

# N.J. pols cave to a billionaire (cont.) | Editorial

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**By Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

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**The Liberty State Park Design Task Force abruptly postponed its second meeting Tuesday.**

**It was suspicious timing: The decision was made just hours after Shawn LaTourette, the commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection and leader of this revitalization project, told our two most powerful lawmakers that they've been hoodwinked by a billionaire developer who seeks to detonate the park's historic restoration by spreading disinformation.**

Pointedly, he informed Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin that their letter to the DEP last Friday was indistinguishable from the piffle cited by surrogates for Reebok tycoon Paul Fireman -- the subtext being that his lies about flood risks and inflexible leadership should not merit the attention of such distinguished lawmakers, no matter how much money Fireman gives to political campaigns, no matter how many of their colleagues lobby for him.

So, right on cue, someone pulled the plug on the task force meeting -- ostensibly LaTourette himself, who said the postponement was "due to significant public interest."

**But while the commissioner probably enjoyed a sophistic chuckle with his one-sentence statement, this is yet another warning that a plutocrat's ability to reach into the highest echelons of state government is a serious and dangerous thing, even if it is only used to get a meeting cancelled so that he can rethink his strategy for hijacking the process.**

**This probably sounds familiar. It was last March that Fireman shelved his effort to grab 21 acres of waterfront at Caven Point for his golf course, and instead lobbied for a massive commercialization and privatization of the park -- an overhaul that included a concert venue, sports stadiums, and a 250,000-square-foot community center.**

**LaTourette smashed that plan to pieces with four words -- "Not on my watch,"** the commissioner said, citing federal law -- but four days later, the open house the commissioner had planned to formally introduce his own revitalization project was glibly cancelled because of *significant public interest*.

He and the governor waited for the political storm to pass, and ultimately LaTourette showed the state and Liberty's five million annual visitors a spectacular vision for its revitalization in May. Work from the Army Corps of Engineers began in October on the cleanup of the contaminated

interior section, which will be converted to 165 acres of immaculate natural green space, miles of paths, and seven acres of open water.

That is merely the start of this four-phase operation. **The task force was supposed to meet Tuesday and discuss the project's subsequent steps and timeline -- including 60 acres of active recreation such as ball fields and basketball courts;** the conversion of the CRRNJ train shed into commercial space; the size and location of an amphitheater; the size of the community center; and how to move visitors between all these places.

Now it's all on hold – again – as Fireman continues his imperious lobbying efforts. It could last for as long as it takes to run out the clock on this administration, and convince the next DEP commissioner that he should fill that interior space with concrete and AstroTurf.

**And Scutari and Coughlin seem willing to let that happen by repeating Fireman's lies, while the billionaire's allies on the advisory panel – none with expertise in park planning or design -- rehearse their tedious talking points.**

**The governor didn't respond to the lawmakers' puerile threats to defund the project, but Murphy "remains supportive of the Department of Environmental Protection's plan for the revitalization of Liberty State Park, which prioritizes community access and sustainability while ensuring the park can reach its full potential," his spokesman said yesterday.**

Given the endless parade of moneyed zealots who have passed through, however, advocates have a right to be alarmed. Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, still fears the governor is "caving in to the lies of Fireman, his lobbyists, and front groups," and that the meeting cancellation is "another example of politicians subverting democracy and the public good by colluding with wealthy private interests."

**That public vision is reflected with crystalline clarity on the DEP website: The 2,659 public comments about the first phase of the project are overwhelmingly supportive of LaTourette's vision, and one would hope that this informs the task force going forward.**

As Doug O'Malley of Environment New Jersey put it, "The Legislature and Gov. Murphy shouldn't snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The Task Force should hear from the public – and not try to railroad through the wish list of Fireman and his paid allies."

**The public knows that this will not be the final attempt by a land-grabbing sneaker tycoon to desecrate the waterfront jewel, and the civic irritation is already at a slow boil. It's time to remind legislators that our great endeavors must never be endangered by some fat cat flooding the zone with steaming piles of misinformation. It's time to remind them to pick a side.**