

Bill that would protect birds at Caven Point, not birdies, is approved by Senate committee

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Jake Maher | The Jersey Journal

TRENTON — A bill that would ensure Caven Point remains a home for migratory birds — and not three holes on a billionaire’s golf course — took the first step toward becoming law Monday.

The Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously advanced a bill sponsored by state Sen. Brian Stack that would preserve the ecologically sensitive area in Liberty State Park as a natural habitat. The bill would also effectively thwart any attempt by Paul Fireman may to acquire the land for three new holes at his ultra-exclusive Liberty National Golf Course.

“I wouldn’t have felt right if I couldn’t get this bill done,” Stack said, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Stack introduced the bill last month after another bill he co-sponsored (the Liberty State Park Conservation, Recreation, and Community Inclusion Act) authorized \$50 million in active recreation investments in Hudson River waterfront state park, but failed to specifically give any protections to Caven Point, which Fireman has coveted in the past.

Fireman had said the holes were necessary to draw major PGA events, even though the club currently hosts a round of the PGA FedEx playoffs every few years. It also hosted the President’s Cup, a global team competition between the United States and an International team that represents the rest of the world excluding Europe.

The bill initially allocated \$250 million in funding for the park and park advocates at the time panned the \$50 million legislation as a giveaway to Fireman.

They were not satisfied by Stack’s effort to make amends with the Caven Point bill when it was first announced, but during Monday’s hearing, testimony from several groups signaled that all is forgiven between them and Stack.

“I want to thank (Sen. Stack) because he listened,” said Jeff Tittel, former president of the New Jersey Sierra Club. “When the hearings on the other legislation was there he heard compelling testimony on how important Caven Point is.”

“Senator Stack, you are a man of your word. You said some things and you did them,” said Greg Remaud, the New York/New Jersey Baykeeper.

Sam Pesin, president of Friends of Liberty State Park, maintained his criticism of Stack’s earlier bill in his testimony while praising the new bill.

“This bill is historic. It’s a milestone,” Pesin said. “It’s tremendously welcomed.”

Fireman has publicly stated that he has given up on trying to acquire the land, but lobbying reports show he has continued efforts to sway opinions on the park land adjacent to his golf club. No representatives from groups linked to Fireman spoke at Monday’s hearing.

His efforts helped keep the Liberty State Park Protection Act, which would have provided for active recreation plans and the park’s protection from large-scale commercial interests, from ever coming up for a vote.

Liberty State Park For All, a group funded by Fireman, issued a statement Monday thanking Stack for his support for the park and attempting to reframe the question of the preservation of Caven Point to one of contamination.

“Similar to other areas in Liberty State Park, there is historic contamination at Caven Point — including chromium and petroleum that pose a threat to the safety of our community. We strongly urge the legislature to conduct a thorough review of the historical significance of Caven Point as well as an environmental investigation, with a commitment that any remaining contamination in Caven Point be cleaned.”

The state Department of Environmental Protection has said

that Caven Point was remediated in 2004 and does not require additional clean-up.

Liberty State Park for All and The People’s Park Foundation, another new group funded by Fireman, have advocated for a stadium, concert arena and community center, besides all the ballfields that have been discussed by the DEP’s Liberty State Park redesign task force.

The bill will now advance to the floor for a vote in the Senate. No hearing is scheduled for its sister bill in the Assembly.