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<https://www.nj.com/hudson/2024/04/fireman-backed-group-steps-up-claims-dep-will-flood-liberty-state-park-heres-whats-actually-happening.html>

"Fireman-backed groups step up claims DEP will 'flood' Liberty State Park. Here's what's actually happening"

Six months into the revitalization of Liberty State Park, two groups funded by billionaire golf course owner Paul Fireman have ramped up a misinformation campaign that claims the state agency managing the project plans to flood the Hudson River waterfront park with dozens of acres of water.

On Monday, eight days before the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) hosts another public design task force forum, hundreds of local residents received a text message saying the DEP "wants to FLOOD (the park) — and destroy active recreation opportunities for Jersey City's children and families."

Dozens of annoyed residents rushed to social media platforms to bash Fireman and the groups he funds, saying things like "F*** Fireman!" and worse.

DEP officials have clarified multiple times they will not "flood" the park, and Commissioner Shawn LaTourette previously emphasized such actions by funded groups are "purposeful disinformation, and it needs to stop."

In actuality, the plan for the contaminated interior of the park calls for less than seven acres of open water and the reintroduction of "native ecological features" that will mitigate flooding.

"The DEP is the state agency that is responsible for reducing flood risk to New Jersey communities," LaTourette said Tuesday. "Under no circumstances, would the DEP pursue a project that will cause flooding. A key part of our job is to make sure that when other folks are developing projects, they do not cause flooding."

The DEP's plan for the 234-acre interior, the first phase of the redesign, includes an ecological restoration and construction of nature-based solutions that serve critical flooding and climate resilience functions for the community; and the reintroduction of native tidal and non-tidal wetlands, meadows and urban forest.

Frank Gallagher, the Environmental Planning Program Director at Rutgers University, says creating wetlands "to actually protect Jersey City from flooding is central to the idea of building wetlands today."

The “flooding” narrative is part of the strategy by the People’s Park Foundation and Liberty State Park For All, which have advocated for much of the park to be devoted to athletic facilities than the current plan of 60 acres of various ballfields.

They are funded solely by Fireman, the owner of the ultra-exclusive Liberty National Gold Course next door, who has at times tried to purchase part of the park to add to his golf course. Leaders of the nonprofits have said Fireman, the founder of Reebok, has no ulterior motive in funding the groups.

Liberty State Park For All, headed by attorney and LSP task force member Elnardo Webster, funded the text messages, which directs people to a single-page website that claims it as fact that the DEP plans to flood the park with 200 acres of water. The website include a 32-second video with out-of-context news clips and their own editorials.

The DEP’s plan “invites water in and is essentially a design feature that doesn’t really do anything to bolster resiliency,” Webster said Tuesday. “We don’t think it’s the superior design and we’d like to redesign the park to have a different design. We’d like to move the water to the south side of the park where there’s already coming into the water.”

The People’s Park Foundation, run by Bob Hurley, the Hall of Fame basketball coach who is also a member of the DEP’s task force, has a note on its website, urging people to contact state officials “to stop NJDEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette from flooding Liberty State Park. ... Jersey City and Hudson County need fields not flooding!”

LaTourette has said the interior will be lowered to create tidal and freshwater wetland areas, whose “greatest values ... are resiliency and storm surge attenuation during storm events. ... In such events, these nature-based flood and climate resilience features act as an energy dissipator while also offering additional flood storage capacity during weather events.”

The wetlands area is designed to capture stormwater runoff from drainage areas west of the park and provide “additional flood storage.” In addition, LaTourette says, the interior project will reduce flooding from 100- and 500-year storms.

“In short ... the project will afford surrounding inland properties a degree of protection that they do not have presently,” LaTourette said. “The benefits of this protection will be real and tangible for the surrounding residents and businesses, as well as for newly developed features of the park itself.”

Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, slammed the text campaign as “despicable, greed-based, science-denying lies about the spectacular habitats flood resiliency plans created by DEP, Army Corps scientists and Princeton Hydro consulting scientists.”

Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, whose administration had previously raised questions about flooding last year, said in a statement that the DEP “provided detailed explanations from experts with how it would mitigate further flooding and as a city we are comfortable with the explanation the DEP provided.”