

## Golf Club for the 1 Percent Wants to Seize a Migratory Bird Habitat

The golf course in Jersey City, N.J., says it needs the land to compete for tournaments. A birder counters, “It’s really just an obscenity.”

By Tracey Tully

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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — The snowy owl was first spotted just beyond the 18th hole of one of the most expensive golf courses ever built.

The [bird](#) was resting on a sandy beach filled with seashells and driftwood at the edge of Liberty State Park. Waves lapped the New Jersey shoreline of the Hudson River as birders with binoculars stood in awe two years ago.

Nearby, behind a tall black fence, were the willow-lined fairways of [Liberty National](#), an exclusive private golf course where luminaries like Tiger Woods and Brooks Koepka have played, and where the original initiation fee for members was about half a million dollars.

The contrast between the lavish club and the adjacent park, with its hodgepodge of rough-hewed public amenities — both with sweeping views of Lower Manhattan bejeweled by the Statue of Liberty — has been stark since the course opened nearly 14 years ago.

But the two worlds are now clashing as never before in a showdown over the Jersey City golf course’s push to expand into nearly 22 acres of public parkland.

The outcropping of land, known as Caven Point, is a migratory bird habitat where spotted sandpipers and American oystercatchers nest near elevated walkways that allow visitors to wander, from March to October, through tall reeds and onto the sandy beach. The other half of the year the wildlife is considered too fragile to permit access.

But it is there that Liberty National officials say they hope to build three new holes, bringing more of the 18-hole course closer to the water’s telegenic edge and helping it draw high-profile PGA Tour events that supporters say spin off economic benefits for the state.

“If we are not able to accommodate what these tournaments need, then they will simply go somewhere else that can,” said Chris Donnelly, a spokesman for Liberty National.

A key vote in the State Senate related to that effort could come as early as Thursday, marking the [latest battle](#) in a long-running history of park advocates [fending off private developers](#) hoping to build in the state park.

“To me, it’s really just an obscenity,” said Rick Cordner, an avid birder and the treasurer of Friends of Liberty State Park, a group opposed to the golf course expansion. “It breaks my heart to think there could be a bulldozer out there plowing it under for a golf course.”

The course opened on the Fourth of July in 2006, and takes in about 170 acres of privately owned land, much of it a former toxic wasteland that cost more than \$250 million to reclaim. It was thought at the time to be the [most expensive golf course](#) ever built.

With [founding members](#) that include President Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, and Robert K. Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, Liberty National is no stranger to the levers of power in Trenton and beyond.

One of its owners, Paul B. Fireman, the founder of Reebok who sold his company to Adidas for [\\$3.8 billion](#), and his family are generous campaign donors, contributing about \$420,000 to Democrats and Republicans in New Jersey between 2009 and last year, state records show.

Liberty National’s lobbyist, Eric Shuffler, has worked for two New Jersey governors and was appointed to Gov. Philip D. Murphy’s transition team after his 2017 election.

Mr. Murphy, a Democrat, declined through a spokesman, Mahen Gunaratna, to discuss the proposed expansion.

“We generally don’t comment on pending bills,” Mr. Gunaratna said. “But the governor believes that Liberty State Park is a New Jersey treasure that belongs to every family. He is a strong supporter of protecting our public lands for the benefit of everyone.”

The land Liberty National wants to lease for an as-yet undetermined sum was purchased with state and federal funds, including money meant to conserve land and water. The state would have oversight over any land conversion and the interior secretary would also need to sign off on the plan, according to the state’s Department of Environmental Protection.

Activists have said the proposed land use could be precedent setting and have vowed to challenge it, if need be, in court.

“If you can privatize land purchased with Land and Water Conservation dollars, you’re jeopardizing most of our national parks,” said Greg Remaud, the director of the NY/NJ Baykeeper, a nonprofit conservation organization. “It’s one of our bedrock precedents for land conservation.”

Mr. Donnelly said the new holes would be used to free up other land on the course for staging and hospitality activities that are vital to attracting PGA Tour events like the Presidents Cup and the Northern Trust.

“Each of these PGA events, each one, contributes tens of millions of dollars into the Hudson County and New Jersey economy,” Mr. Shuffler testified last month at a Senate budget hearing.

A spokeswoman for the state's Economic Development Authority said the agency had no estimate of the economic value to the state from the four PGA tournaments held at Liberty National since 2009.

A spokesman for the PGA Tour, Joel Schuchmann, confirmed that the size of Liberty National had become a consideration, particularly for the Northern Trust, which is the first event in its FedEx Cup playoffs each year.

"It's true that as the PGA Tour, and the FedEx Cup playoffs specifically, continue to grow in stature and interest among our fans, media and partners, so does the need to make certain the proper footprint is in place," Mr. Schuchmann said in a statement.

The club's goal is to move three existing golf holes to Caven Point, freeing up space for event staging and for the creation of an introductory golf program for area children, the First Tee.

In exchange for the right to build, Liberty National has said it would offer unspecified funds for park improvements, create access at certain times to the Caven Point beachfront and provide a jitney to transport people across Liberty State Park.

Golf course officials also say that contaminated land at Caven Point would be remediated, but a state spokesman said the plot was cleaned and deemed safe in 2004 for its current use. "Additional cleanup is not required," Larry Hajna, a D.E.P. spokesman, said in an email.

The club has gotten backing for the project from the state N.A.A.C.P., in part based on the promise of programming like the First Tee.

"Preserving the park is important, but there is much more at stake for the communities we represent," the group's president, Richard T. Smith, wrote in a letter in support of Liberty National's efforts.

But Daoud David Williams, a lifelong resident of Jersey City and a member of the local N.A.A.C.P., said black leaders in Jersey City were not consulted.

"Whoever got to him," Mr. Williams said of Mr. Smith, "I think he's making a big mistake." Mr. Smith could not be reached for comment.

"I think there's ulterior motives for offering some quote-unquote 'inner-city kids' some lessons in golf," said Mr. Williams, 76.

This is not the first time the club has tried to expand into Caven Point. It attempted to procure the land during the course's initial construction and again during the waning days of the administration of Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican.

The state Department of Environmental Protection quietly shelved the proposal once Mr. Murphy took office, but the idea never completely died.

This latest effort is tied to legislation, the Liberty State Park Protection Act, that aims to prevent all but small private development within the sprawling park, which has repeatedly been eyed for a variety of for-profit ventures, including a marina, amusement parks and a racetrack.

The Friends of Liberty State Park, led by Sam Pesin, whose [father was among those responsible for the creation of the park](#), have spent decades facing off against private developers and had hoped the Protection Act would finally secure the land as a “free and green people’s park.”

Liberty National is lobbying to amend the legislation to allow the state to solicit bids to develop Caven Point.

“This is a billionaire privatization assault for the 1 percent,” Mr. Pesin, 70, said.

The powerful chairman of the budget committee, Senator Paul A. Sarlo, a Democrat, strongly suggested he supported the proposed expansion during the hearing. “There’s a lot of money that we are leaving on the table here quite frankly,” he said.

More than 50 organizations have signed a letter in opposition and are planning a protest rally in the park on Saturday.

Mayor Steven Fulop of Jersey City and the bill’s sponsor in the Assembly, Raj Mukherji, are unequivocal in their opposition to the golf course expansion.

Mr. Fulop said he is grateful for the PGA’s and Mr. Fireman’s extensive philanthropy in Jersey City.