

The Record: Liberty maul

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NOT ONLY is Liberty State Park in Jersey City an open space oasis in a highly urbanized area, it offers a panoramic view of the New York City skyline and easy ferry access to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. It's no surprise that the park attracts more than 4 million visitors a year.

Not content with the status quo, the state has plans to sharply increase development in the park, saying that would draw even more visitors and increase revenue. Park supporters and environmental groups have condemned the idea, and Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop has pledged to go to court to stymie the state's efforts.

The unhappiness is not only attributed to any development plans, but to the state's reluctance to openly discuss its intentions for the park for most of this year. Park supporters also were dismayed when a last-minute amendment was added to a non-related bill in 2014 to give some development powers to the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority.

An 18-page report by the state Department of Environmental Protection made public last week justified park development by noting that there are numerous hotels and restaurants within Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks in California and Wyoming, respectively. But those parks are substantially larger than Liberty State Park and are not located in, or even near, urban areas. Lodging and dining is not hard to come by in Hudson County, not to mention Manhattan just across the river.

One part of the state's plan is to redevelop a portion of the historic train shed in the north end of the park. Possibilities would include a low-rise hotel within the "envelope of the train shed," a museum or the re-creation of "famous restaurants (past and present) from all over New Jersey." As for the adjacent terminal building itself, the plan suggests a restaurant with outdoor seating or a small catering hall as possibilities.

It is true, as the report points out, that the sprawling train shed may be too large to restore and that the terminal's interior has been damaged over the years, most recently by Superstorm Sandy. Both properties need attention, but turning the park's north end into a miniature commercial hub is not a remedy.

The park's main entrance at the south end of the property is flanked by maintenance yards and a rather seedy waterfront area. The report is correct when it says, "This hardly presents the sort of appealing welcome one should be able to expect at New Jersey's only urban [state] park."

The obvious solution would be to eliminate the maintenance yard and to clean up the waterfront. A boathouse and a marina are reasonable suggestions, but we have no idea why the state report also mentions an amusement park as a possibility. The park's main attribute in many ways is what it does not have. Many of those who visit Liberty State Park live in urban areas and seek a small bit of refuge from noise and clutter. Changing that dynamic would not serve the public.

Followup Comments by Sam Pesin, president of Friends of LSP:

Thanks to The Record for this important and powerful editorial and also thanks to Scott Fallon for his excellent and vigilant news coverage of Gov Christie's arrogant attack on Liberty State Park in the last year. For the parks 39 years, the overwhelming majority has always wanted a free open space peaceful park behind the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. The Governor's proposals show a cluelessness of the true purposes and meaning of this public resource to NJ and our nation.

A couple of points about the proposals mentioned in the editorial are:

- A hotel should not go where the sheds are or anywhere in LSP because hotels should go outside the park as with Central Park

- The historic landmark 1889 Terminal building is in great condition after the just finished \$10 million dollar renovation after Sandy. That historic landmark space should not be rented out to a sheds hotel or for any other daytime private uses.

-One proposal is not just for yoga and poetry readings by the riverfront but for a private company to book many large events on a waterfront lawn which would cause spring and summer weekend traffic jams and the taking away of free parking spaces, just as an amusement park or commercial amphitheater would do at the southwestern side of LSP

-The maintenance complex is totally out of sight of the public and is totally necessary for the park and relocating it would mean putting it in some park open space, and included in that southwest acreage is the popular Camp Liberty, the 42-year-old camp that serves a diverse urban population.

Lastly the state has not pledged that there will be public hearings and public comment period which is a must! The state has only promised phony manipulated "stakeholder meetings". There must be a full public participation process for this sacred priceless park behind Lady Liberty.