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Liberty State Park must not be sacrificed for millionaires' play time

The Assembly Agriculture Committee is meeting this afternoon to vote on a half-dozen bills, including one that pays for deer fencing on farmland, another that eliminates the Sunday ban on shellfishing, and a measure that promotes the cultivation of aquatic life. All are worthy of vigorous policy debate.

But one bill left off the agenda is the Liberty State Park Protection Act, which is an omission that essentially jeers 25 bill sponsors, a coalition of 111 environmental advocates, 31,000 petition signatories, and 5 million annual visitors who oppose privatization of our state's most popular public space – not to mention a shameless invitation for a plutocrat to filch 21 acres of magnificent waterfront for his golf course.

The bill, which would ban large-scale commercial development within the LSP's footprint and create an advisory panel to watch over it, actually passed the Senate by a 21-13 bipartisan vote in January 2020.

But when it got to the Assembly, it was torpedoed by Speaker Craig Coughlin without explanation, and two years later he is still engaged in a "thorough and thoughtful review of the legislation."

Given that the legislation is three years old – and designed to protect a park that has been in developers' crosshairs for four decades beyond that -- Coughlin might want to streamline his flawed review process.

Because it isn't very complicated: This is a vulgar land grab, and everyone knows it.

Billionaire Paul Fireman, the prolific political money spigot, has his eyes on the priceless peninsula known as Caven Point, so he can relocate three holes of Liberty National, a golf club that charges \$450,000 for an annual membership.

That is land the public would never get back, so it's not the kind of place where anyone should drop a fat-cat leisure center.

Caven Point is a migratory bird habitat, a serene oasis for nature lovers, and a glorious beachside stroll in the shadow of the Manhattan skyline and the most famous statue in the world.

It is also a salt marsh, which makes it invaluable. Such coastal wetlands are breeding grounds for fish and birds and other wildlife. Lose the saltmarsh, and you lose the place where fish grow and where blue herons forage. You lose the place where hawks and owls look for meals. You also lose a buffer against storm surges and a living science classroom for thousands of school kids each year.

But killing the Protection Act – again -- is more than enabling a theft of public resources. It is another reminder of why New Jersey may never shake its reputation for being a venal political swap shop, where billionaires can twist arms, smear activists, and grab public land for trinkets

“In what world should the interest of one billionaire outweigh the public interest?” asks Sen. Loretta Weinberg, a longtime LSP champion. “This bill is unique, in that there is no logical reason to oppose it.”

Sam Pesin, the longtime deacon of this Jersey City jewel, and the son of the park’s founder, put it best: “If someone asked for a piece of Central Park in Manhattan, they would be laughed out of town,” he said. “But in Jersey, they are welcomed into the back room.”

Fireman was even able to prevent the bill from being heard in the Senate Environment Committee with a single email sent by his surrogates Thursday morning – after Chairman Bob Smith called Liberty "an untouchable, super-duper gem that can only belong to the people."

It is unclear why Fireman and his astroturf groups should have any input into a bill literally designed to keep him at arm's length, but his reach is formidable, and he has been a generous donor to Coughlin and his Middlesex County power base over the years.

Most New Jerseyans, however, are fed up with this pointless exercise. We want LSP protected, period, because we believe parks represent our state at its best. We pledge that they should be prized by each succeeding generation. We affirm that they contribute to our grasp of history and enrich our lives.

But the obstruction of the LSP Protection Act is now likely to persist into the next session, which is a stark statement about our elected leaders and the courage required to honor the will of the people. One leader who got it was Gov. Christine Whitman, who nailed it in her NJ.com essay Wednesday: One thing that all New Jerseyans have agreed on is the need to protect natural space, she wrote, if only because we have so little of it, and it must not be sacrificed at the altar of millionaire play time.

John Muir also had it right, more than a century ago, when he wrote that any fool can cut down a tree. It takes a leader to save it.

In the current legislative session, the LSP Protection Act is A1957 and S907.