

Lawmakers who should know better dance to Fireman's tune | Editorial

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By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

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The revitalization of Liberty State Park should be an exhilarating event for all New Jerseyans, especially the 5 million visitors who enjoy the waterfront oasis each year.

But this historic occasion could easily become a tedious and contentious slog, because a billionaire golf course developer has apparently convinced our top two lawmakers to mimic the talking points that should already have been consigned into the rabbit hole of crankery.

A letter from President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin assails Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette for the way he has led the project and chaired the advisory panel known as the Liberty State Park Design Task Force, which meets again tonight at the CRRNJ train terminal.

It is telling that their objections are identical to the spitballs fired by surrogates of Reebok founder Paul Fireman, the political mega-donor who has tried to filch a federally protected, 21-acre piece of bayside land to expand his adjacent golf course and has spent \$2 million to lobby for oversized sports and entertainment facilities inside the park.

But it's reprehensible that the legislators are now threatening to make this a budgetary football, using the twitching corpse of Fireman's agenda to warn that "further deviation" from the task force's original aims may result in funding cutbacks.

The letter has the tone of a peevish plutocrat. In their first paragraph, Scutari and Coughlin claim that the four members they placed on the 24-member task force were left out of meetings held by LaTourette, which is demonstrably wrong.

"The DEP and commissioner didn't even tell my appointments for a whole year that they started meeting," Scutari said Monday. "My people were in the dark for a year."

Hardly. The Legislature passed a resolution that expanded an existing 17-member task force in July 2022, his two appointees weren't seated until October of last year, and the first and only meeting took place last Nov. 28. Scutari couldn't name the date of another meeting in which his appointees were snubbed.

In the second paragraph, the letter repeats the same demagogic rubbish that Fireman's crew has voiced for years: that the DEP plans to "flood 170 acres in the center of LSP," and that this is "exactly the type of monumental decision that demands task force input."

Actually, as three commanders from the Army Corps of Engineers have explained ad nauseum, Phase 1A of the revitalization introduces tidal wetlands and reshapes the landscape in the contaminated, interior portion of the park, which is the most logical science-based strategy for flood remediation. The forms and features will provide more water storage and protect the community around it.

So in his 11-page response to the lawmakers Monday, LaTourette told them it's time to move on from the flood fallacy: "While it is not clear why the Legislature would believe this, DEP is aware of certain private interests and individuals who have been knowingly and purposefully circulating misinformation along these very same lines," he wrote. "It is alarming that such misinformation could influence our partnership on this important project."

It is also a civic embarrassment that lawmakers have deduced that lobbyists, staffers and local sports heroes have more expertise in this area, and that Scutari can believe that "there are different scientific viewpoints" when the science has already been explained.

"This is supposed to be a collaborative process," Scutari said. "He's not a dictator."

Coughlin, meanwhile, says that their letter "simply inquired about the status of public hearings required by law to ensure those communities have input when it comes to public money being spent."

Actually, the letter makes a threat based on a level of mendacity that can only be described as Trumpian.

LaTourette, who seems to have Gov. Murphy's support, is an intrepid administrator who always invites input from the well-informed and well-intentioned. He has laid out a blueprint that is ecologically sound, physically alluring, and welcoming to all – he is especially proud of carving out a whopping 60 acres for active recreation -- and he has vowed to protect our state's greatest open space from commercial predators.

He was respectful and solicitous of task force members in November – the proof is on YouTube -- and now he will ask them to read the 2,690 public comments on the DEP website that show overwhelming support for the balance he's found between nature-based attractions and athletic use.

Our top lawmakers should look at them sometime, as it will might enhance the vast expertise in park planning and design that they seem so eager to share.