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Liberty State Park Group Opposes Elimination of Free Parking Lot, Supports DEP Plan Overall

by Ron Leir October 23, 2024

The state Department of Environmental Protection's latest tweaking of its master plan for Liberty State Park in Jersey City drew a generally positive review from a park advocacy group – with one disclaimer.

DEP hosted another in a series of public briefings at the historic Central Railroad Terminal building on September 28.

Friends of Liberty State Park, headed by Sam Pesin, lauded state Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette and his staff for being “responsive to the 5,000 public comments DEP received” about preserving open space and “unstructured recreation” in the park’s northern section.

But in a message posted on its website, FOLSP took issue with what it called the agency’s “ill-conceived, unrealistic proposals in Station 2 (the park’s northern border leading to the train site) to eliminate the very useful free 2-hour lot by the Terminal – except for buses which should continue to park in the ferry lot” at the end of Zapp Drive and another proposal “to reduce needed parking spaces in the ferry lot (which are) usually filled by ferry users (and) for diverse special events such as performances, festivals, 5K (runs), exhibits, concerts and (other) programs.”

According to Pesin, “the two-hour lot’ by the Terminal is needed and deserved by urban residents and other visitors for many purposes.”

Pesin also notes that FOLSP is strongly opposed to the large area taken by three proposed North Cove beaches, including a beach umbrella beach, next to the “un-swimmable” river and “taking away lawn space on which people can play, picnic, catch sun rays, or get shade under trees.”

Pesin says that with the eventual re-use of the Terminal sheds, a new north side flexible playing field and picnic area, and path entrances to the interior, the DEP and the consultants have a “major challenge” coming up with a plan for the shuttle bus, a tram, traffic, and new parking on the park edges such as the light rail lot on weekends. One consideration, says Pesin, should be for mass transit options accommodating people bringing picnic and barbecue supplies.

In opening remarks to visitors who attended last month’s update (a taping is available on both FOLSP and the DEP websites), LaTourette mentioned that DEP received “an additional \$7.3 million federal grant” from the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration for work related to climate resilience.

“We initially broke ground in October 2023 on the interior remediation of the park,” the commissioner said. Diseased trees will be coming down and invidious vegetation will be cleared, he said. And traces of “old munitions” will be removed “to protect against any risk” to park visitors.

All of this cleanup work will enable visitors “to enjoy the beauty that will result,” he said.

LaTourette said experts called in by DEP came to the park in October 2024 to evaluate the structural integrity of the old CRNJ train sheds for possible restoration.

By spring 2025, DEP is aiming to clean up the park’s environmentally compromised 235-acre interior area – about one-third the size of New York’s Central Park – along with restoring the park’s ecology, devising “nature-based solutions” to “critical flooding” issues, reintroducing “native tidal and non-tidal wetlands, meadows and urban forest,” creating hilltop scenic outlooks of the harbor and skyline views, uniting all these features in a 5.6-mile walking and running trail network and extending cleanup to the site of the future Southern Athletics Hub.

By the same date, DEP expects to complete a master plan for the park’s southern area, encompassing the Morris Pesin Drive corridor and waterfront area (the Freedom Way corridor) by creating a Southern Athletics Hub that “could include a track-and-field center, integrated multi-use fields, basketball and racquet courts and skate park,” possible pool and/or aquatics center and community gardens and long-term parking plus intra-park transit solutions.

And, for the park’s northern section, DEP projects a similar timetable for “finalizing a detailed design of priority areas,” along the Audrey Zapp Drive corridor, including new public amenities accommodating active recreation, repurposed train sheds for such things as covered outdoor community space and marketplace, arts and cultural exhibits, playground, concessions and development of transit improvements.

For those who attended the 11 a.m.-to-2 p.m. DEP event, it wasn’t easy navigating their way by car. Because the timing of the New Jersey Half-Marathon hosted by Jersey City overlapped with the LSP presentation, the city closed off the park’s two northern entrances and provided limited access to the south.

With better advance planning, Pesin said, “there could’ve been perhaps twice as many visitors to the event. Still, it was heartwarming to see the park enthusiasts that did show up.”

Still, Pesin says FOLSP is gratified that the Commissioner and the consultants listened to the public and acknowledged “the consensus for a free and green open space park.” Said Pesin, “we look forward to the public weighing in on more final proposals early in 2025.”

DEP expects to convene its next LSP presentation in early 2025, he said.