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Prescott Tolk staff writer
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The grass gets greener
Liberty State Park receives more environmental restoration funds

Jersey City's Liberty State Park will be home to a five-year environmental feasibility study costing up to \$10 million, officials announced at a press conference Monday.

The study's purpose is to find the most efficient way to restore the greatest amount of wetlands in the 600-acre park.

A coalition of environmentalists, park rangers, and elected officials gathered Monday at the peak of the Liberty Science Center, where the windows frame panoramic views of the park, to unveil the project.

Rep. Robert Menendez (D-13th Dist.) received the bulk of accolades for getting Liberty State Park included in a Hudson-Raritan Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study. For Menendez, Liberty State Park has been a "leisure space to bring my family in one of the most densely populated places in the country."

Led by the Army Corps of Engineers, this study will focus on ways of restoring freshwater marshes, salt marshes, and grasslands that help preserve the diverse species at Liberty State Park. The Army Corps of Engineers is restoring various waterways in the New York and New Jersey harbors.

"I'm glad the Army Corps has an opportunity to show the other nature of its mission," Menendez said. Most Army Corps projects deal with dredging waterways to make room for cargo ships.

According to Col. John O'Dowd, Liberty State Park's feasibility study could cost up to \$10 million over the span of five years. The state of New Jersey is splitting the expense with the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, which has signed on

board as the local partner for the project.

The Port Authority agreed to help finance these projects in return for the government's help in funding a \$2.3 billion dredging project in various parts of the New Jersey Harbor. Liberty State Park is not an area affected by this dredging process.

The study coincides with the General Management Plan (GMP), which the state Department of Environmental Protection has sponsored that will make the 251-acre area of undeveloped forestry in the park's center an accessible nature trail to the general public. Both studies attempt to preserve the natural wildlife in the park while providing opportunities for observation for nature enthusiasts. The GMP includes a 60 acre open space perimeter of the Interior nature preserve.

After both studies are completed, it is more likely that Liberty State Park will be home to a nature preserve and less likely that it will be used for commercial ventures.

Since the projects overlap in several ways, similar people are involved in each project. Greg Remaud, president of the LSP Conservancy and conservation director of the New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, has been a part of creating both plans and said he was able to give insight into how one could complement the other. Even though the Army Corps' study may take up to five years, Remaud said that some environmental studies early on could facilitate plans to develop the interior sooner.

DEP Acting-Commissioner Bradley Campbell commended Menendez for elevating Liberty State Park's status and said it was important to "incorporate the needs of the citizens with the needs of the environment." There will be an international design competition which will include public input.

Coming a long way

Friends of Liberty State Park, an advocacy group dedicated to promoting free open space within the park, see these newest restoration plans as another affirmative sign

that the powers to be are listening to the public. "All we have to do is look out of these windows to feel the park's immense spiritual power," said Sam Pesin, president of the organization.

Preserving Liberty State Park's natural terrain began in the late 1950s by Pesin's father, Morris. Prior to this effort, the park had served in various industrial capacities, housing commercial ports, railroad stations, and factories. But the changing economy had transformed this industrial zone into a receptacle for abandoned railroad yards, construction debris and toxic waste. As the battle for park preservation began, natural restoration processes began as grass, trees, and wetlands replaced the commercial litter. Soon enough, the park had naturally become a biological oasis, serving as a stopping ground for many birds and housing a variety of animals. The diversity of wildlife merely reflected the diversity of vegetation, making the case for park preservation evermore important. The park opened on Flag Day in 1976, celebrating its birth with the nation's bicentennial. Since then, the park has developed into a public resource and tourist attraction that brings 4.8 million visitors each year.

Aside from the green grass and its waterfront location, people are drawn to the park because of its proximity to places like Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and recent neighbor, Liberty Science Center.

Restoring the wetlands, marshes, and grasslands is essential for maintaining the 278 species of birds that use the park as a stopping point before flying to South America, said Richard Kane, vice president of the New Jersey Audubon Society.

Commercial interests loomed

Recent news about environmental restoration gave a concerned community a sigh of relief after protesting against a few proposed commercial ventures. In January 2001, a public meeting grew ire from the Friends of Liberty State Park and the Liberty State Park Conservancy when possible plans for the 251-acres of undeveloped land included a water park. Prior to that, the same advocacy groups had fought a long battle against a golf course and amphitheater. These proposals have emerged from

the Liberty State Park Development Corporation, a relic of the public/private partnerships of the Reagan era that strove to generate financial independence in public lands by incorporating private enterprise. The Liberty Landing Marina, for example, is a private venture that earns income for the maintenance of the park. Environmentalists say that these type of commercial projects rob the public of free open space and cause more damage to the park than the revenue it generates.

The public outcry that erupted over the proposed waterpark drew attention fast and won promises from state officials that the park's interior would be preserved and developed as nature trails open to the public. The plan evolved from an Interdisciplinary Committee that included public officials and citizens in an ongoing dialogue about retaining the integrity of the park environmentally, economically, and geographically.

"This park has a mission and a destiny as a free park for a free people," Pesin said.

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