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## **Friends of Liberty State Park, Allies File Lawsuit to Nix Marina Lease**

by E. Assata Wright    March 11, 2026

Eight environmental groups across the state have jointly filed a lawsuit against the commission that approved a controversial lease agreement for the operator of the marina in Liberty State Park. In the lawsuit, filed on Feb. 27, the groups allege the lease, if signed, would be a “grave environmental and financial injustice to the people of New Jersey, and against the public’s best interest.”

The State House Commission, the respondent in the lawsuit, approved a new 60-year lease for Suntex to operate Liberty Landing Marina in January. Under the revised terms of the new lease, Suntex, a private company, will be allowed to build a 70-foot-high boat warehouse at the entrance to Liberty State Park, covering 2.3 acres. The potentially lucrative warehouse, which will allow Suntex to offer its customers valuable dry dock storage, will accommodate roughly 500 boats. In exchange, Suntex will return 8.7 acres of land currently part of the marina to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which will use it to create Marina Green, a key feature of the Liberty State Park Revitalization Program. Finally, the lease agreement states that Suntex and DEP will equally share the \$60 million cost to repair the failing bulkhead along the marina.

The State House Commission approved the lease in the lame duck days of former Gov. Phil Murphy, and it was Murphy’s DEP commissioner, Shawn LaTourette, who negotiated the lease terms with Suntex and who advocated for its approval. But environmental advocacy groups questioned the legality of the lease ever since it was unveiled last August.

They questioned the lease on several grounds:

- First, did the state accurately appraise the value of the marina land before it set rent for the 60-year lease, and why were other potential operators not considered for the contract?
- Second, does the square footage of the proposed boat warehouse violate a law (*note from Friends – violated National Park Service Record of Decision*) that limits the marina’s indoor boat storage to a half-acre?
- Finally, is the state or the marina operator responsible for upkeep of the bulkhead? (A 1996 lease for the marina stated the operator was responsible. An amendment to the 2010 lease between DEP and Suntex shifted the responsibility to the state — but this provision was never approved by the State House Commission.)

These questions are now the backbone of the lawsuit against the State House Commission.

The appellants — who include Friends of Liberty State Park, New Jersey League of Conservation Voters, New Jersey Conservation Foundation, NY/NJ Baykeeper, New Jersey Environmental Lobby, New Jersey Highlands Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation, and the

Pinelands Alliance— are being represented by attorney Renee Steinhagen, executive director of New Jersey Appleseed Public Interest Law Center.

The State House Commission could not be reached for comment.

“We hope the State House Commission’s lease approval will be invalidated, and that Governor [Mikie] Sherrill will respect the overwhelming broad public consensus of nearly 50 years against the privatization of Liberty State Park,” said Sam Pesin, president of Liberty State Park. “The 60-year lease, allowing the construction of a massive boat storage warehouse, would severely damage the park’s character, openness, purpose, and legacy.”

LaTourette finalized the general terms of the lease in November, and they were approved by a vote of 5 to 2 by the State House Commission two months later. Language of the final lease was still being drafted, however, when Murphy and LaTourette left office in mid-January, and the lease has yet to be signed by Gov. Sherrill. The new governor has said she will reexamine, and possibly renegotiate, the lease. The lawsuit appears to be an attempt to give Sherrill ammunition to renegotiate.

Environmental groups fear the agreement could set a bad precedent in the state that will lead to more privatization if it is allowed to go through.

“New Jersey’s state parks should not be treated as revenue centers. If portions of Liberty State Park ... are commercialized ... no state park or forest is safe,” said Anne Poole, president of New Jersey Environmental Lobby. “Other state parks will be targets for private interests that want decades of rights to our natural resource assets.”

The case was filed in the Appellate Division of New Jersey Superior Court.