

Liberty Park advocates seek hearings on report project

August 9, 2015 Last updated: Sunday, August 9, 2015, 1:21 AM

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The Record

Advocates concerned about the Christie administration's plans to bring more private development to Liberty State Park are asking for public hearings to discuss a report detailing possible projects, which has so far been kept secret.

In a letter sent last week to Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin, park advocates said they didn't want the plans "ramrodded" through without a chance to comment.

Concerns over the park erupted late last year when DEP officials asked lawmakers to add language at the last minute to a bill on the Meadowlands that gave oversight of the park to the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, which can help finance large projects. It was later revealed that the DEP had awarded a \$120,000 contract months before to contractors to produce a report on the park's development possibilities.

The DEP has turned down two requests by The Record for copies of that report by the private planning group, New Jersey Future, saying it's still only a draft and therefore exempt from the state's Open Public Records Act even though it was completed last year.

Larry Hajna, a DEP spokesman, said Thursday that the report is a "draft evaluation of possibilities" that agency officials are still evaluating. He said officials are also still reviewing the request for public hearings.

Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, asked Martin for two hearings and a monthlong public comment period because they are "the only way to show respect for democracy and for this beloved park, an American treasure."

Governor Christie has long seen Liberty State Park as an untapped revenue source with its 5 million annual visitors and its spectacular views of Manhattan, New York Harbor and Ellis Island. The park costs New Jersey taxpayers \$2 million a year to operate despite bringing in \$1.5 million from special events and leases for two restaurants and a marina.

DEP's contract with New Jersey Future said the vast majority of Liberty State's visitors are just passing through to access ferries to the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and Manhattan.(please see [Friend's reply to this lie at end of this story](#)) It said the DEP's parks division lacks the expertise to "bring in enhancements, programming and services that would appeal to this international audience."

New Jersey Future hired Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, a New York-based consultant group that redesigned Bryant Park in Manhattan and Military Park in Newark. Although the report remains unavailable to the public, the contract with New Jersey Future mentions a few

areas at Liberty State that could be developed, including the historic train terminal as a potential venue for a restaurant, catering facility and conference rooms. It also says that all "elements of the park" can be considered in the analysis, something that concerns Pesin and others who are open to some small-scale development.

Hajna said the park's plans are still "very much in preliminary stages."

Reply by Friends of LSP to NJDEP's statement quoted in story:

“DEP’s contract with New Jersey Future said the vast majority of Liberty State’s visitors are just passing through to access ferries to the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and Manhattan.”

It is a lie for the DEP to have stated in its contract with NJ Future that most park users are those who come to take the ferry to Lady Liberty and Ellis Island. 5 and a half million people visit LSP each year. About 700,000 come to LSP to get on ferries to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island and about 500,000 visit Liberty Science Center. The rest of the 5 and a half million come to the park for public enjoyment of various unstructured recreation and leisure, relaxation, picnics, running, walking, bicycling, and special events like charity walks and runs etc.

This administration's dead-wrong "Sustainable Parks" goal of turning LSP into a revenue-generating "venue", a commercial cash cow at the expense of urban park users and the purpose and spirit of LSP - casts aside 39 years of the broad public consensus for a free and green open space urban state park behind Lady Liberty. Looking at LSP through money-making eyes and seeing LSP's value as tied only to how much money it can bring in, is warped and is an assault on the quality of life of urban people and all who enjoy its inspiring vistas, lawns, and paths.