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Officials envision a wildlife refuge in Liberty State Park

Funds sought to convert 234 tainted acres

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A fenced-off, long-contaminated chunk of Liberty State Park is about to get a facelift to become what federal and state officials are calling an urban wildlife refuge.

The \$32 million project is not a cleanup. It's a green makeover, with 234 acres of wasteland in the middle of the 1,100-acre park getting remodeled into a mixture of freshwater wetlands, grasslands, hardwood forests and a saltwater marsh.

"The project could start as early as the next three to four months," said Col. Aniello Tortora of the Army Corps of Engineers yesterday as he joined a host of state and federal officials atop the Liberty Science Center's glass tower in Jersey City. The venue offered an unobstructed view of the property, which has been reclaimed by a mix of native and invasive trees and grasses since it was fenced off from the public decades ago.

"This is good news for our economy, for Liberty State Park and most of all for the environment in which we live," said U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, who grew up in Hudson County and is working to secure \$20 million in federal funding to cover most of the costs.

"When complete, it will be one of the largest contiguous areas of natural established hardwoods in the metropolitan area and will represent a unique opportunity for a long-term study of urban forestry," he added.

The project, known as the Hudson-Raritan Estuary and nine years in the making, includes plans to dredge a tidal creek and build a walking trail through the restored acres, where warning signs of toxic contamination still cling to a rusty chain-link

fence.

The site was long ago filled with industrial waste, dredged materials and rock dug out of Manhattan to create basements. John Watson, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, said New Jersey will add \$10 million to the project -- some collected from companies that dumped chromium waste in Hudson County.

Frank Gallagher of the state Division of Parks and Forestry said bio-filters will be constructed to cleanse polluted stormwater flowing in from roads, buildings and construction sites west of the park.

Officials talked hopefully of a day when schoolchildren use the area to view birds that flock to the park.

"This is very exciting. This will make the park one of the greatest urban parks in the world," said Sam Pesin, president of Friends of Liberty State Park.

His father, the late Morris Pesin, was a Jersey City activist credited with conceiving of Liberty State Park and beautifying the New Jersey backdrop to the Statue of Liberty.

But the project raises ecological questions.

While poplars and birches have already reclaimed the polluted ground and red-tailed hawks fly overhead, the scenery belies the heavy metals detected even in the new plant life.

While officials contend the pollutants would pose no threat to humans, there are questions about the impact on wildlife.

"We should clean it up first; we're remediating without cleaning," said Jeff Tittel of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. "It may eventually look wonderful when they finish, but what will the results be in the long run? The contamination is still there." (Jeff Tittel didn't go to any meetings or make any calls of inquiry, and didn't know any of the comprehensive scientific research or plans or reasons for the plans - of saving emerging forest and unique vegetation - regarding the contamination in the

emerging natural area - note by Sam).

Tittel also questioned the impact on the birds that will feed and nest on the new and inviting habitat.

"That's the big gorilla, and not just here but in every urban restoration project, including the Meadowlands," said Greg Remaud, conservation director of the New York New Jersey Baykeepers, which supports the restoration effort.

He said the project may have to nurture only plants that store contaminants in their roots and not those that produce fruits, like berries, that could pass contaminants on to wildlife.

"There are no easy answers on what to do," Remaud added.

Gallagher of the parks and forestry division said that, according to a Rutgers University study, birds were found to have no more traces of heavy metals along the Hudson River area than at an inland study site. He also said the restoration project includes measures to keep any contaminants from moving off-site or becoming exposed.

Despite the ecological debate, authorities are committed to the project.

Menendez said the \$20 million in federal funds, authorized under the federal Water Resources Development Act signed in December, must still undergo review by federal subcommittees. But he vowed to press for its release and any additional funds needed.