A dream of liberty

By Jason Fink, Journal staff writer

In the shadows of the nation's most enduring monuments to political freedom, surrounded by some of the most densely populated and ethnically diverse cities in America, Liberty State Park stands as a green oasis of emerging forests and preserved wetlands, a quiet reminder of the human affinity for the natural landscape.

Twenty-five years ago tomorrow, the Jersey City state park, just a stone's throw from both the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, was dedicated as New Jersey's gift to America on the eve of its Bicentennial.

What began decades ago as the vision of a few dedicated crusaders, who saw a muddy landfill dotted with storage sheds and railroad tracks and envisioned the potential for something great, is now the most visited state park in New Jersey.

As elected officials and thousands of area residents prepare to gather this weekend for the anniversary celebrations, longtime supporters of the park are pausing to recall 2 1/2 decades of a near-constant - often contentious - fight to secure what is today more than 1,200 acres of protected open space along the west bank of the Hudson River.

"I'm very happy that this sacred parkland has reached its 25th birthday with its destiny as a completed, free, green open space within view," said Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park. His father, Morris Pesin, was a driving force behind the creation of the park.

In the beginning

While Liberty State Park is not entirely finished, with plans still in the works to add to the roughly 300 acres currently accessible to the public, there is no denying that it has come a long way since Morris Pesin took his famous canoe ride to the Statue of Liberty in 1957.

Frustrated that New Jerseyans had to travel all the way to New York to visit a statue that is only 2,000 feet from their state, Morris Pesin - a businessman and lawyer from Jersey City - canoed out to Liberty Island in a public demonstration that launched the decades-long effort to create a public park along Jersey City's waterfront.

Seven years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared Ellis Island - which, at 1,200 feet from the park, sits even closer than the statue - a national monument and promised $6 million for its restoration and to beautify the area of Jersey City behind it.
The next year, the city gave 156 acres to the state, beginning a process that would eventually transform this tract of waterfront land into one of the nation's most popular state parks.

"It was among the first of the big urban parks," said Michael Timpanarao, a historic preservation specialist who works at the park. "The land itself is actually landfill, filled in by the railroad companies to make freight and passenger terminals."

When Morris Pesin, who died in 1992, first articulated his desire to see Liberty State Park created as the backdrop for Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, the land had been suffering from years of neglect.

With Ellis Island long since closed and the railroads in decline during the years after World War II, an area that had once seen 50,000 commuters board trains and ferries every day was, by the 1950s and 1960s, a fading industrial graveyard.

Morris Pesin, along with other noted activists such as Audrey Zapp, spent years drumming up support for a state park, finally seeing their effort bear fruit on June 14, 1976, when Gov. Brendan Byrne dedicated Liberty State Park.

On that day, the first 35 acres opened to the public, and Boy and Girl Scouts raised all 50 state flags along a street inside the park that now bears Morris Pesin's name.

Pieces of the park were donated and bought by the state over the next few decades, growing the original 156 acres reserved by the city in 1976 to 1,212 today.

In 1985, the Interpretive Center, which offers environmental educational programs, opened on Freedom Way. Eight years later, the Liberty Science Center was opened.

But most of the intervening years have seen campaigns waged to preserve large swaths of land for open space without buildings or any other construction.

Fighting development

The road to transforming this land into an area that now boasts more than 200 species of birds and other wildlife has been an incremental journey, marked by public battles between conservationists and developers and various - often competing - visions of what the park should look like.

In 1979, three years after the park's Flag Day opening, Byrne established the Liberty State Park Advisory Commission to participate in steering the park's future development.

Although the public space has increased tenfold in the past 25 years, clashes have arisen along the way over what types of recreational facilities, if any, are appropriate.
In the mid-1990s, developers proposed building an 18-hole golf course, a plan that met with fierce opposition from conservationists as well as much of the public.

The project was eventually killed, prompting former Gov. Christie Whitman, who now heads the federal Environmental Protection Agency, to preserve approximately 185 acres as off limits to developers.

But that still left portions of the park's edges open for discussion, a fact that erupted onto the public stage this past winter when plans were floated to build a commercial waterpark on 40 acres along the perimeter.

In January, the public once again spoke out against the sort of active recreation that many say would add intolerable traffic snarls and restrict public access.

An interdisciplinary committee was formed to study the fate of about 250 remaining acres, a process that will result in another public hearing this fall, said Sam Pesin, who sits on the committee.

"It's impossible to underestimate the importance of public participation in creating Liberty State Park," said Greg Remaud, president of the Liberty State Park Conservancy.

"If it wasn't for Morris, there wouldn't have been a vision. If it weren't for Audrey and Sam and thousands of other citizens, you wouldn't have Liberty State Park the way it is today."

The premier battles these days are generally between Pesin's group and Remaud's group and the Liberty State Park Development Corp., which oversees the private developments.

"They should be abolished," Pesin said of the development corporation. "It was a wrong idea to begin with, to have commercialization in the park."

The Friends group has taken exception to places such as the Liberty Landing Marina LLC, which leases space from the development corporation to operate the private 500-slip boat marina on the northern end.

In the future, Liberty Landing will move into its new headquarters, an 18,000-square-foot building just west of its current facilities, an old boat in the marina. Their lease approves a dry rack storage facility for 300 boats.

But for all of the sparring back and forth, most agree that Liberty State Park has charted a remarkable course from a freight and transportation hub in the beginning of the last century, through the lean years of neglect and disrepair, finally blossoming into a world-renown public park that last year drew more than 4 million visitors.

Plans to continue expanding the park's public spaces will likely continue over the next several years, with improvements coming in stages much as they have over the previous 25 years.
"Anyone would say that there has been an amazing transformation from a waterfront wasteland of rotting piers and abandoned rail yards into the beautiful park we have today," said Sam Pesin.

"There have been steady improvements throughout the years and I'm very hopeful that the park will be completed in a very special way."