

The Jersey Journal
Restoration of river shoreline proposed
Wildlife refuge, habitat among the design plans
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A 251-acre undeveloped portion of Liberty State Park, which has been targeted for use at various times as a golf course and a commercial waterpark, will instead be transformed into a tidal salt marsh and nature preserve, according to officials from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which will undertake the massive project.

Seeking to restore the swath of land to its natural condition as the shoreline of the Hudson River, Corps officials are proposing to run one or more channels into the Jersey City park's interior. The project is designed to recreate the habitat of long-departed animal and plant species, and open up a wildlife refuge for the enjoyment of the park's roughly 2 million annual visitors.

"This is going to create a Discovery Channel in the backyard of millions of New Jersey residents," said Eric Stiles, a member of the New Jersey Audobon Society and a participant in Wednesday night's public meeting at which the Corps' preliminary plans were presented.

The specific shape of the area just east of the Liberty Science Center, which will likely be divided into a roughly 60-acre open space perimeter of grasslands surrounding 190 acres of wetlands and forest, has not been settled and Corps officials are offering their preliminary plans for public comment.

In order to create the natural shoreline and tidal marsh, the Corps will have to remove the landfill, which was added more than a century ago by the railroad companies that ran freight and passenger lines through what is now the state park.

Liberty State Park was created in 1976 and has been a work in progress ever since, with various sections getting cleaned up and developed in stages over the past 26 years.

"After the Industrial Revolution, what was left was basically a derelict rail yard," said Frank Gallagher, the director of Parks and Forestry for the state Department of Environmental Protection, which manages the 1,122-acre park, 600 acres of which are above the waterline.

Officials say immediate plans for the 251-acre interior call for digging up the fill - much of which may be contaminated - and clearing the way for an

ambitious restoration project that will take several years to complete.

Two conceptual plans were presented Wednesday night by the Corps, both of which include fresh and salt water marshes, mud flats, upland forest and possibly small hills to block views of nearby industrial buildings from the preserve. One plan calls for dredging a single channel to bring water from the Hudson into the area and the other envisions two channels, one bringing water in and the other allowing it to flow back out.

Although there was some disagreement among the roughly 75 members of the public who came out on a rainy night to hear the Corps' plans, most praised the general intention to create wildlife habitats.

"The Hudson River is one of the mightiest rivers in the country and has virtually no natural shoreline," said geologist Emlyn Koster, president and CEO of the Science Center. "We're bringing back that which was there."

After plans for a golf course and commercial waterpark died in the face of widespread public opposition during the 1990s, a committee was assembled by the DEP to come up with plans for the interior section of the park.

The committee, made up of park advocates, government officials and members of the public, spent nearly two years soliciting ideas and eventually came up with what is known as the General Management Plan. That document calls for open space for passive recreation around a nature preserve with trails running through it.

Some have asked that sports fields or a small amphitheater be built on the perimeter section. Those close to the planning process say, when the engineering work is underway, public bids will be sought for landscape architects to design the open fields and portions of the interior preserve.

While members of the Audobon Society said they generally favor an undisturbed wilderness area where migratory birds can stop on their winter flights south, others are pushing for public access to the forest and tidal areas.

The Corps, which is directing the project as part of the Hudson-Raritan Ecosystem Restoration - a program authorized and partially funded by Congress - will be coming back to the public with more specific plans as time goes on, said Joseph Redican, the Corps project planner.

"We're not going to come in here and do something that nobody wants us to do," Redican said. "We're here to get your ideas."

Some have objected to the Corps' plans to eliminate Phragmites - tall plants that Redican characterized as "weeds" - from the area.

"We have to watch what they do, what vegetation is removed, how many trees are destroyed," said Jersey City resident Katherine Grimm. "We have to keep it serene for the animals."

Greg Remaud, president of the Liberty State Park Conservancy, said he would

favor opening up the marsh and forest areas to park visitors.

"This is nature for people," said Remaud. "I am a strong advocate for people having access to the 251 acres."

Sam Pesin, president of the 700-member Friends of Liberty State Park and son of Morris Pesin, who first proposed the idea of the park more than 40 years ago, said so far the plans are keeping with those his organization has pushed for always.

"This is the infancy of a plan that will one day be an international model for urban nature restoration," Pesin said.