

Something to say about Liberty State Park? Team Fireman wants you to shut up | Opinion Mar. 07, 2024

By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist **Eric Allen Conner**

It wasn't an ideal day to be at the park with my one-year-old daughter. Cold, wet, grey weather greeted us as we queued up in the historic Jersey Central Railroad terminal Saturday morning, but I wanted to hear the design task force's recommendations about the future of community recreation at Liberty State Park. I also wanted them to hear from me, as part of their job to receive public feedback.

What I took away instead is that some members of the task force, all of them aligned with the oligarch-funded People's Park Foundation, would rather the public not be there at all.

I have been worried about the future of Liberty State ever since the PPF -- a group led by coach Bob Hurley and financed by billionaire Paul Fireman, who owns the golf course next door -- started waging a disinformation campaign against the sensible revitalization plan announced last May.

This group has lobbied Trenton to pass the Conservation, Recreation, and Community Inclusion Act of 2022, which derailed the state's original plans for the park. **It has repeatedly smeared park advocates and tried to discredit Shawn LaTourette, the commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, who oppose commercialization. And through the Fireman's political connections, it managed to get Hurley and his PPF allies -- including attorney Elnardo Webster and Hudson County Commissioner Jerry Walker -- appointed to the design task force.**

I felt some relief when LaTourette moved forward with plans to use 230-plus acres for habitat restoration and flood mitigation, creating over 6 miles of trails, scenic overlooks, and fields for community sports for families like mine to enjoy.

But it was a short-lived optimism. PPF-aligned task force members soon started complaining that the DEP was planning on "flooding the park and surrounding communities." **This misinformation has been repeatedly corrected by the DEP, but Fireman's relentless campaign of lies inspired me to make my voice heard.**

Then I discovered that the same task force members who bray about wanting want to build "a people's park" don't really want to hear from the people at all.

Tellingly, Hurley and Webster both suggested that the next task force meeting take place behind closed doors. That was echoed by other Fireman allies on the task force. The suggestion of an executive session without the public came shortly after the mention of controversial topics such as building a 5,000-seat stadium or indoor ice-skating rink in the park.

Then, predictably, every member of the People's Park Foundation — Hurley included — left the task force meeting before the public got a chance to speak.

They left before elected officials like Mayor Bhalla of Hoboken, members of the Jersey City council, and Sen. Raj Mukherji could address them.

They didn't want to hear anything from our people in the community or from public officials. Their only strategy was to ignore opposing voices and bolt for the exit. My one-year-old daughter managed to last longer and behave better in a public meeting than some members of this advisory panel.

Here are some things I would have liked to have said to those who left early:

I heard more concern from you for where park goers would park their cars than for how we can work to improve public transit access. Better transit options will reduce disruptive traffic during big events and on beautiful days. This was a missed opportunity to advocate for how Liberty State can be more accessible to the 38% of Jersey City households that don't own a car:

There was a lot of talk about how Jersey City has failed to provide adequate recreational facilities to its youth and many city facilities are in shambles. **What exactly is the PPF demanding that isn't already included in the 60 acres already aside by the DEP for sports? And what did Walker mean when he said that this could be a "revenue-driven opportunity for the state" that could offset expenses?**

The only thing we learned from Fireman's appointed messengers is their disdain for the public, which is clear by the way they refuse to engage with us. If they actually listened, they might finally realize that we're not going away.

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