

The Jersey Journal

Don't fall for disinformation, DEP's vision for Liberty State Park is the right one Opinion

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By Jersey Journal Guest Columnist **Nick Lawrence**

I'm speaking as a father of an 8-year-old, as a resident of Jersey City, as a social studies educator, and as a community leader in my role as president of the Washington Park Association of Hudson County.

Over the past few weeks, the amount of disinformation I've received via text, email and other media about the rehabilitation of Liberty State Park has been alarming, to say the very least.

The plan proposed by the People's Park Foundation to build a stadium and other commercial venues in Liberty State Park not only goes against the public opinion of nearly all local residents, but it would also be a regional disaster and a national embarrassment to allow. Such a project flies in the face of our shared values to protect our children, the Garden State and the democratic institutions Americans herald and seek to lead the world in supporting.

The state Department of Environmental Protection's proposed project, conversely, will do none of these things. It is carefully designed to protect the harbor and Jersey City, among other cities just inland, as well as to build up the park to make it more useful, safer and accessible to New Jerseyans.

Aside from stadiums, the DEP's project accomplishes everything the PPF's plan is heralding in its message plus 10 times more. It does all of that without a disinformation campaign designed to wildly mislead the public.

It's no longer a debate that humans need to act and act decisively to preserve our natural resources and combat climate change. This is abundantly clear in New Jersey, where half the state has recently been ravaged by major storm systems and will likely be again all too soon. Commercial elements of the PPF's proposal fly in the face of the mutual understanding New Jerseyans of myriad political persuasions hold — that in order to maintain and preserve our great state, we need to be putting in place resiliency plans and infrastructure to protect it. This applies to the Shore, to New York Harbor, to the Pine Barrens, to the Water Gap and everything in between and beyond.

Projects in key ecological areas should and have been carefully designed to ensure not only increased use and appreciation for our natural resources, but they will also set us on a trajectory to address our climate reality and put New Jersey in a position of leadership in this work nationally and globally. What the Department of Environmental Protection has developed and proposed is one such project, as it's designed to protect Liberty State Park and the surrounding area.

The outsized influence of billionaires on global politics plays out in many places including right here at home. New Jersey is no stranger to political corruption and has a reputation for outsized party and monetary influences making decisions in spite of the will of its citizens, but in this state and in the United States there are mechanisms to combat this and demonstrate to the world that democracy can work.

What the PPF's plan does is to serve as a demonstration in how money can make decisions over a democratic process and over the will of the people. Unfortunately, it will also reinforce stereotypes of New Jersey that its people would love to leave to its past.

In an age when democracy is at risk of fading into history, our leaders should be standing up to say we will not capitulate to the interests of rich individuals at the expense of the public and the environment. They should be standing up, leading from the front and saying that the public will not sacrifice our environment, our home and the health and well-being of our children for the benefit of the billionaire class. Our leaders should finally be making it clear that they are committed to not shouldering the next generation with more economic and environmental debt. Many of our local leaders are, in fact, doing this, including Hoboken Mayor and Congressional candidate Ravi Bhalla and state Sen. Raj Mukherji, who support implementing the DEP's plan.

Beyond obvious monetary influence issues, the People's Park Foundation's plan will, in all likelihood, one day sit ironically as a set of dilapidated venues behind the Statue of Liberty as a message to the world that the voice of the American people is not as strong as its richest class; that an entire community and a state government will bend their knees to a billionaire's will not because they actually want to, but because that billionaire openly wields political power and there is no other choice. It will send the message that those with the golden spoons in the United States make decisions over the masses who came through New Jersey's Golden Door and those who were here before it existed.

In an age when environmental justice is at odds with power and influence rather than supported by it, the People's Park Foundation's project will stand as a symbol of the injustices done to our children's generation.

The decision to stay the course with the Department of Environmental Protection's plan is a simple one and it's the right one. The question remains as to whether those making this decision believe in New Jersey, in giving our children a future and in democracy.

Nick Lawrence is a resident of Jersey City.