

New Jersey Conservation Foundation

Editorial on its website <https://www.njconservation.org/a-win-for-liberty-state-park-and-the-people-of-new-jersey/>

June 8, 2023

A win for Liberty State Park – and the people of New Jersey!

By Jay Watson, Co-Executive Director

Ever since Liberty State Park was established in 1976 along the Jersey City waterfront, the guiding vision has been to preserve it as a “people’s park” in the style of New York’s Central Park – free, non-commercial, and open to everyone.

It’s a fitting vision, as the Statue of Liberty stands just outside the park in the waters of New York Bay, symbolically welcoming all. It’s a popular vision, too, as Liberty State Park attracts over 5 million visitors a year, making it the most visited in New Jersey’s state park system. This gem offers stunning views of Lady Liberty, Ellis Island and the Manhattan skyline.

But the inclusive vision for Liberty State Park has been repeatedly threatened with a barrage of proposals from moneyed interests to commercialize and privatize it. An influential group somewhat misleadingly named the People’s Park Foundation has recently pushed a vastly different vision that includes building two large stadiums, an indoor professional-sized hockey rink, Olympic-sized swimming and diving center, and a 7,000-seat commercial concert venue.

Happily, it appears that good sense has prevailed in the shadow of Lady Liberty!

On May 24, Governor Phil Murphy endorsed a state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) revitalization plan that would remediate contamination in the park’s interior, help protect against flooding in surrounding neighborhoods by creating tidal and freshwater wetlands, and add recreational and cultural amenities throughout.

The plan was developed by DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette and his staff to improve the park while keeping it free and non-commercial – consistent with state park philosophy.

“Liberty State Park is a treasure that will always belong to the people of New Jersey,” said the governor. “Our Administration’s plan prioritizes protecting our precious public lands and revitalizes Liberty State Park through exciting new amenities for the community, including new ways to enjoy nature, play sports, engage in active and passive recreation, and experience arts

and culture. The proposal will also improve transportation to and within the park and include long-term improvements to enhance flood and climate resiliency.”

Governor Murphy’s support for the revitalization plan thrilled the park’s longtime defenders, including Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, and Greg Remaud, the NY/NJ Baykeeper.

“This was a major win for the park and for the people,” said Pesin, the son of park founder Morris Pesin and a tireless force in fighting attempts to commercialize Liberty State Park. “This will be a major part of the governor’s legacy in New Jersey.”

“This was truly the will of the people – a free, green, open space,” added Remaud.

Kudos to Commissioner LaTourette, the architect and chief advocate of the revitalization plan, who resisted a high-pressure campaign to sway public opinion in favor of commercialization efforts.

Among the misinformation spread about the revitalization plan is that it would increase flooding in neighborhoods around the park. But science clearly shows the opposite, as wetlands act like giant sponges to soak up rainfall and flood waters from storm surges.

Another false narrative was that the DEP plan is somehow racist, prioritizing animals and plants over the Black and Brown community. In truth, said Pesin and Remaud, communities of color are among the most frequent users of Liberty State Park – and the ones who would be most hurt by exclusionary facilities with admission fees. “That’s the beauty of the park, the diversity of the people behind the Statue of Liberty,” Pesin said.

The revitalization project will be done in three phases. The first, scheduled to begin this fall, includes:

- Cleaning up 230-plus acres long closed to the public due to industrial contamination dating back to the property’s previous use as a railroad yard;
- Reintroducing tidal and non-tidal wetlands, as well as native meadows and urban forest;
- Creating hilltop scenic overlooks with views of NJ/NY harbor and the New York skyline;
- Building a 5.6-mile walking and running trail network.

The second phase will focus on cultural, arts and recreational improvements in the 160-acre northern section. Plans include building multi-purpose athletic fields, rehabilitating historic train sheds to use as a covered outdoor public community space and marketplace, building a public outdoor amphitheater, and adding a community center, playgrounds, small-scale concessions, and other public gathering spaces.

The third phase will add more recreation amenities in the southern and waterfront sections, address parking needs, and integrate elements of earlier phases into a holistic parkwide network.

While Liberty State Park's future as a true Central Park-style "people's park" now seems assured with Governor Murphy's pledge of support, there is still work to be done.

Caven Point, a small peninsula that serves as a haven for nature and wildlife, needs another layer of protection. The DEP under Governor Murphy has rebuffed attempts by the owner of a neighboring golf club to acquire it to relocate three golf holes, but future administrations may think differently. The state Legislature should pass the Liberty State Park Caven Point Protection Act, S2956, to designate and preserve the land as a natural habitat.

Liberty State Park is indeed one of the most amazing and important public open spaces in the entire nation. Many future generations of people and wildlife will benefit from the state's forward-thinking actions and vision.

To learn more about the DEP's plans to revitalize L, go to **<https://dep.nj.gov/revitalizelsp/>**.