

# The Star-Ledger

## Turning back the ecological clock

**As Liberty State Park nears its 30th birthday, an ambitious project aims to give nature a huge boost**

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In the center of Liberty State Park is something of a miracle.

At 234 acres, it is no small thing. A chain-link fence surrounds it, with signs warning of toxic contamination.

Though the public has never been admitted, it is hardly unoccupied.

There are Japanese evergreens, fields of wispy rushes, stands of gray birch, and sumac that pierces the sky like stag horns. There are woodcocks, goldfinches, sharp-shinned hawks, long-eared owls and rumors of a fox.

"This is turkey scat right here," said Frank Gallagher, park administrator for the Department of Environmental Protection, pausing on a quiet trail.

Part of the miracle is that this place exists at all. Over the past three decades, a conga line of builders, some friendly with mayors or governors, has floated one development idea after another for the property.

Equally unlikely was nature's comeback. This was once a marsh, and was filled with dredge spoils, industrial waste and granite chipped out of Manhattan to make way for basements.

"In 30 years, the natural restoration that has taken place here is just phenomenal," Gallagher said.

Now there's a plan to push that restoration a giant step forward. The Army Corps of Engineers has designed a scheme to cut a tidal creek in from New York Harbor. Once in the interior, it would widen into a salt marsh of the sort that used to line the harbor, serving as fish nurseries and bird buffets.

Nearby would be three new freshwater wetlands and a pond, filled with rainwater funneled in from two parking lots and the roof of Liberty Science Center. Walking trails would lace the whole concoction.

The \$32 million design, seven years in the making, is looking less and less like a pipe dream. Though Congress seems unlikely to fund it any time soon, the state came up with \$10 million for the project last month.

Environmentalists and Corps officials could think of no more ambitious effort to turn back the ecological clock on an urban shore.

Park advocates are also enthusiastic about the project, partly because it would open the interior, fully 40 percent of the park's land, to the public for the first time. Moreover, it would probably protect the section once and for all from the covetous eyes of developers, a fitting gift for the park in this, its 30th year.

## **THE UPLANDS**

In his original master plan for Liberty State Park, Princeton architect Robert Geddes dubbed the interior section the Uplands, and called for community playfields and gardens there.

They never materialized. Instead, a series of development proposals did.

The first, for a theme park, came less than a year after the park's 1976 opening.

The Save Liberty State Park Coalition, founded by the late Morris Pesin, the Jersey City activist who first conceived of the park, quickly formed and defeated the proposal.

But a series of others would follow -- from a 1981 plan for another theme park and 8,000 condominiums to a 2001 plan for a waterpark. Many other ideas came in between, the most persistent being a golf course.

Public meetings on the proposals drew hundreds of people, most opposed to any commercialization.

"The great universal message of the park is that people put democracy into action and fought for a free park behind the Statue of Liberty," said Sam Pesin, Morris' son and president of Friends of Liberty State Park.

Meanwhile, the interior sat gated and undisturbed.

By the early 1980s, it was still largely open land, with grass, shrubs and a few poplars.

Then it started to take off. Though some of the trees were planted as part of a children's program, most took root naturally.

"Nature just re-emerged," said Greg Remaud of the New York-New Jersey Baykeeper. "It grew back on its own.

That's despite being surrounded by a city. Most of the tree species that took root have light seeds that travel great distances on the wind, Gallagher said. Birch and poplar are typical colonizers of open space.

Railroad ties can still be found among the trees, along with a wide variety of other garbage. But the young forest, whose treetops frame the Goldman Sachs Tower, the state's tallest building, has become an oasis of natural habitat in the most densely populated county of the most densely populated state.

In 2003, Gov. James E. McGreevey dissolved the Liberty State Park Development Corp., a state-sanctioned body that encouraged development in the park.

Pesin and his allies considered it a watershed victory. Finally free to stop fighting, they started promoting the wetlands restoration, which the Army Corps had begun considering in 1999 as part of the broader goal of bringing tides, marshes and life back to the hardened shores of the Hudson-Raritan Estuary.

### **A \$10 MILLION LIFT**

The project has long looked unlikely, but the state's contribution has made it less so.

The \$10 million came from a settlement the DEP made with companies that dumped chromium waste in Hudson County. Of that money, \$1 million will go toward design and \$9 million toward construction.

The state Freshwater Wetlands Mitigation Council, which controls a state wetlands fund, has pledged an additional \$1.5 million.

What the Corps will do with the money remains to be determined. A final design stage will begin when it receives the money from the DEP, which should occur "shortly," Corps spokeswoman Carolyn Vadino said.

Gallagher said the money would probably "get the tidal creek at least started."

Construction may begin on some piece of the plan as early as the spring of 2007, said William Slezak, chief of the Harbor Programs Branch of the Army Corps.

The project is one of several under way in the state's most popular park -- more than 5 million visitors last year -- as it nears its 30th anniversary this June.

"Empty Sky," a 9/11 memorial of two stainless-steel walls that will merge into the New York skyline in Twin Towers-like proportions, is under construction on the north end of the park's waterfront and expected to be completed by Sept. 11.

Just south of the park, the exclusive new Liberty National Golf Course is under construction. The developers are obligated to include a waterfront walkway, which will connect the park proper to the Caven Point Natural Area, a beachy public peninsula that is accessible only through Port Liberté, a gated condominium complex.

In the rear of the park, the Liberty Science Center is undergoing a \$104 million renovation that will expand it by a third.

Pesin said he also was advocating for \$2.5 million to build a picnic pavilion to alleviate the summer congestion, as well as a \$500,000 athletic field, though those funds are proving hard to find.

The projects that are under way, however, amount to quite a growth spurt for a 30-year-old, he said.

"We are at the beginning of a tremendous positive era," Pesin said. "The park is getting closer to fulfilling its potential."

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