

# The New York Times

## New Jersey section

by Steve Strunsky

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### “Creating Liberty State Park from the Outside In”

STEVE AND MEGAN TRASK had spent a recent morning at Liberty State Park and were returning to their car in a lot along Freedom Way when they paused near a vast wooded area surrounded by a fence with signs warning, "No Trespassing: Hazardous Materials Area."

"We moved here, two or three years ago, and you look at a map and it shows this huge mass of land that says it's Liberty State Park," said Mr. Trask, a pharmaceutical marketing consultant. "But then you find out it's only 60 percent usable." (park is 600 acres above water and 600 acres under water.)

Mr. Trask was not far off in his estimate. June will mark the 30th anniversary of Liberty State Park. But even as a waterfront walkway, picnic areas and playgrounds have been created around the perimeter for the enjoyment of almost 5 million visitors a year, the park's 234-acre interior portion has remained undeveloped and off limits.

But under a plan developed over several years by the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the State Department of Environmental Protection, private environmentalists and park watchdogs, the interior of Liberty State Park is to be flooded using a salt creek that will be dug as a link to New York Harbor. In turn, this will create a tidal marsh surrounded by forest and grasslands, and crisscrossed with miles of boardwalks and footpaths.

The project, which is expected to cost the state and federal government an estimated \$32 million and take five years, is scheduled to begin early next year after the engineering plans are complete.

There have been previous plans to develop the park's interior, including proposals for a theme park, a residential complex and most recently, a controversial golf course. The course, put forth as a way to finance development of the interior without taxpayer funds, was squashed by Gov. Christie Whitman in 1995 amid criticism that even a public course would be too exclusive for such a cherished public space.

That and the other previous plans lacked a consensus among elected officials, policy makers and the public, including the influential Friends of Liberty State Park, a citizens' group headed by Sam Pesin, the son of Morris Pesin, a community activist who conceived of the park and pushed for its creation.

"My dad would be so excited that his vision of a family park behind the Statue of Liberty has continued to blossom in so many ways," said Mr. Pesin, whose father died in 1992. "It's a recreational resource, a cultural resource and a natural resource."

The park was established in 1976, nine years after the Central Railroad of New Jersey went bankrupt and halted service to its waterfront terminal on land now occupied by the park. Yet while most of the terminal was restored to its Victorian splendor, and the 1.5-mile waterfront walkway was built to provide exquisite views of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty just off shore, the interior portion of the park was neglected.

Gradually, the interior has grown into a kind of post-industrial urban wilderness, with overgrowth masking most traces of the rail yards, which had been created in the 19th century using garbage, dredge materials and blasted bedrock to fill in hundreds of acres of natural salt marshlands. To this day, uprooted railroad ties with

rusted spikes are scattered amid bayberry bushes, sumac, white pine and gray birch trees that sprout from glinting coal cinders.

"There's remnants of the old railroad all over the place," said Frank Gallagher, the park administrator, the very image of a naturalist -- with his well-worn hiking boots -- as he led visitors on a tour.

Dozens of bird species, including red-tailed hawks and goldfinch (New Jersey's state bird) as well as rabbit, fox and other wildlife inhabit the area. Wild turkeys have been spotted by park rangers.

The fence and warning signs went up as a result of a lawsuit against the state filed in 1993 by the Interfaith Community Organization, which also forced the current cleanup of four acres next to the park's interpretive center on Freedom Way. Joe Morris, the interfaith group's chromium cleanup project director, praised the salt marsh project, but said the money would be better spent on residential cleanups. (Greg Remaud, preservation director for New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, explained that New Jersey's Natural Resources Damages program which brought 10 million dollars to LSP, from a settlement with polluting companies, to restore those 4 acres and for use in the Interior Restoration, needed to be spent on restoring a natural area, and wasn't meant for residential area clean-ups).

Under the project, a total of 36 acres would be converted to salt marsh, fed by a creek up to 8 feet deep and 100 feet wide. Another 28 acres would be freshwater wetlands, fed by rainwater runoff from parking lots and the roof of the nearby Liberty Science Center. A berm built up to eight feet high would occupy 30 acres of the site's northwest corner, to act as a sight and sound buffer against the New Jersey Turnpike Extension. About 100 acres would be woodland, with some 60 acres of grass.

In certain hot spots, soil containing higher concentrations of contaminants will be removed, said Greg Remaud, preservation director for New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, who helped plan the project (and moved it forward). In a cost-saving element, several hundred thousand cubic yards of earth dug up for the salt creek is to be used for the berm and as a layer of topsoil to cap lightly contaminated areas.

The state's \$11.5 million share of the cost includes \$10 million in penalties assessed to companies held responsible for chromium contamination. There is no federal money budgeted for the project, but the Army Corps is hopeful that, with state funding already in place and strong support from New Jersey's new United States Senator, Robert Menendez, the federal government's \$20 million share will be allocated soon, said William F. Slezak, chief of the corps' New York and New Jersey Harbor Programs Branch.

In the meantime, officials said work would begin using the state money, which by itself would pay for the salt creek and 10 acres of marsh.