

A moment of truth for Liberty State Park | Editorial Feb. 29, 2024

By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

Bob Hurley is a proud man, and few New Jerseyans have as much right to be. It has less to do with his basketball résumé than his humanity and integrity: His Hall of Fame profile is defined not by championships, but by how he used a game to transform the lives of hundreds of boys who otherwise might have been lost to the streets. Over four decades at St. Anthony's, he turned them all into men and sent all but two of them to college.

But Hurley is not an expert in urban park design, even though he is the sole employee for the People's Park Foundation, an organization financed by Paul Fireman, the billionaire developer who seeks to torpedo the revitalization plan for Liberty State Park and remap it to include large-scale commercialization that would feature a 5,000-seat football stadium and a 7,000-seat concert venue.

Such facilities already have been rejected by DEP commissioner Shawn LaTourette – with both vigor and empathy -- but that doesn't change Hurley's mission: He was paid a reported \$300,000 the last two years to hand out T-shirts, traffic in deceit, arouse community resentment, and smear the advocates who have kept LSP free from developers for 47 years.

This is something to bear in mind Saturday morning, when Fireman will dispatch his noisemakers to the Central Railroad of NJ terminal to hijack a public hearing and support his hand-picked surrogates on the LSP Task Force, who seek to fill the waterfront jewel with a curate's egg of asphalt and cement.

That means regular park-goers – five million strong – must also join the discussion, which begins at 10 a.m. If you can't make it to the CRRNJ train shed, you can join virtually by registering at the DEP website, and you are invited to leave your own comments.

But the vox populi has never been more critical, because we could use a cleanse from Fireman's sleazy methods.

The Reebok founder - who has long sought to expand his neighboring golf course by filching 21 acres of federally protected land at Caven Point – is so politically waterlogged, he got Sen. Nick Scutari and Speaker Craig Coughlin to repeat his lies and threaten to pull funding for LaTourette's plan if the billionaire's concerns weren't taken seriously.

After LaTourette responded with a strategic yawn, Hurley rolled out his greatest hits last week, some during a Foundation meeting where Fireman's son-in-law handled PowerPoint duties. To wit:

♦ Hurley's latest Facebook post said that it is "*critical that we STOP THE DEP from flooding 180 acres of LSP. If they bring water into the park we risk more flooding of Jersey City and we will NEVER get this land back!*"

We asked Coach for the source of that estimate, but he did not respond. This has been repeated ad nauseum: The DEP is not flooding anything. The Army Corps has been cleaning up the park's contaminated interior section, and is deploying a nature-based flood resiliency system that will actually prevent flooding. Yes, the 165 acres of nature habitats and miles of paths in this area will include seven acres of open water, but that will actually catch stormwater runoff.

◆ Hurley derided the DEP plan as insubstantial, saying the park “should be more than a parking lot and a ferry ride to The Statue of Liberty,” and that the DEP is prioritizing birds over children.

It makes you wonder what has changed since May, when Hurley issued a gushing endorsement of LaTourette's vision – “thrilled” was the word he used – and even took a bow for selling the commissioner on the merit of active recreation facilities, even though they were the scheme all along.

◆ **And Hurley is officially all-in on large-scale development, with must-haves that include the 5,000-seat football stadium, a 7,000-seat amphitheater, and a 250,000-square-foot community center.**

Someone please show the man the DEP website. There is a plan for a massive community center – with a gym, pool, a kitchen, and two levels of meeting space -- in the Northwest section of the park. There will be an amphitheater with a skyline backdrop. As for active recreation, a half-dozen baseball fields and multiple soccer fields are planned for the Northern hub alone. The Southern hub will have 50 more acres of multi-purpose athletic fields, including two football fields and a track and field center.

Quick tip for Coach: Don't bother to grumble about the lack of pickleball and bocce opportunities, because those are also covered.

We understand why Hurley dusts off these old chestnuts.

His benefactor has spent \$2 million on lobbying and on financing his AstroTurf groups – he's also given Hurley's family foundation an estimated \$500,000 – and he's firing every spitball that his money can buy. It's worth repeating that this money could go to more useful pursuits: Fireman once insisted – amid raucous laughter -- that he's doing all this to help the kids of Jersey City, but he still hasn't spent a penny on youth sports or playing fields, even though a sports complex (Caven Point Field) hidden behind a row of trees on the 5th fairway of his golf course is a shambles.

Until he does something that actually helps kids, we'll assume he's just another petulant fat cat who can pay off politicians and the biggest celebrity in town.

Fireman is not going to go away. But he needs to be told – starting Saturday -- that a sneaker peddler and a retired probation officer/basketball coach are not ideal choices to design an oasis that will serve New Jersey for generations.