

New Legislation on Liberty State Park signed

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TRENTON - Gov. Christie signed legislation Monday that would provide new protections against any proposed commercial development at Liberty State Park but does not meet the expectations of park advocates, who still fear the site is "very vulnerable."

The law requires at least one hearing at the park over any project there, and gives the commissioner of environmental protection the right of final approval.

An earlier version - which opponents feared would open the door to the park's privatization and commercialization - was signed by the governor in February, then revised to offer protections to the site, a popular gateway to the Statue of Liberty.

"The people will zealously fight for Liberty State Park," said Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, a nonprofit advocacy group. "There is such passion for a free park behind Lady Liberty.

"I would expect liberty-loving people to fight against large privatization plans," Pesin said. "This is an American park that needs to be passed on to future generations."

Pesin says he hopes any plan for the park receives "at least two public hearings - one during the week in the evening and one on Saturday."

"It is better that the DEP commissioner has to approve a plan," he added. "Then it's clear that the buck stops with the governor," since the commissioner serves him.

Christie said the original law would help make government smaller and more affordable by merging the Meadowlands Commission and the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority into a Meadowlands Regional Commission. It said the new commission "shall evaluate, approve, and implement any plans for Liberty State Park."

Critics' concerns over the management and potential development of the site appear to have been at least partly addressed by amendments, which say "any plans approved by the commission shall be . . . subject to approval or disapproval by the commissioner of environmental protection."

"In evaluating any plan, the commissioner shall prepare an assessment of environmental impacts on the plan, and how those impacts, if any, may be avoided, minimized, or mitigated," the measure says. "At least one public hearing in connection with plans under consideration by the commission shall be held at Liberty State Park."

One of the major concerns that Pesin and other park advocates have is the possible use of the park as a concert venue.

"There will be a grassroots battle against any large-scale plans, as in the past, especially against a commercial amphitheater . . . with a long-term lease to a concert industry entity, which would turn the park into the PNC Arts Center on summer weekends, and cause traffic jams with big concerts," Pesin said. The move would "block access by all who want to use the park as a park.

"Summer weekends are the most special days in our sacred park, and so any private amphitheater proposal is the most dangerous plan which I expect to be pushed forward by Christie's DEP," he said. "We'll see if Christie listens to the overwhelming majority sentiment - the broad public consensus against park privatization/commercialization - like Gov. Whitman did" in battles against a proposed golf course and water park.