

Liberty State Park Advocates Rally to Oppose Boat Warehouse

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(Caption for a photo by E. Assata Wright/Jersey City Times) “Protesters gathered at Liberty State Park to oppose the building of a boat storage facility”

With the New Jersey State House Commission potentially weeks away from approving a controversial lease extension deal for the operator of the marina in Liberty State Park, residents and activists rallied in the park Saturday to pressure authorities to, in their words, “freeze the lease.”

The rally drew support from the Friends of Liberty State Park (FOLSP), hundreds of local residents, and several elected officials who spoke out against the lease extension. The event included speeches, a march, old-school social justice songs from the Jersey City Resistance Choir — and a message for both the outgoing and incoming governors.

“We must never stop protecting this park from the greed of wealthy developers,” Sam Pesin, president of FOLSP, told rally attendees. He further lambasted the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and its commissioner, Shawn LaTourette, for “ramrodding a major privatization expansion” in the park.

The controversy centers around a proposed deal between DEP and Suntex, a private entity that leases park property and operates Liberty Landing Marina as a business enterprise. The state is proposing a new 60-year lease that would see Suntex pay \$30 million of the estimated \$60 million needed to repair the failing bulkhead at the marina. Suntex would also give up 8.7 acres of marina land so DEP can build Marina Green, a key feature of a park revitalization plan. In return, Suntex would get the new 60-year lease to operate the marina, plus the right to build a 75-foot tall, three-acre boat storage facility at the entrance to the park.

Many residents who have seen plans for the boat warehouse, which would be built at the entrance to the park, have labeled it outsized and out of step with the park’s majestic character. DEP held two public hearings on the proposal in August and September which drew dozens of residents. Members of the public were also invited to submit written comments and the agency received more than 600 responses. A few residents who sail and fish in the Hudson River were supportive of the proposal, but most of the responses opposed the plan.

“Here we are again. Last year, it was Caven Point. Now it’s the marina,” said U.S. Rep. Rob Menendez, referring to an earlier attempt to expand a private golf club near the park, which he called “the people’s park.” He said the community must continue to fight against what he called the “encroachment of commercialization” in Liberty State Park.

FOLSP Board Member Rafael Torres, a retired Jersey City firefighter, spoke about the need to preserve the park’s legacy for future generations of New Jerseyans.

“Do we want another commercialized waterfront,” Torres asked, “or do we want a natural public space that breathes life into the whole community?”

For the deal to move forward, it will first need to be approved by the New Jersey State House Commission, which has to approve land sales and leases for state-owned property. The commission had been expected to meet on Dec. 3. However, a spokeswoman for the commission said that week a date for the next meeting has yet to be scheduled. She said the meeting will likely be held in mid-December.

The sitting governor sits on the seven-member commission, and activists at the rally asked outgoing Gov. Phil Murphy to punt the lease decision to Gov.-elect Mikie Sherrill, although they fear Murphy could well approve it on his way out the door.

“I urge everyone on Instagram and Facebook to tag Mikie Sherrill and to urge her to tell the DEP commissioner to freeze the lease process so that her administration can review the lease, listen to the people, and quash the warehouse,” Pesin said.

If the commission does not act on the proposal next month, it will fall on the Sherrill Administration to either sign the 60-year lease, or find some other way to pay for the bulkhead repair and secure the acreage for Marina Green. Activists and some elected officials have suggested adding the cost of the bulkhead repair to the state budget, or covering it through Economic Development Authority bonds. Taking the eight-plus acres needed through eminent domain has also been suggested.

“It should be a no-brainer...that getting marina bulkhead money in return for the warehouse is a dangerous precedent,” Pesin said.

Ward E City Councilman James Solomon agreed, and urged the DEP to “go back to the drawing board.”