

Nonprofit says kids need more ballfields at Liberty State Park, but it spent \$1 million on salaries, lawyers, lobbyists and ads

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By Mark Koosau | **The Jersey Journal**

A Jersey City nonprofit group that claims new ballfields and athletic facilities are desperately needed for local youth spent none of its million-dollar bankroll creating or improving athletic facilities.

Instead, the \$1 million donated to the People's Park Foundation in 2022 went toward a six-figure salary for its president, Hall of Fame basketball coach Bob Hurley, as well as lobbying and law firms in an effort to convince the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which oversees state parks, to transform Liberty State Park into a sports and entertainment mecca.

And all of its funding came once again from Paul Fireman, the billionaire owner of the ultra-exclusive golf course next door, according to public tax filings published by the IRS.

The \$1 million gift from the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation was the sole donation received by the People's Park Foundation (PPF), and it nearly matched the 2021 donation of \$1.1 million from the Firemans.

Paul Fireman, the former CEO of Reebok, owns the Liberty National Golf Course adjacent to the state park, and critics say the People's Park Foundation has been funded solely to help Fireman acquire an environmentally sensitive portion of the state park known as the Caven Point peninsula. *(note from Sam Pesin – Fireman's Boston architect created the exhibits for their exclusionary, admission fee, destructive and Sports and Entertainment Complex and he was quoted as saying he wanted to "re-imagine LSP" with those plans).*

"It's disgusting that Fireman, Liberty State Park's 'Public Enemy Number One', continued his deplorable funding of these collaborators who shamelessly pushed vicious lies and smear attacks to kill the essential and popular Liberty State Park Protection Act," said Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park and the son of the park's founder, Morris Pesin. *(note from Sam - and to push the Sports & Entertainment Complex)*

The Liberty State Park Protection Act is a proposed bill supported by park and environmental activists that would protect the park from privatization, but has failed to be put up for a vote by state legislators.

The PPF spent \$1 million on salaries, legal fees, advertising and other expenses, tax filings for 2022 show. And like in 2021, none of the money was spent purchasing or leasing athletic

facilities (*note from Sam – or building or renovating sports facilities*). The group has advocated for scores of acres at Liberty State Park be converted to athletic fields for Jersey City and Hudson County youth.

Hurley, the group's president, received a \$200,000 salary in 2022, double his 2021 pay. PPF also paid \$391,000 to Connell Foley, a prominent law firm, and \$166,000 to Avoq, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying firm formerly known as Homefront Communications.

Fireman, through spokespeople, has said he is no longer seeking to acquire or lease part of the park to add three holes to his golf course. Yet, groups like the Friends of Liberty State Park fear he is behind any efforts to privatize the Hudson River park. (*note from Sam – Fireman is just biding his time to privatize the priceless LSP Caven Point Natural Area for golf holes. If he honestly wasn't interested in privatizing Caven Point, he'd publicly support the Caven Point Protection bill instead of his surrogates lobbying with misinformation to stall the bill*).

Over the past two years, PPF has advocated for a major overhaul of the park that includes building large-scale facilities such as a 5,000-seat multi-use stadium, a track and field complex and a 250,000-square-foot community center with ice hockey, an Olympic-size swimming and diving pool and more. (*note from Sam – Fireman's and his two front groups' plan included a 5000 and 2500 seat stadium, 7000 seat commercial concert venue and 2000 seat hockey arena*).

While the organization has been criticized as a front group for Fireman, Hurley and PPF supporters have insisted that their goal is to increase active recreation for local residents in the park. (*note from Sam – they pushed lies and smear attacks to kill the Protection Act on behalf of Fireman and to push the massive Sports and Entertainment Complex **and have never urged Jersey City or Hudson County to renovate or build new sports facilities for youth***).

In a statement, Hurley credited the People's Park Foundation for securing \$50 million toward Liberty State Park, referring to a bill signed into law in 2022 that established an advisory task force on redeveloping the park and also funded \$50 million for the project. The bill has been criticized for opening the park to privatization and was later revealed to have been supported by lobbyists tied to Fireman's golf course. (*note from Sam – in testimony by Fireman's funded surrogates at legislative hearings, they showed exhibits of the Sports and Entertainment Complex and made it clear that they wanted the taxpayers' \$50 million to be spent toward building it, totally ignoring 47 years of the broad public consensus for a Central Park type park*).

Despite PPF's efforts, the DEP has opted for its own revitalization plan for the park that puts an emphasis on natural areas and smaller scale recreational areas. Work on cleaning and naturally restoring the 234-acre contaminated interior of the park began last October, and the DEP is currently in the process of drafting its second phase for the park's northern area.

Fireman's charity also donated \$125,000 to the Hurley Family Foundation, which runs a free basketball program in Jersey City, as well as \$250,000 to Hudson County Board of Commissioners member Jerry Walker's nonprofit, Team Walker; \$25,000 to former Sen. and current North Bergen Mayor Nicholas Sacco's nonprofit, and \$20,000 to state Sen. Angela McKnight's nonprofit.

Walker said in a statement that the \$250,000 donation was used for his nonprofit's new vocational school in Jersey City, but he did not answer whether the donation had influenced his support for the People's Park Foundation, where he sits as a director. *(note from Sam – Hudson County Commissioner Jerry Walker, before and after he became a board member of Hurley's front group, signed statements full of lies to kill the LSP Protection Act, organized counter rallies to LSP Protection Act rallies with participants getting shirts, and according to accounts, payments to show up at their counter rallies); hasn't acknowledged that the DEP has pledged 50 acres of structured active recreation in the interior and other acres outside the interior; and hasn't publicly advocated for the county or Jersey City to build or renovate sports facilities).*

McKnight and Sacco also supported the bill establishing the advisory task force that year. McKnight did not respond for comment on the donations, while a spokeswoman for Sacco declined to comment.

Pesin noted that the DEP has earmarked 50 acres of the interior for active recreation, and that “it's not Liberty State Park's primary purpose to solve Jersey City's sports facilities' needs. ... There has been nothing stopping that shameless front group, which has constantly used misinformation and smear attacks, from spending their Fireman money on Jersey City sports facilities or asking their billionaire pal to fund such facilities.”

Greg Remaud, the NY/NJ Baykeeper, said while active recreation is a “fair debate,” he cautioned that when there's something that “(doesn't) necessarily jive with the public benefit or seem like they're helping a specific interest group ... following the money is always the first thing that you need to do.”

Fireman's attorney and his charity did not respond to a request for comment on the donations.