

The Star Ledger

8/12/94

OPPONENTS TEE OFF AT A HEARING ON LIBERTY PARK GOLF COURSE PLAN

AL FRANK

A proposal to build a public golf course in Liberty State Park found itself in the rough during a public hearing in Jersey City last night. The \$20 million plan, which has been debated for three years, was supported by those who say it will help the state pay for improving the popular waterfront park that opened 18 years ago but still is only 20 percent complete. Proponents said the golf course will not only provide an attractive amenity but also generate enough money to pay for landscaping 50 acres of parkland with playing fields and other facilities. But the hundreds who packed the landmark Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal were overwhelmingly against the plan, saying there are just too few golfers to justify taking about a half of the park's available open space in an urban area where open space is at a premium.

The partisan crowd repeatedly shouted down those attempting to speak on behalf of the proposal. Many also waved small, green signs reading "No golf course," successfully circumventing park rangers, who required larger placards - both pro and con - to be posted near the terminal doors. "No one can take open space from our people," said Audrey Zapp of Jersey City, a longtime critic of park development proposals. Statements opposing the plan were also submitted by representatives of Reps. Robert Menendez (D-13th Dist.) and Robert Torricelli (D-9th Dist.) Sen. Bernard Kenny (D-Hudson), the only legislator who testified personally, said a golf course as a money-raiser to finish the park was unnecessary. "The money is there," Kenny said of the state treasury. "Put a stake, once and for all, in the golf course proposal." The hearing was conducted by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to air a plan devised by the Liberty State Park Development Corp., a non-profit arm of the agency founded in 1984 to find private developers to build park amenities in exchange for long-term operating leases. Steve Lanset of Hoboken faulted the corporation's operation of two parking lots, its only business venture so far. "If this gang can't succeed at the parking lot business, how can they succeed at the golf course business?" Peter Ylvisaker, development corporation president, said the plan was not only workable, but would provide balanced recreational opportunities for the region. "It's not just a golf course; it's a lot more." "This would provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people," said the Rev. Daniel Degnan, president of St. Peter's College, who chaired the committee that came up with the plan. Like Ylvisaker, Degnan was repeatedly hooted. One man yelled, "Go to confession, Father. You're lying." The plan calls for spending \$20 million on the golf course, picnic areas, playgrounds, walkways, formal gardens and playing fields. The amenities would be constructed in an undeveloped section of the park west of Freedom Way. Last night was the first of two hearings to be conducted by the administration of Gov. Christie Whitman, who said she is receptive to the plan. The next hearing will be Aug. 25 at 7 p.m. in DEP headquarters at 401 E. State St.,

Trenton. The record will remain open until Sept. 24 for submission of written comments. Prior hearings were conducted by former DEP Commissioner Scott Weiner and then a task force that drew up the latest proposal after deliberating more than a year after Weiner's rejection of the original plan. The plan debated last night calls for an \$11 million golf course to be built on 150 acres of a 225-acre section of park bounded by Freedom Way and Phillip Drive. In the area, 35 acres would be reserved for wetlands. The other 40 acres, at a cost of \$5 million, would be transformed into passive recreation facilities, including walkways, picnic areas, playgrounds, a formal garden and restrooms. Active recreation facilities are to be built on the 11-acre 'Dog Show Field' at the corner of Freedom Way and Morris Pesin Drive. The multi-purpose playing fields and a 1,500-square-foot fieldhouse would cost about \$2 million. If any funds are available following the construction of those improvements, they would be allocated to a new pool and recreation complex at Camp Liberty at an estimated cost of \$8 million. DEP Commissioner Robert Shinn, who sat at the dais while assistant Commissioner James Hall presided at the hearing, said he hoped to make a decision on the proposal by the end of the year. 'This park needs to be developed,' Shinn said. 'What's been done here is so dynamic, but it really needs to be finished. It's an incredible facility.' Many speakers, including Lori Luck of Jersey City, agreed, noting that the harbor vistas and the proximity to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island would be spoiled by a golf course. A golf course was proposed in a 1983 DEP "Action Plan" but that plan never had a public hearing. But opposition to its size prompted Weiner to sever it from the corporation's first bond sale in 1992, and a task force convened by the corporation came up with the latest plan. The earlier bond sale earmarked \$13.2 million for two parking lots, improvements to the railroad terminal and raising the bulkhead at the park's northern end. The cost of those bonds is covered by parking fees