

Why let a billionaire take a bite out of Liberty State Park? | Moran

Updated: Jun. 26, 2022, 7:16 a.m. | Published: Jun. 26, 2022, 7:15 a.m. By Tom Moran | Star-Ledger Editorial Board

It's time for Americans to use the word "oligarch" to describe our own billionaires, not just those in Russia.

Because it clarifies things. It helps explain what's happening at Liberty State Park as Reebok billionaire Paul Fireman paves the way to grab a pristine corner of the park for himself. He wants to expand his members-only golf course, whether we mere citizens like it or not.

And the Legislature, at every turn, has rejected pleas to protect the land at stake, a 22-acre spit of gorgeous oceanfront, including a half-mile of beach, the biggest stretch in New York Harbor. Known as Caven's Point, it is a feeding station for migratory birds, a nursery for horseshoe crabs, and a home for mussels, clams and even some oysters. Schoolkids visit to study this rare haven, tucked into the most densely packed corner of the most densely packed state.

Why on earth the people of New Jersey would sacrifice this treasure so that Fireman can expand his elite club is beyond my imagination.

Fireman's bill doesn't grab the land outright, not just yet. He's tried crude land grabs in the past, and failed each time. Bruised by the experience, he's now hired several of Trenton's most expensive strategists and lobbyists to revise his tactics.

His new strategy is to enlist, and finance, local groups who have long pushed for needed improvements at the park, like ballfields, basketball courts, and a natural amphitheater for concerts, along with environmental clean-ups. All that is most welcome by people in Jersey City, especially in poor minority neighborhoods where kids have few options. And that effort takes the focus off Caven's Point.

"I get the energy around Caven's Point, but that's not what the community is asking for," says Elnardo Webster of The People's Park Foundation, which is partly funded by Fireman. "We're focused on the interior of the park. I don't really care about Caven's point. That's their issue. My issue is kids in Jersey City."

It's a clever strategy of divide-and-conquer, and for Fireman, it's working so far.

But it's built on a fiction. The truth is we can save Caven's Point *and* build ballfields and basketball courts in the park.

"Nobody disagrees with the idea that the park needs active recreation," says Doug O'Malley of Environment New Jersey. "But why not do both those things?"

At an Assembly hearing on the bill this week, defenders of Caven's Point kept repeating that core question.

Not a single legislator answered it. They listened in silence, whacked the gavel, and voted as Fireman wanted them to.

The bill Fireman is pushing -- sponsored by Sen. Brian Stack and Assemblywoman Angela McKnight, both Hudson County Democrats -- doesn't spell out exactly what should happen at the park. It doesn't even mention Caven's Point.

Fireman has learned to be more subtle. The bill sets up a task force, which critics say is stacked with Fireman's supporters, to make recommendations to the state Department of Environmental Protection. (It also sets aside \$250 million for improvements, which a reliable source tells me will be cut back to \$50 million next week.)

But the bill carefully leaves the door open to Fireman's ambitions to expand the golf course. Repeated attempts to add an amendment protecting Caven's Point were rejected in both the Senate and Assembly in recent weeks, practically inviting Fireman to give this new strategy a try.

Sen. Bob Smith, chair of the Environment Committee, said he opposed amendments to protect Caven's Point because he felt the DEP should have a free hand in making its plan, a point echoed by Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin.

"And the bill has unanimous support among Hudson County senators," Smith added.

The bill is greased to win legislative approval next week. The only hope is that Gov. Phil Murphy will save the day with a conditional veto. And no one expects that.

Here's what the governor said about the park on WNYC radio's call-in show earlier this month: "Sometimes people think it's in a perfect pristine state right now, doing everything it needs to, particularly for the neighbors that live right around it. It isn't. It needs to be better and it can be better."

No mention of Caven's Point there.

Councilman Frank Gilmore represents Ward F in Jersey City, a mostly Black and brown neighborhood near the park. He says his voters agree with park-lovers who want to protect Caven's Point and build ballfields. He says Fireman is trying to stir up a phony racial divide.

"People in the community are asking for this park to be protected," says Gilmore, who is Black. "This narrative is being painted to get Black and brown people to be for this bill as it stands, without those protections.

"It's no secret what's happening here. He's been trying to get this parcel to expand his golf course. Fireman is strategic."

A second point of friction centers on the scale of development that will be permitted in the park. Webster has grand ambitions, and not just for ballfields and basketball courts. His group's plan includes a huge recreation center of 150,000 square feet, holding two skating rinks, an Olympic-sized pool, community rooms, and hard courts. It includes a 5,000-seat stadium, and a 7,000 seat amphitheater.

It amounts to a mini-Meadowlands, far beyond anything that would be allowed in Central Park, which was held up as a model in the Assembly hearings.

Those ambitions will likely have to be toned down. Webster said it would all be paid for by taxpayers, not private interests, something that's much less likely on the reduced \$50 million budget that's expected.

A few last-minute amendments are expected next week, one fiddling with the composition of the task force, and another scaling back the Assembly bill's call for the park to generate revenue.

But the bill won't protect Caven's Point from Fireman's grip, that much is clear. In a state that has preserved more than 500,000 acres of green space, we are leaving these hyper-pristine 22 acres on the chopping block.

Two years ago, after a setback, Fireman said he would "halt" his efforts to expand his golf course. But I found no one who believes that, and Fireman will not rule out reviving the effort.

I asked Fireman to discuss his plans, but he refused. Nor would he reveal his spending on this effort. We know he's providing money to the two "grassroots" organizations in Jersey City fighting for this bill. And two years ago, sources told Terrence McDonald at the Bergen Record that Fireman's foundation gave to several politically connected non-profits in Hudson.

But the rules of American politics allow billionaires to donate vast sums of money to political groups and foundations controlled by politicians, with no fingerprints.

So we have a right to be suspicious. A dark money group supporting Murphy is now spending \$2 million on a series of TV ads promoting the governor. Is Fireman helping pay that bill? Neither man will open their books, so it's fair to wonder. Is Fireman donating to groups allied with legislators, even those who just voted on this bill? Again, a fair question with no answer.

The Oxford dictionary defines the word oligarch like this: "(especially in Russia) a very rich business leader with a great deal of political influence."

Time to get rid of the Russia part. We have our own oligarchs. And if we're not careful, this one is going to bulldoze our parkland.