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Liberty State Park: The good guys finally won | Editorial By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

The ultimate vision of a pristine urban oasis – protected from garish development, political dithering, and billionaire hubris – took a giant step closer to reality last week, when a massive plan to revitalize Liberty State Park was announced by the Department of Environmental Protection.

To put this as succinctly as possible: New Jersey’s most popular meeting venue – a sacred space of history, community, and majesty – is about to become grander, and it’s all because the good guys finally won.

The glorious blueprint comes largely from the imagination of Shawn LaTourette, the tireless DEP commissioner who engineered a brilliant plan for ecological restoration while adding an enormous array of recreational spaces – all as he withstood relentless pressure from moneyed interests, satisfied the needs of preservationists, and managed the politics with a dexterity that nobody knew he had.

Along the way, his team seemed to be guided by one reality: This park, situated in the most congested county in the US, welcomes 5 million visitors each year -- that’s more visitors than Yosemite or Yellowstone – and we had to get this right.

“Liberty State Park is an incredible place,” LaTourette said as he unveiled his plan Wednesday. “It’s rich with history and full of opportunity. It’s the crown gem of our state park system. But if we’re honest, it’s a rough-cut gem, one that we will fashion together and shine together. . . .and we will give the people of New Jersey a natural space that they can be deeply proud of.”

That means all New Jerseyans, because there is something here for everyone, including amenities that satisfy groups that had long lobbied for large-scale development in the park, but whose proposals -- some impractical, some even illegal -- were considered by LaTourette and wisely rejected.

The DEP plan has three phases, and if you haven’t checked out the agency’s online microsite, it’s worth the visit. <https://dep.nj.gov/revitalizelsp/>

The first stage, which begins this fall, involves the restoration of a blighted interior section, more than one-third of the park’s acreage, which has been off-limits to the public since the park opened. The Army Corps of Engineers will clean up the contaminated space, all 230 acres of it, and it will ultimately be transformed into a glorious wilderness of tidal and freshwater wetlands,

meadows, woodlands, and a hilltop with breathtaking views of the harbor, the Manhattan skyline, and the Statue of Liberty.

It will all be knitted together by 5.6 miles of trails, and once complete, the park's accessible footprint will have increased by a whopping 40%.

LaTourette envisions "a truly be a premier outdoor urban environment – likely one of the finest in the nation."

Critically, this part of the project will provide potent flood resilience to the park and the surrounding communities, unlike the proposal still favored by the now-muzzled opposition funded by Reebok billionaire Paul Fireman – the People's Park Foundation – which wanted to fill this space with stadiums and a 250,000-square-foot community center. More on that later, because billionaires don't stay muzzled for long.

The second phase is about accommodating families, kids, ballers, shoppers, and audiophiles. It will be focused on the northern end of the park, along Audrey Zapp Drive, and it will feature multipurpose athletic fields and playgrounds; arts and cultural spaces, anchored by an outdoor amphitheater with a skyline backdrop; a community center and other gathering spaces; and a rehabilitated train shed that will be repurposed into an outdoor marketplace.

And the third phase, along the southern tier – where cleanup also begins this fall -- adds more active recreation, which will be tailored through public input. But the DEP is making plans for basketball, tennis, and racquetball courts, a track and field center, more multi-use fields, a skate park, community gardens, and an aquatics center.

It also plans to add natural enhancements and more public access to Caven Point, the 21-acre bird sanctuary that Fireman sought to filch and turn into three holes for his adjacent Liberty National Golf Course. LaTourette has repeatedly pointed out that this would violate federal and state laws, and we hope – without much confidence – that the plutocrat next door will finally get the message.

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Either way, the results promise to be a magical, and LaTourette says they will be guided by a survey of 3,600 park visitors. Even Jerry Walker of the People's Park Foundation, a Hudson County commissioner, had to acknowledge it: "I can't say that I'm not impressed," he said. "It's especially gratifying that after 60 years, we're going to get the contaminated area cleaned up. And as a youth advocate, all these ballfields are a big plus."

There will always be other forms of resistance, because this is New Jersey, where protecting public property from the depredation of private interests is an ongoing concern. And while Gov. Murphy has finally given his enthusiastic support of the plan, funding could always become an issue for his successor.

One potential successor, Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, sent a letter to the DEP on May 19 that raised “serious concerns about the tidal channel aspects” of the Phase 1 plan -- echoing a common PPF meme. Following the DEP’s response, the mayor issued a positive statement that acknowledged the agency’s science-based strategy for flood remediation, but his spokeswoman added that Fulop is “looking forward to a more detailed conversation.”

Here is what he will hear from LaTourette: “The nature-based resilience features intended for the interior in Phase 1A -- including its tidal channel network -- will not increase the threat of flooding, but rather reduce the risk of flooding,” the commissioner said.

That will not likely stop Fireman and some of his proxies from fear-mongering about flood control. LaTourette is prepared for anything, given Fireman’s blessing of previous PPF messaging, which included accusations of the DEP being “racist” and its prioritizing of “fish and birds over children.” Fireman might even summon help from federal lawmakers, because that’s how billionaires roll.

But we have a suggestion for Fireman, who denies having commercial interests in the park, and claims that his only motivation is to provide a “gift” to the people of Jersey City: If his primary interest is to improve athletic opportunities for city kids, why doesn’t he pull out his wallet to help the schools whose athletic facilities that have fallen into disrepair?

“Well, that would be real nice,” said Walker, with a laugh that was probably louder than he had intended.

Instead, Fireman has funneled gobs of money to astroturf groups such as the PPF and incited a campaign that pitted communities of color against dedicated park advocates such as Sam Pesin, while repeatedly trying to torpedo the most practical plan to restore our greatest public space. Indeed, Fireman has spent years investing money and energy on a development plan that was not a plan at all; it was a Hail Mary, one that ultimately plummeted to the astroturf like a duck in the middle of a mid-flight aneurysm.

For example, he could have thrown some of that disposable cash at a facility such as Caven Point Stadium -- a dilapidated four-field complex on the corner of Caven Point Road and Chapel Avenue, which Fireman can see behind a row of trees from the 9th hole fairway of his golf course.

Perhaps he can also use his influence to take advantage of the DEP’s Community Investment and Economic Revitalization (CIER) Program, which invests up to \$250 million for local parks.

But this is a good time to pause and rethink his altruism. The finest park in New Jersey, whose best days are just ahead, is moving on.