

The New York Times

Fans of Liberty State Park Leery of Proposed Agency

By JASON GRANT

January 6, 2015

When Liberty State Park opened in 1976, it was said to be New Jersey's bicentennial gift to the United States. Sitting at the southeastern end of Jersey City, it stretches along the Hudson River for 1,200 acres, offering a collection of stunning vistas: The Statue of Liberty seems almost within reach, and Ellis Island beckons. The waters of the Verrazano Straits and New York Harbor stretch east; the Manhattan skyline shimmers in the distance.

Yet the park has been a battleground since it opened. Developers' attempts to build a golf course, an amusement park and condominiums have all been defeated.

Now, according to some supporters of the park, there is a new threat: a last-minute addition to a bill passed by the New Jersey Legislature shortly before Christmas that proposes a merger of two agencies —the Meadowlands Commission and the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority —into a new Meadowlands Regional Commission and handing over final control of the park's preservation and development to that commission. Such decisions now belong to the state's Department of Environmental Protection.

The Record of Hackensack, N.J., which broke the story last week, reported on Monday that the environmental department, part of Gov. Chris Christie's administration, was responsible for the addition to the bill.

The environmental department has no bonding authority, which could help finance revenue-generating projects in Liberty State Park; the new Meadowlands commission would.

The governor, who declined to comment on the bill, has until early February to act on the legislation.

Larry Ragonese, a spokesman for the environmental department, said on Tuesday that while he was hesitant to say much about a bill being reviewed by the governor, "I can only tell you, the D.E.P. will retain control of activities and operations of Liberty State Park. There is no plan to relinquish that control" to a new Meadowlands commission.

One portion of the language added to the measure, which generally aims to change the tax structure for several towns in Bergen and Hudson Counties and to form a commission to help improve Meadowlands development, says that the commission will "evaluate, approve, and implement any plan or plans for the further preservation, development, enhancement, or improvement of Liberty State Park."

A state government employee with knowledge of plans for Liberty State Park, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the bill, insisted on Tuesday that any development would maintain the "nature of the park."

"We are not talking any kind of commercial or residential development there at all," he said. While new projects, funded in part with bonds, would bring in revenue, they would largely be additions such as "new picnic facilities, a music venue shell, maybe kayaking centers or restaurants" similar to a couple already on the park site.

The governor has been pushing since 2011 for New Jersey's parks to create more revenue and rely less on taxpayers. But Sam Pesin, president of the 800-member Friends of Liberty State Park, and other park supporters see the move as a threat to the park. They point out that the new commission would include the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, which promotes the building of sports and entertainment venues. And some supporters are concerned that officials from northern New Jersey have been pushing for casinos both in the Meadowlands and miles away, near the park.

"We urge the governor to conditionally veto this bill until the park language is taken out," Mr. Pesin said in an interview on Tuesday. "If he signs this bill to facilitate the privatization of the free park behind the world's greatest symbol of freedom, he will be dishonoring Lady Liberty and the spirit of America."

Mr. Pesin added, "It's a shameful tragedy that language was sneaked into an 80-page bill at the last minute before Christmas and there was no legislative floor debate and public knowledge and no public discussion."

Greg Remaud, the deputy director of the New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, a nonprofit group that aims to protect area waterways, is also concerned.

"Since its inception politicians have tried to put pet projects into this park," Mr. Remaud said. "It hasn't been the D.E.P. and the politicians who have protected Liberty State Park. They have tried to sell it out on multiple occasions. It has been public protests."