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As state moves forward with Liberty State Park redesign, Hurley rallies supporters in fight for sports mecca plan

Feb. 21, 2024 By [Mark Koosau](#) | [The Jersey Journal](#)

JERSEY CITY — Deriding Liberty State Park as little more than “a parking lot and a ferry ride to the Statue of Liberty,” Hall of Fame basketball coach Bob Hurley pitched his sports-and-entertainment-mecca vision for the state park to a small group of supporters Tuesday night.

The public meeting hosted by the People’s Park Foundation, of which Hurley is president, was held less than two weeks before the next Liberty State Park design task force public meeting March 2.

“The park for the 4 million people that come here should be more than a parking lot and a ferry ride to The Statue of Liberty,” said Hurley in one of several jabs at the park and the current plans by the state Department of Environmental Protection to add some 60 acres of active recreation.

The Hudson River waterfront park, he says, should have a 5,000-seat football stadium, a 250,000-square-foot community center and a 7,000-seat amphitheater.

Those items were all part of a proposal by the People’s Park Foundation that was rejected last year when the DEP opted to focus on the remediation and restoration of the long-contaminated 234-acre interior and smaller-scale recreation in its multi-phase overhaul.

Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park group that has endorsed the current DEP plan, pushed back Wednesday on the People’s Park Foundation’s continued efforts.

“Bob Hurley’s front group of billionaire Paul Fireman and the others whom Fireman has bought off and brainwashed want to cast aside the 47 years of the overwhelming broad public consensus for a Central Park-type park and against the kind of sports and entertainment complex that they’re still pushing,” he said.

Hurley told the crowd that if he were younger, he’d ride his bike in the park, but the park offered “nothing that would keep me there,” and insisted that “we need to do so much more.”

“Liberty Park is jam-packed on all nice weekends and most of the 5 million annual visitors come to enjoy the park as a park,” Pesin said. “The Friends of LSP supports the DEP’s plans for unstructured recreation, open space and nature, and the 60 acres of free active recreation.”

The project is already underway, with the DEP working to naturally restore the interior with wetlands and meadows. Plans are also being discussed to revitalize the northern end of the park.

But Hurley ridiculed that effort, saying “The people are going to say ‘We need to flood the park, it needs to be a bird sanctuary’ versus our children,” Hurley said. “My wife and I recently took a walk through the park (and) counted one bird.”

The “flooding” complaint echoes the words used by state legislative leader Senate President Nick Scutari and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin in a letter to DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette earlier this month, which drew a quick, sharp rebuke as unfounded and incorrect.

“While it is not clear why the Legislature would believe this, the DEP is aware of certain private interests and individuals who have been knowingly and purposefully circulation misinformation along these very same lines,” LaTourette wrote. “It is alarming that the misinformation could influence our partnership on this important project.”

The second phase of the project being drafted includes revitalizing the northern end of the park with recreational and cultural amenities such as sports fields, a community center and more. A 50-acres southern athletics hub could include a stadium and track and field facilities. Plans for another section of the southern end include an aquatics center.

Hurley used to gathering to insist to the crowd that the extensive makeover proposal for the park could still happen, with Hurley adding “this battle is ongoing.”

The People’s Park Foundation has received more than \$2 million in funding from billionaire Paul Fireman, the owner of the nearby Liberty National Golf Course, to lobby the state and the public to push for a sports-and-entertainment mecca at the park.

Fireman, the former CEO of Reebok, had attempted multiple times to acquire or lease part of the Caven Point migratory bird habitat to expand his golf course, and critics say he is behind recent attempts to privatize the park.

Hurley, who has received at least \$300,000 since 2021 while running the foundation, dismissed criticism of Fireman’s influence.

Fireman “helped us ... to battle this existing problem of the media (saying) ... your concerns ... are because (he) gave you something to eat tonight,” Hurley said with Fireman’s son-in-law, Adam Rodgers nearby working a power-point presentation. “This is so insulting, what we’ve gone through for so long.”

Rodgers spoke to the crowd at one point, reiterating the unfounded “flooding” claim and then ripping the current design plan as “a few small fields, a tiny football field with a four-lane track, a soccer field and a little league baseball field. ... (and a) community center, they want to limit it to a small pool and a one single bathroom.”

Pesin called the attacks on the plan for the interior a case of “Fireman’s puppets shamelessly continuing to push total lies, smear attacks and science denialism.”

The lack of sports facilities and the notion that it's that state's responsibility to address – not Jersey City's -- was a running theme at the event.

Hurley scoffed at a question about performing an analysis of Jersey City's parks, shooting back "We don't need to do what the city of Jersey City should do."

One parent said there's "nothing" in the city and that the city government's only priority is real estate development, while a local coach said the Caven Point Field and the Pershing Field ice rink are "beyond repair."

Hurley repeated that the foundation's goal is to provide more active recreational opportunities, although none of the money given by Fireman's foundation has gone toward finding recreation space in Jersey City or Hudson County.

The one-time Jersey City Department of Recreation director cited shuttered stadiums, overburdened sports fields and inadequate facilities — and that the state park is the cure to all that ails Jersey City's recreation needs.

Tuesday Younger, a mother of four in Downtown, said her family leaves the city to do different activities.

"I'm for whoever gives us something so that these kids can have an outlet and have more to do and enjoy this beautiful park, because it is really beautiful," Younger said.