

Liberty State Park design task force presents some new options, but nothing that would appease critics

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JERSEY CITY — A group of Liberty State Park Design Task Force members lobbying for a fresh start to the redesign process offered few new ideas when the task force met for a much-anticipated public forum Saturday at the state park on the Jersey City waterfront.

“I don’t think the task force gets a chance to just share (in public),” said Bob Hurley, a task force member and president of the People’s Park Foundation (PPF), which has advocated for transforming the park into a sports and entertainment mecca far beyond the current state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) proposal for 60 acres of active recreation.

Hurley was one of a number of task force members associated with the People’s Park Foundation who wants to hold private discussions on the park, although he and others did not explain what could not be debated or discussed in public.

The PPF, which amped up a disinformation campaign this week by saying on social media that the DEP plans to “flood” 180 acres of the park and “any hope of active recreation will never happen under (the DEP) plan,” had urged its supporters to voice their support at meeting.

But Hurley and task force member aligned with the group backed by billionaire Liberty National Golf Club owner Paul Fireman — county Board of Commissioners member Jerry Walker, former schools superintendent Franklin Walker, NAACP Jersey City branch President Charles Mainor and attorney Elnardo Webster Jr. among them — left the meeting prior to the four hours of public comment.

“It is purposeful disinformation, and it needs to stop,” DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette told The Jersey Journal Saturday on the flooding claims. “Every single time that I see or hear it, I am going to call it out and correct it, and we all should, because it serves absolutely no one for those who maybe might think they’re not getting everything they want, so they sow a lie instead.”

The fight over commercializing or monetizing the most visited state park in New Jersey has been waged for years, but picked up steam when then Gov. Chris Christie talked about it bringing in more revenue. A task force was created in 2019, and with much public input, it devised a park redesign plan that called for 60 acres of active recreation and the remediation of the long-contaminated 234-acre interior.

Much of the initial plan remained in place when a 2022 law that funded \$50 million for the project and added members to design task force was enacted. The People’s Park Foundation — funded solely by Fireman, who has attempted to acquire part of the park to expand his golf course — has waged a sort of whispering (*PR for its Sports and Entertainment Complex*) campaign to take a fresh look at how much space in the park is allotted to active recreation.

The People's Park Foundation has also advocated for a large-scale sports arena and concert venue as part of the redesign.

The latest evidence, critics say, is a letter by state Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin and Senate President Nicholas Scutari to the DEP commissioner echoing the same false narrative as Hurley's People's Park Foundation.

Saturday's meeting drew approximately 150 people in person and another 270 via livestreaming platforms. Almost every public comment was in favor the DEP's plan and many called out Fireman, who has spent millions in lobbying.

"It is our duty to leave to those next generations our open spaces in our parks improved and not impaired in value," state Sen. Raj Mukherji said in the public comment session. "Those measures that would guide us in the direction of revenue generating amenities or towards the direction of commercialization ... impairs the value of a state park."

Hoboken Mayor Ravi Bhalla also spoke, supporting the DEP's vision. Jersey City council members James Solomon, Mira Prinz-Arey and Frank Gilmore, and county Board of Commissioners member Yraida Aponte-Lipski were also among the elected officials at the meeting. Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, who has a designee on the task force, did not attend the event.

Hurley has said there is nothing nefarious about Fireman's interest in Liberty State Park and pointed out that Fireman's foundation donates to many organizations.

Adam Rogers, Fireman's son-in-law, attended the meeting and called the criticism "all untrue" as he walked out of the Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal where it was held. "There's no commercialization (and) privatization of the park," he said.

It was the second time that the Liberty State Park Design Task Force, a 23-member advisory body consisting of local officials, activists and residents, gathered at the park's CRRNJ Terminal to discuss the project among themselves in front of the public.

The first part of the three-phase renovation involves the cleanup and restoration of the park's 234-acre interior with new wetlands and meadows.

Far from talk about greatly expanding active recreation, the task force discussed options like open fields, basketball and tennis courts in place of the current three-ballfield proposal next to the Liberty Landing Marina on the north end of the park.

The DEP's rough draft of the southern end includes enhancing and improving certain elements, such as turning the Hudson River walkway into a promenade, adding canopies, and enhancing the pavilion and coastal wetlands. There is also the plan for a 50-acre athletics hub.

The draft also includes enhancing Caven Point, a migratory bird habitat. "It'll be improved (and) enhanced, but it won't be disturbed," he said.