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Seeking a greater public role in LSP's future

Liberty State Park advocates have called on Gov. Christie and the commissioner of environmental protection to hold at least two hearings at the park on any proposed development there, instead of one, as required by legislation signed into law in July.

In a letter this week to Commissioner Bob Martin, the Friends of Liberty State Park also asked the state to provide a public comment period of at least one month.

Christie and Martin should show "respect for the democratic process and avoid a 'ramrodding' of plans, by providing at least two public hearings . . . one on a middle-of-the-week evening and one on a Saturday," wrote Sam Pesin, president of the nonprofit group and a Jersey City resident.

The public comment period "is also the only way to show respect for democracy and for this beloved park, an American treasure," added Pesin, son of Morris Pesin, who led the crusade that resulted in the park's opening in 1976. "LSP elicits powerful emotions due to the iconic American monuments in the harbor, its precious urban open space, and its uplifting views."

Gov. Christie signed legislation in July that provided new protections against development at Liberty State Park but did not meet the expectations of park advocates, who still say the site is "very vulnerable."

The law requires at least one hearing at the park for any proposed project there, and gives the DEP commissioner 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 administration has been implementing a plan that will help make our parks more sustainable while enhancing amenities that better serve visitors," DEP spokesman Larry Hajna said Tuesday. "As a gateway to millions of immigrants, Liberty State Park played an important role in the growth of the nation.

Any plan that is developed will be "consistent with our sustainability goals while being respectful of the park's important role in America's history," Hajna said.

State officials just received the friends group's letter and had no comment on its requests for two hearings during a weekday evening and Saturday and a public comment period over a month.

"Anything less . . . would be a subversion of democracy and an assault on the spirit of Liberty State Park and Lady Liberty," Pesin wrote to Martin. "Lady Liberty must be honored as the

world's greatest symbol of democracy."

Pesin criticized state officials for trying to make the park pay for all of its maintenance and operation costs.

"The broad public consensus has always been for a non-commercialized, non-privatized free park," Pesin said Tuesday. "The only way to respect the park's history is to keep a free park behind Lady Liberty, symbolizing democracy."

He said that he had not yet received any response to his letter.

"No park should pay for itself," Pesin wrote in his letter. "LSP already brings in \$1.5 million annually, not counting salaries - from the marina, two restaurants, ferry concession, special use permits, etc.

"Liberty Science Center and the ferries to our national monuments provide enough tourist attractions," he added. "LSP is New Jersey's crown jewel park overlooking the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, and it was our 1976 Bicentennial gift to the nation.

In his letter, Pesin also warned state officials against allowing any future construction of a concert shell venue, saying it would cause traffic jams and restrict use of the park.

He also asked that any plans for the park be revealed after August, since many people are on vacation, and that a copy of any development proposal be sent to the friends group.

"I would urge the governor to reject any privatization plans, to listen to the voice of the people," Pesin said in an interview. "The park is priceless, private land.