

Paul Fireman, get your billionaire's golf club out of our public park | Opinion

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For over a decade, a self-serving billionaire whose ultra-exclusive golf course neighbors Liberty State Park, has used his money and influence to prevent improvements for fear that a better LSP does not include the potential development of New Jersey's most vital open public space.

Last year, when LSP's revitalization plan was proposed by the State, some thought Reebok founder Paul Fireman had finally given up his quest for large commercialization and the expansion of his golf course into the park.

But, in typical horror flick fashion, Fireman is back like Dracula.

And this time, it sure looks like he has convinced major players in the New Jersey State Legislature to join his cause.

On Friday, Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin sent a letter to the State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) littered with the same lies spread by Fireman and his lobbyists, and seemingly intended to halt the long-overdue improvements now underway at LSP. The letter so closely mirrors Fireman's disinformation campaign that one can only assume the legislators took cues from them.

The letter reads like a screening of Groundhog Day, with the lawmakers perpetuating Fireman's now infamous lie that climate resilience features designed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would "flood 170 acres in the center of LSP." This Fireman-designed falsehood has been repeatedly refuted by flood mitigation experts and rejected by two U.S. Army Corps Commanders.

The actual facts: In Phase 1A of the LSP Revitalization, 230+ acres of closed-off, contaminated land in the interior of LSP are being cleaned up. Part of it will become the "Central Park" of LSP, which will be 165 acres, with less than 7 acres of open water. No one has ever suggested "flooding" the park. However, with the reintroduction of native tidal and freshwater wetlands, and land recontouring to serve as natural flood protection, this Central Park will better protect both newly developed features in LSP and the neighboring community from 100-year and 500-year storms.

It is disappointing but not surprising that Fireman's misinformation is now being carried out by our lawmakers. Their bidding for Fireman undermines the public planning process led by DEP. For years, Fireman has quietly groomed favor with power brokers and elected leaders who might

help him halt plans for LSP's cleanup and restoration — all in hopes that he might one day be able to expand his golf course into the protected LSP bird sanctuary at Caven Point.

When an earlier version of DEP's plans for a resiliency park at the heart of LSP was first presented to the public in 2020, Fireman's dream of a greedy takeover of public land started to dim. So, he tried a new tactic: have the aptly named Fireman Family Foundation birth and fund front groups to smear and attack State plans to revitalize LSP in the guise of supporting better athletic facilities for Jersey City youth.

Ever the philanthropist, Fireman spent \$1 million fighting the revitalization of LSP without sending a dime to improve Jersey City facilities he says are failing.

Our two top lawmakers repeat Fireman's platitudes about serving urban youth in their attack on the LSP Revitalization. Echoing the billionaire's front groups and lobbyists, they criticize the plans for not including enough playing fields in the concept for LSP's northern end (Phase 1B). However, the reality is that the DEP has designated more than 60 acres of land for active recreation, including two "athletic hubs" for the north and south of the park.

For a moment, let's set aside the fact that LSP is a state park and that such parks are intended largely for conservation and passive outdoor recreation, not sports. In 2020, the DEP changed long-established State policy to enable LSP to host playing fields and scaled back its resilience and restoration plans to provide more active recreation. This is a seismic change in public lands management policy for the State, and it will largely benefit the people and youth of Jersey City, which has approximately 120 acres of city-owned parkland.

After years of fighting the billionaire's takeover efforts, community members and park advocates breathed a sigh of relief last May when the DEP presented its plan at the LSP Open House and began the clean-up and construction of the park's interior.

We hope our legislators can find the courage to stand up to private interests so that we can move forward with cleaning up and restoring LSP. Let DEP clean up the legacy pollution at the park, and construct a desperately needed nature-based flood resilience project at its center that also provides passive recreation, while ringing Central Park with more than 100 acres of sports, active and passive recreation, arts, and cultural facilities.

Liberty State Park belongs to all New Jerseyans, especially the local community in Jersey City. We cannot allow Fireman's plans to privatize such a priceless resource to become a reality. It truly has something for everyone, just not Paul Fireman. Enough is enough.