

# The Jersey Journal

## N.J. legislative leaders unhappy with DEP's direction on Liberty State Park revitalization plan

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By Mark Koosau

New Jersey's top legislative leaders are unhappy with the way the state Department of Environmental Protection is overseeing the revitalization of Liberty State Park and are pushing to have a controversial task force they created to have more say on the park's future.

The leaders, Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, went as far as to say that the DEP should reconsider the plan to remediate the interior of the state park and to add more active recreation to the northern end, all with significant input from the advisory task force.

That task force is filled with allies of billionaire Paul Fireman who have called for a sports-and-entertainment mecca makeover of the park that environmental and park activists have opposed in favor of the DEP's current plan.

Scutari and Coughlin's remarks were made in a Jan. 26 letter obtained by The Jersey Journal, where they focused their attention on the Design Task Force and said it has not been consulted on the decisions made by the DEP for the park.

“(The) DEP seems to be using the task force to comment on a plan the DEP has developed rather than allow the task force to provide their input prior to DEP making recommendations,” the letter reads.

The Design Task Force was created by a fast-tracked law in 2022 to advise the DEP on how to redevelop the Hudson River waterfront park and set aside \$50 million for it. But the bill was criticized as an attempt to privatize the park and feared to have ties to Fireman, who owns the nearby Liberty National Golf Course.

In comparison, the Liberty State Park Protection Act, a bill supported by activists that would shield the park from privatization, has failed to be put up for a vote by state legislators over the past few years.

Fireman, the former Reebok CEO, has funded over \$2 million into groups such as the People's Park Foundation that have lobbied for multi-thousand seat sports and entertainment venues in the park.

**The task force includes a number of Fireman's allies** such as Bob Hurley, the Hall of Fame basketball coach who runs the People's Park Foundation, Hudson County Board of Commissioner member Jerry Walker and attorney Elnardo Webster.

While the task force was created into law within a matter of weeks in 2022, the formation of it wasn't finalized until after the DEP began its revitalization project more than a year later.

The DEP got the project underway last October via the interior phase, which includes cleaning the contaminated 234-acre interior of the park and building new wetlands and meadows inside. The next phase to redevelop the northern section of the park with athletic and cultural activities is being drafted.

The remarks that Scutari and Coughlin made about the current plan, including that naturally remediating the interior would "flood" the park and that more active recreation is needed in the northern end, are similar to arguments made by Fireman's allies on the park's direction.

The two leaders called the current interior plan "deeply troubling" and that "this sizable wetland allocation, given the park's urban location, existing water boundaries with the Hudson River on three sides, and history of severe flooding demands careful consideration."

They also wrote that the plan for the northern section of the park with only three athletic fields and a community center "dismisses the tremendous need for active recreation in this urban setting."

Scutari and Coughlin added that "further deviation from the statute and legislative intent" may prompt the legislature to extend the duration of the task force or "restrict future funding." The two could not be reached for comment Sunday and spokespeople for the DEP did not respond for comment on the letter.

**Sam Pesin, a longtime park activist, called the letter "full of shameful misinformation that denies science, ignores the DEP's pledge of 60 acres of active recreation, and ignores Jersey City's primary responsibility of creating and renovating sports facilities."**

**"This is another Fireman power grab as he wants the public to only give input to proposals coming from this travesty task force created by his non-protection law and dominated by his front groups and other surrogates," Pesin said in a statement.**

Fireman has kept a political presence in New Jersey that has put him close to state politicians. For instance, Coughlin received a combined \$5,200 campaign contribution from Fireman and his wife, Phyllis, in 2019, while other legislative members have received thousands more.

His golf course and the People's Park Foundation have also hired the politically-connected River Crossing Strategy Group as its lobbying firm. The firm's team includes Kevin McCabe, the chairman of the Middlesex County Democratic Organization, which is Coughlin's political base.

**"I don't think decision making should be entirely based on what the task force thinks," added Anjuli Ramos-Busot, the director of the NJ Sierra Club. "I hope (Scutari and Coughlin) understand this process and the true facts involved in the cleanup and the revitalization of the park, and that they can backtrack their comments."**