

The New York Times July 2, 2020

Buried in N.J.'s Budget Cuts: a Break for a Billionaire

By Tracey Tully

A stopgap budget with \$4 billion in cuts also includes an opening for private development in state parks, like a long-desired expansion of a golf course into Liberty State Park.

New Jersey lawmakers passed a stopgap three-month budget this week that included \$4 billion in cuts.

The temporary spending plan was described in news releases as “painful,” “austere” and “bare bones,” a bitter but necessary pill to offset the devastating toll the coronavirus has taken on the state’s finances.

It was fast-tracked to meet Wednesday's deadline, leaving watchdogs and advocacy organizations largely in the dark about key details during a time when most traditional lobbying and legislative activities at the State House have been sidelined by the virus.

Somewhere along the way a one-paragraph clause was quietly inserted.

The wording could clear the way for private development in Liberty State Park in Jersey City, N.J., a crown jewel of the park system that has been eyed for decades by developers. Liberty National, an exclusive private golf club where the original initiation fee was about half a million dollars, has been pressing for years to expand into a nearby section of the park.

Owners of the golf course, which offers spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline, want to create three new holes at Caven Point, a 22-acre outcropping of parkland that has been designated a migratory bird habitat.

Liberty National officials have said the extra space would help the club compete for future PGA Tour events, which they say generate significant revenue for the city and state.

The budget provision, buried on page 95 of the 111-page document, encourages private ventures at any state park by requiring the Department of Environmental

Protection, by Sept. 1, to solicit bids from interested developers to help pay for maintenance and improvements.

Key lawmakers said they were blindsided by the maneuver that would likely reward the wealthy at a time when the coronavirus is exposing the nation's gaping economic and racial divide.

An assemblyman from Jersey City, Raj Mukherji, said inserting the privatization clause in the midst of a pandemic that has led more than one million New Jersey residents to apply for unemployment benefits was especially troubling.

"The notion that I have constituents whose unemployment claims haven't been paid since March and who can't pay for groceries — who would have their public parkland taken away at this moment — stinks," said Mr. Mukherji, a Democrat. He said he was unaware of the privatization provision when he voted to approve the budget bill.

The Assembly and Senate passed the spending plan on Monday, and Gov. Philip D. Murphy signed it into law on Tuesday, over the objection of Jersey City's mayor, Steven M. Fulop, and several lawmakers.

"It was put in there at the last minute and rammed through," Mr. Fulop said.

Mr. Murphy's office released a statement indicating that the governor did "not intend" to solicit bids from private developers for Liberty State Park. A spokesman for Liberty National, Chris Donnelly, could not be reached for comment.

"The governor's office and Department of Environmental Protection will work together to evaluate all options and ensure that New Jersey's parks remain an accessible resource for residents," a spokeswoman, Alexandra Altman, said in a statement.

She also noted that the language in the bill "does not specifically refer to Liberty State Park."

The privatization amendment was not listed among the changes included in a written briefing of the bill some lawmakers were given before the vote, according to a legislative official. How the provision was added and by whom could not be determined.

Sen. Loretta Weinberg, a Democrat who holds the No. 2 leadership position behind the Senate president, Stephen M. Sweeney, said she was not aware of the provision when she voted to approve the budget. She said she was “outraged” by the turn of events.

One of the golf course’s owners, Paul B. Fireman, the founder of Reebok who sold his company to Adidas for \$3.8 billion, and his family are generous campaign donors, contributing about \$420,000 to Democrats and Republicans in New Jersey between 2009 and last year, state records show.

“A couple of paid lobbyists along with a couple of legislators got in special language for a guy who owns a golf course,” Ms. Weinberg said in an interview.

Hours earlier, she had sent a news release urging Mr. Murphy to issue a line-item veto of the bill.

Activists, she said, had “worked far too hard to have their efforts thwarted by a few lines buried in an emergency, never-before-done budget at the crest of a global pandemic,” Ms. Weinberg said. “This was a sneaky, backdoor way to attempt to change important public policy.”

Others, however, questioned how Ms. Weinberg, the Senate’s Democratic majority leader, could have not known about the effort.

When asked who she believed orchestrated the last-minute bill language, she said: “The boys. What else is new?”