the trade center. And at Ground Zero, construction

is proceeding apace on replacement skyscrapers.

Reflective steel

The interior walls of the memorial will be covered in reflective stainless steel. On them will be inscribed, in letters 3.75 inches high, the names of the dead, in random order. A visitor will need an alphabetized guide to find the name of a loved one.

At night beacons atop the walls will shine straight up., confusing migrating birds. The architect who designed the memorial called it “Empty Sky.”

By comparison, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, with a maximum height of 10 feet, is much more human in scale. It is only 47 feet longer than the New Jersey memorial but is inscribed with 58,261 names. They are half an inch high, quite readable.

The budget for Empty Sky is \$13 million, with the state providing \$6 million and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey \$7 million. When the project was initially put out for bids three years ago, four were submitted, ranging from \$22 million to \$25 million. Nothing much has happened since then.

The architect, Frederic Schwarz, whose office is on Varick Street in Manhattan, saw the towers collapse and has an understandable personal interest in seeing his design realized. He has already suggested several money-saving modifications, including facing only the interior walls in reflective steel, not the whole thing.

Expensive project

Still, this is going to be a very expensive project, given the fragile economy and the pinched state budget. The walls could be shortened and reduced in height, with no loss of impact.

And it is not too late to pull the memorial back from its prime location at water’s edge, preserving harbor views and strolling space for visitors. The lawn next to the Grove of Remembrance looks like a natural fit. That way, everybody with a stake in the project could get behind it.

James Ahearn is a contributing editor and former managing editor of The Record. Send comments to grad@northjersey.com.

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