

editorial

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Liberty Park is saved

Gov. Whitman has made the right decision in rejecting the Liberty State Development Corp.'s plan to build a golf course on one of the finest park sites in America: Liberty State Park, in the shadow of the Manhattan skyline. Her verdict is the result of a determined campaign for a "people's park" waged by a group of Hudson County activists and their allies, and they should be pleased at the success of their efforts.

At the heart of the park is a 225-acre tract once used by the Central Railroad of New Jersey (CRRNJ) for switching and other purposes. It's polluted, and it needs cleaning up before it can be put to any public use. The development corporation had proposed to fund that cleanup, and some additional park amenities, by turning 150 acres of the tract into an 18-hole links.

But to the Coalition to Save Liberty State Park, that would have been a prodigal misuse of a unique public amenity. Their vision — of a New Jersey version of New York's Central Park, with facilities for recreation and nature study — was a far more appealing vision than the development corporation's. The Coalition and its leaders, primarily Ethel Pesin of Jersey City and her son Sam, rallied opposition to the golf course at two heavily-attended public hearings last summer, and enlisted an impressive corps of allies, including Richard Sullivan, the state's first environmental protection commissioner — and, eventually, Mr. Sullivan's current successor, Robert C. Shinn.

On Commissioner Shinn's recommendation, Gov. Whitman announced a plan that would commit up to \$12 million in state funds for waterfront improvements and improvements to the historic CRRNJ Terminal. Half that money would come from the Green Acres bond issue that is headed for the November ballot with bipartisan support, and the rest from another source, possibly the Economic Development Authority. Action to remedy the polluted soil will be facilitated by a windfall from the federal government in the form of some 600,000 tons of fill from the I-287 construction project. This will be used to bury the pollution hot spots with a foot of clean cover.

The 225-acre central portion that the development corporation had eyed for a golf course will be partly revegetated through a volunteer tree-planting program and left to return to its natural state, the governor said. Later, interpretive programs, boardwalks and wayside exhibits may be provided. As DEP official Jim Hall said, "A living and evolving ecosystem would be a natural oasis in one of the most densely populated areas of the state."

Thanks to determined citizens, and to officials who responded to their wishes and their logic, Liberty State Park has been saved. In time it can become what its admirers want it to be: one of the finest and most important urban parks in the nation.