

Advocates see hidden threat to Liberty State Park; bill could spark development

December 31, 2014, 10:05 PM

By SCOTT FALLON

staff writer

The Record

A paragraph added at the last minute to a bill awaiting Governor Christie's signature puts a new state commission in charge of development of Liberty State Park, a move some believe will make it easier for the park's coveted Hudson River waterfront to be sold or leased to private developers.

Three sentences, buried in the 80-page legislation that combines two Meadowlands agencies, allow a new commission to evaluate, approve and implement any plan or plans for the further preservation, development, enhancement or improvement of Liberty State Park in Jersey City.

It is unclear who added the paragraph. A spokesman for Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto, the bill's primary sponsor, would not say.

"It came out of nowhere, because no one knew this was happening until after it passed," said Sam Pesin, president of the 800-member Friends of Liberty State Park, a volunteer group. "There's no reason to put the park under a new commission unless you want to build on it." (*Sam addition to article - or have way too many admission fee summer weekend concerts with traffic blocking park users and turning LSP into PNC Arts Center*).

When it was introduced in the Assembly on Dec. 15, the bill did not mention Liberty State Park. But the added paragraph was there when the measure passed three days later, according to a review of legislative records. It passed through the state Senate a few days after that. There was no debate on the measure in either house.

The paragraph has also drawn criticism from Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop. "This park has been a jewel for the state of New Jersey, and any formal steps to attempt to privatize would be a black eye for our entire state and all of our residents," he said.

Conservationists say it would make it easier for officials to allow private developers access to the 1,200-acre park (*Sam addition to article - 600 acres of land and 600 of*

water/marsh) with its panoramic views of Manhattan and easy access to mass transit and highways. The park has long been targeted for private development from amphitheaters and an amusement park to condos and a golf course.

A spokesman for Prieto said that despite the measure, no changes to Liberty State Park could be made without consent of the Department of Environmental Protection, the agency that oversees state parks. "The new commission will not have any control over Liberty State Park and any suggestion to the contrary is false," said Phil Swibinski, spokesman for Prieto, a Democrat from Secaucus. *(Sam addition to article - as the second line of this story reports, the 10 lines on LSP in the 80 page bill, states, the Commission shall... ""evaluate, approve and implement any plan or plans for the further preservation, development, enhancement or improvement of Liberty State Park in Jersey City." and the last line of the LSP language states "Any approved plans shall constitute a project of the commission, and shall be adopted as part of the master plan").*

Promote growth

The measure merges the Meadowlands Commission, the regional zoning and planning agency for 14 towns, with the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, which oversees the sports complex in East Rutherford. It overhauls the tax structure of the Meadowlands towns and imposes a 3 percent tax on hotels but does not appear to dramatically change the long-term or day-to-day functions of both agencies except for its new development authority over Liberty State Park.

A statement accompanying the bill says it is an effort to promote the "economic growth of the Meadowlands and northern New Jersey" and eliminate "unnecessary government bureaucracy."

Critics say the measure is something of a land grab, considering the park is miles from the Meadowlands. Liberty State Park has never been part of the Meadowlands district nor was it ever under the auspices of the Meadowlands Commission. It has not been overseen by the sports authority.

Prieto's spokesman said the language only allows the new commission to review pending preservation or development plans "that the DEP is considering and to offer its recommendations, just as it currently does with other open space and zoning decisions within the Meadowlands district."

Critics, including Fulop, say the language allows the commission to bypass the DEP and make decisions about the park on its own.

"It opens up a prime piece of waterfront property to a development agency that has had no jurisdiction there," said Greg Remaud, . (*Sam addition to article - Greg Remaud is Conservation Director of the NY/NJ Baykeeper*) who sits on the DEP's public advisory committee for Liberty State Park. "Everyone comes in here, looks at that view and wonders, 'How can I make money off of this?' This bill makes it easier."

A DEP spokesman said the agency is aware of the legislation change and declined to comment.

Christie has until early February to sign the bill into law, veto it as a whole or veto parts of it. His policy is not to comment on legislation before him.

A governor will have considerable control over the new agency called the Meadowlands Regional Commission. Of the 13 members, six are appointed by the governor and three are Cabinet members.

Liberty State Park was created out of a former landfill (*Sam addition to article - landfill was created by railroads over a century ago and by the late 1950's the area was a wasteland of abandoned railyards and decaying piers*) and opened in 1976. Located near the Statue of Liberty, the park is mostly open space but has seen some development, including Liberty Science Center, two restaurants and a marina.

Casino proposal

The new commission would be formed just as North Jersey officials are jockeying for a casino in the region, including a proposal to build one next to Liberty State Park.

A \$4.6 billion multi-use project proposed last summer by real estate investor Paul Fireman and supported by Fulop would include not only a casino but also a convention center, 95-story hotel, and a motor-sports stadium adjacent to the park. There is also a push led by state Sen. Paul Sarlo, D-Wood-Ridge, to build a casino at the Meadowlands Sports Complex, which the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority controls. A statewide referendum allowing table gaming and slot machines outside of Atlantic City is expected to go before voters in November.

It also comes as funding for state parks is expected to take a considerable hit after passage of a ballot question in November that redirects millions of dollars for capital improvements in state parks to open-space preservation. In 2010 Christie commissioned a report that recommended turning over the operation and management

of state parks to a private recreation firm to save upwards of \$8.2 million a year. Christie never acted on those recommendations.

Swibinski said Prieto is very "supportive of Liberty State Park and of open space throughout New Jersey, especially in urban areas where these resources are so precious."

But Pesin, of the Friends of Liberty State Park, is wary.

"Right now you have people at the DEP with years of park stewardship overseeing Liberty State Park," said Pesin, whose father, Morris, helped create the park. "This puts the power in the hands of politicians and that's wrong." *(Sam addition to article - power in the hands of politicians through the appointed politically-connected members of this autonomous Meadowlands Regional Agency who will get major pressure from developers and promoters, and with this Commission, there will be minimal public participation in decision-making which the DEP has provided over the years - and listened to).*

Email: fallon@northjersey.com