

The Jersey Journal May 23, 2024 by Mark Koosau

Declaring victory: DEP's redesign plan for Liberty State Park survives, despite billionaire's efforts

JERSEY CITY — In spite of months of pressure from some members of his own task force and hundreds of thousands of dollars in outside lobbying efforts, **the state official refused to bend.**

The Liberty State Park redesign project — which could cost the state as much as \$1 billion when completed — will move forward with a delicate balance of athletic facilities, passive recreation areas and environmentally friendly tideland areas, state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Shawn LaTourette said Tuesday night after the final redesign task force meeting.

“We’ve completed the charge,” the commissioner told The Jersey Journal. “The task force members provided their recommendations, and now the DEP (has) to do the hard, unenviable work of considering it all, synthesizing it and coming up with a sequence plan of what improvements will come first, and importantly, how much do they cost, estimate and provide that to the (state) Legislature.”

By statute, the 23-member task force will dissolve June 30, two years after the Liberty State Park Conservation, Recreation, and Community Inclusion Act was approved.

The People’s Park Foundation and Liberty State Park For All, headed by Hall of Fame basketball coach Bob Hurley and former Rutgers’ football star Elnardo Webster, respectively, have argued to convert the park into a super-sized athletic complex with a stadium and arena that would seat thousands.

They are both task force members and their groups are funded by billionaire Liberty National Golf Course owner Paul Fireman, who has previously attempted to acquire Liberty State Park’s Caven Point area to create three additional holes for the PGA event-caliber golf course.

The DEP, meanwhile, has stood firm on a plan that features 60 acres of active recreation and athletic fields.

The three-phase revitalization of the park that started last October includes remediation and restoration of the 234-acre contaminated interior with wetlands and meadows, as well as athletic facilities and other features on the northern and southern ends of the state park.

Through a series of public meetings task force members were asked for input on the project, and members of the public were outspoken in their wish lists for the park.

Tuesday evening’s three-and-a-half hour long meeting had the air of finality to it as some task force members thanked the DEP and the task force itself for the work they put in. More than two dozen members of the public later spoke during public comment.

Some public speakers have said the state should take on the responsibility of providing athletic facilities for Jersey City high schools, which **LaTourette pointed out at a previous meeting that it is not the state's job and has never taken place at any state park. But he has noted the park will be contributing toward Jersey City's needs.**

Hudson County Board of Commissioners member Jerry Walker, a director at the People's Park Foundation and a task force member, said Wednesday "there's a great compromise at this point ... on both sides of the aisle, and I think it's going to be fantastic once it gets done."

At prior meetings, some newer task force members complained they were not being heard, and wanted to restart the process or have discussions behind closed doors. **Outside the meetings, Fireman's circle has also sought to spread misinformation claiming that the DEP is planning to "flood" the park and take away space for recreation.**

Plans for the project also had to overcome meddling by the state's top elected officials earlier this year. Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin called for the DEP to reconsider its plans and parroted the false flooding narrative, which prompted a colorful rebuke by LaTourette.

Despite the pressures, the DEP has stuck to its vision for the park's future. LaTourette said there's a compromise for the nature-only and "garish over-development" proponents. "If you listen as hard as I do, you will see that there is more opportunity to bring these things together," he said. "More of that opportunity exists than you might believe if you're only focused on the noise." *Friends note- vast majority has always wanted a Central Park type park.*

Hurley, who has earned \$300,000 running the People's Park Foundation, did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday on what's next for the nonprofit.

Walker said the People's Park Foundation will "continue to make sure that the voices are being heard from the community particularly the south side of Jersey City, which (has) never been involved with this process." *Friends note – another total lie by Walker as people from all over JC have been involved. and always have been as reported in the Aug. 2020 Jersey Journal.*

LaTourette said he expects to have plans for the northern end of the park along Audrey Zapp Drive retooled, noting that there's been agreement on having flexible sports fields and courts there. He added that public engagement will continue and expects the next open house on the park to be held by September.

Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park and a task force member, said Wednesday the task force has "provided some useful input to the DEP" and he is optimistic about the park's future.

"Public involvement in the coming months, with the consultants' revised and narrowed-down proposals, continues to be crucial, and **I have faith that (LaTourette), with the governor's support, will listen to the voice of the people in shaping the park's future,**" Pesin said.