

Jersey City Times

Marina Lobbyists Met Members of Body That Approved Controversial Warehouse Lease

by E. Assata Wright January 17, 2026



Filings with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) show that lobbyists representing Suntex contacted three members of the state commission that approved a controversial lease for the Dallas-based private company that operates the marina in Liberty State Park.

ELEC records do not provide any dates or many details about the nature of the contact, but they do indicate what was discussed. The records may also shed light on why the New Jersey State House Commission approved the Suntex deal, despite it being broadly unpopular among local residents.

A “Lobbying Activity Search” on ELEC shows that lobbyists for Suntex Marina Investors met with State Sen. Anthony Bucco (Dist. 23) and Assemblyman John DiMaio (Dist. 23) to discuss, “State House Commission Agenda item Liberty State Park Marina lease.” Bucco and DiMaio, both Republicans, are voting members of the State House Commission who voted in support of the Suntex lease.

Suntex lobbyists also had contact with Gov. Phil Murphy's office. Murphy also has a vote on the State House Commission, the governing body that must approve property deals involving state-owned land.

Under the newly-approved 60-year lease, Suntex will be allowed to build a three-acre, 70-foot-tall warehouse at the park entrance, which will accommodate about 500 boats. Monthly rent will start at \$900,000, with a 2% increase each year. The state will also receive an increased cut from sales receipts at the marina. Suntex and the state will share the cost of repairing the failing bulkhead along the marina; the two parties will split the estimated \$60 million repair cost. Suntex will also give up approximately 8.7 acres of land it currently leases so DEP can create Marina Green, part of the Liberty State Park Revitalization Program.

Photo here of a marina warehouse rendering was relocated to end of this article on p. 5 with caption "Texas-based Suntex has proposed building a large structure to house 500 boats."

Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) staff spent months making the case that this lease presents the best opportunity for the state to generate much-needed funding for park revitalization, repair the marina bulkhead, and cover staffing needs at a time when public dollars — especially at the federal level — are scarce. Meanwhile, many Jersey City residents, environmental activists, and Hudson County elected officials, who have been fighting the lease for months, say it sets a precedent that will enable private interests to encroach on a sacred public resource.

By a vote of five to two, the State House Commission approved the lease agreement Thursday during a virtual meeting, with State Sen. Bucco and Assemblyman DiMaio voting in favor. A designee for Murphy also cast a vote in favor of the lease on the governor's behalf.

Nearly 300 residents logged online to participate in the meeting. This number does not count those who participated by phone, nor does it include the many people who said they tried to join but could not get through. (Among those who had planned to speak in opposition to the lease but could not get online was at least one elected official. Newly sworn in Assemblyman Ravi Bhalla, who represents a portion of Hudson County, where Liberty State Park is located, never made it online.)

Not a single person spoke in favor of the lease.

Of the dozens of residents who spoke during the public comments portion of the meeting, which lasted more than 2.5 hours, not a single person spoke in favor of the lease. Jersey City and Hudson County residents were the majority of those who spoke, although a few oppositional voices came from other parts of the state.

"Cowards," one man said in a raised voice as Senior Director of Government Affairs Assad Akhter adjourned the meeting. Akhter was Gov. Phil Murphy's designee on the committee and chaired the meeting. He also voted in favor of the agreement.

“The horrific lease approval after dozens of great speakers spoke out against it, and after 49 years of privatization opposition, is proof that the corrupt fix was in,” said Sam Pesin, president of Friends of Liberty State Park. “It’s an obscene subversion of democracy by the shameless Gov. Murphy and DEP with the multibillion-dollar Suntex Marinas corporation.”

The five commission members who voted in favor of the Suntex agreement did not discuss or explain their vote during the virtual meeting, which led many residents who participated to believe there was little they could have done to change the outcome.

“The fix was in,” Pesin later said.

Photo here from 11/15 anti-lease protest was relocated to end of this article on p.6 with caption “Protesters gathered at Liberty State Park to oppose the building of a boat storage facility (E. Assata Wright/Jersey City Times)

Following the vote, there was speculation that Suntex lobbied the elected members of the State House Commission to win support. Indeed, ELEC, which tracks political donations to candidates and lobbying work, shows that lobbyists working on behalf of Suntex contacted the staff of Bucco, DiMaio, and Murphy.

Suntex lobbyists also had contact with DEP staff. The DEP does not have a voting representative on the State House Commission.

Late Friday, a spokesman for Bucco clarified that Suntex lobbyists approached the senator in a hallway as he exited the senate chambers and spoke to him briefly about the lease. Bucco, he added, did not have a formal sit-down meeting with Suntex representatives. ELEC law requires lobbyists to file a report any time they talk to an elected representative about a pending matter, the spokesman explained, even if the conversation is short and informal.

Bucco later issued a statement explaining his vote.

“After listening to four hours of debate and reviewing the full record, I concluded that extending the existing lease is a responsible way to rebuild the bulkheads protecting Liberty State Park, without burdening New Jerseyans with another unnecessary cost,” Bucco said.

Assemblyman DiMaio did not return a request for comment by deadline.

The nature of the contact with DiMaio, Murphy, and DEP is not detailed in the ELEC filing. It is possible the contact was brief, as it was with Bucco. It is also possible that the contact was more formal and substantive.

Murphy’s office referred all Suntex-Liberty State Park questions to DEP.

A DEP spokesman referred the Jersey City Times to Commissioner Shawn LaTourette’s prior comments regarding the lease.

A spokesman for Suntex did not return an email seeking comment.

Legal challenge likely

Despite the approval of the lease, Friends of Liberty State Park and other environmental groups say they will continue the fight and are weighing a lawsuit against the state.

Among the legal options they are considering is a challenge to language in a prior marina lease that shifted the burden of bulkhead repair from the marina operator to the state, since this is part of the justification for the new 60-year lease. The lease that shifted the bulkhead repair, signed in 2010, was never approved by the State House Commission, as required by law.

“This is not a technical oversight,” attorney Thomas Paciorkowski stated in a letter to the commission. “State House Commission approval is the mechanism by which the state authorizes major property transactions and long-term financial commitments.”

Paciorkowski also questions whether the state adequately evaluated and appraised to the marina and bulkhead in 2010 to ensure it was getting fair market value. Since many facets of the newly approved lease stem from the 2010 agreement, he believes there is enough justification for legal challenge, something Friends of Liberty State Park will explore.

Others say they plan to challenge the legitimacy of the State House Commission meeting. Since an unknown number of people who attempted to join the meeting could not, some argue, the commission may have broken the requirements of the Open Public Meetings Act.

“Too many would-be speakers were unable to speak,” Robert Moss said in the meeting’s chat. “Cancel this meeting. It’s invalid!”

“The difficulty in getting into this meeting to just express opposition is showing how far corporate greed is going to push through their agenda,” said Gladys Shefchik.

The only two members of the State House Commission to vote against the Suntex lease were State Sen. Vin Gopal (Dist. 11) and Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin (Dist. 29), both Democrats. Gopal said he did not feel comfortable voting on something when it was difficult to hear comments and testimony due to a poor Teams connection.

Akhter said commission staff “did not anticipate so many people” would join the meeting, which led to the system being overloaded and overwhelmed.

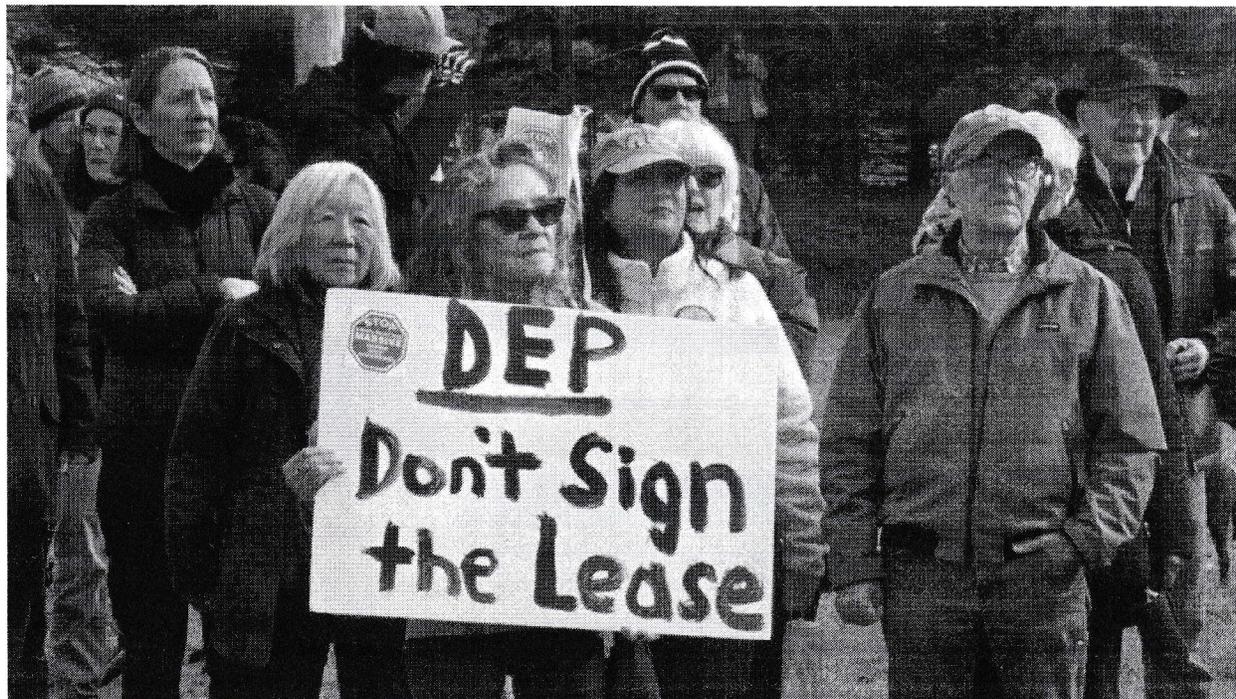
Next two pages have color photos from the story (but was printed on black/white printer)

Texas-based Suntex has proposed building a large structure to house 500 boats.



Please see next page for E. Assata Wright's photo from 11/15 anti-lease protest.

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



Jersey City Times story on the 11/15 protest is at
[https://www.folsp.org/preservation/jc times 11 17 25 rally oppose warehouse.pdf](https://www.folsp.org/preservation/jc%20times%2011%2017%2025%20rally%20oppose%20warehouse.pdf)

Note from Friends of Liberty State Park on the protest:

Among the speakers were Congressman Rob Menendez, State Senator Raj Mukherji, Mayor-elect (at that time) James Solomon and County Commissioner Bill O'Dea.