

THE NEW JERSEY DEMOCRAT [njdemocrat@substack.com](mailto:njdemocrat@substack.com)

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<https://njdemocrat.substack.com/p/the-threat-to-liberty-state-park>

## THE THREAT TO LIBERTY STATE PARK

**Lobbying firms tied to LeRoy Jones and Kevin McCabe have represented ultra rich clients seeking a warehouse for 500 yachts and a luxury golf resort in the iconic green space**

One of the state's premier lobbying firms, 1868 Public Affairs, run by LeRoy Jones, chairman of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee, represented a \$3 billion marina company seeking to build a supersized warehouse for 500 yachts in iconic Liberty State Park, with its stunning views of New York harbor, the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island.

And a second firm, River Crossing Strategy Group, run by Kevin McCabe, the chairman of the Middlesex County Democratic Committee, represented a billionaire who wants to expand his ritzy golf club, the Liberty National Golf Club, with its \$500,000-a-year membership fee, into another part of the park.

An agreement with Suntex Marinas Investors, the marina firm, was okayed by former Governor Murphy's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and fast-tracked in January through the State House Commission, which oversees state lands. But it wasn't officially signed by the outgoing DEP Commissioner and thus is not in force – unless it is okayed by Governor Mikie Sherrill's administration.

That agreement, now on Sherrill's desk, is a controversial 60-year lease that would allow the construction of two massive buildings, one for the yachts and one for offices, on park land. The

choice for Sherrill is clear: either support billionaires and Wall Street investors, who've long wanted to use the park as their playground, or maintain it as the people's oasis.

Environmental groups, community leaders, and local political officials in the Hudson County area, including state Senator Raj Mukherji, Assemblymembers Katie Brennan and Ravi Bhalla, and Representative Rob Menendez want Sherrill to tear up the agreement. Jersey City Mayor James Solomon, a long-time opponent of commercial development in the park, urged people to speak out against the lease when it went to the State House Commission. "That's two football fields of commercial development in one of New Jersey's precious public spaces," he said. "Our parks belong to the people, not multimillion-dollar marina corporations."

"It's an astounding park. It's beautiful and it's inspirational," Loretta Weinberg, the former state Senate majority leader who backed legislation to protect the park, told *The New Jersey Democrat*. "It looks out on a symbol of American democracy and the gateway to America. It is a gift to the residents of New Jersey and surrounding areas, and we should not do anything to jeopardize that gift, to urbanize any section of it, or to give it to a private developer."

Jeff Tittel, who led the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club for 23 years, agrees. "It's one of the dirtiest deals ever done at a state park, because it's not about a use for the park, it's about a storage facility for millionaires, for a multi-billion company allowing storage of yachts in a warehouse in a park that's public land," he told *TNJD*.

### **Billionaire land grab – and the lobbyists who support the billionaires**

The lease issue is the latest battle in a land grab that has been going on for years, both by Suntex, which already has slips for 520 boats and two restaurants at the park, and by a billionaire, Paul Fireman, former owner of Reebok, the force behind the expansion of the golf club. Both are trying to take over the park for their own financial benefit, and key to their efforts have been two lobbying firms tied to the most powerful Democratic political machines in the state.

Suntex's hired gun has been 1868 Public Affairs, founded by Jones, who is also chairman of the Essex County Democratic Committee Inc. And Fireman, who now runs a private equity firm, has employed McCabe's River Crossing Strategy Group. That firm was founded by Eric Shuffler,

who worked for a New Jersey senator and two governors, and who brought his longtime friend, McCabe, into the firm.

The lobbying firms' ties to the legislature run deep, through many politicians that Jones and McCabe have helped elect. Both firms have strong ties to Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, who decides what legislation comes to the floor for a vote. For River Crossing it is not just the fact that Coughlin is a Middlesex politico: Coughlin's longtime district chief of staff is Laurie McCabe, Kevin McCabe's wife.

In 2020, 1868 Public Affairs hired Dan Smith, who has been heavily involved in lobbying for Suntex. Smith had served for three years before that as senior advisor to Coughlin, where he "wielded significant influence over pivotal legislative decisions," according to 1868's website.

"If somebody's a Democratic chair and they're lobbying on behalf of a client to somebody from their home county who's a legislator, who's endorsed by the chair and runs on the organization backing, that's a tremendous amount of power," Tittel said. "Everybody knows he works there, just like everybody knows 1868 is Leroy Jones. Like the Dylan line says, you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

### **Long a target for the ultra-rich**

Liberty State Park has been in the crosshairs of these Wall Street interests because of its unparalleled location. Situated in Jersey City directly on Upper New York Bay, it looks out on the Statue of Liberty a mile away. It is connected by a footbridge to Ellis Island and it faces the stunning panorama of Lower Manhattan.

"The park became a target for wealthy developers who wanted to make money from it because of the views from the park, the Statue, New York Harbor and up to the George Washington Bridge," Sam Pesin, president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, which has led the fight against privatizing the park for 50 years, told *TNJD*. Pesin's father, Morris, led a group of community activists who, after 18 years, successfully convinced New Jersey to create the park in 1976, in time for the U.S. bicentennial. When his father died in 1992, Sam Pesin took on the mantle of protecting it from developers.

A few years ago, Suntex wanted a special dock for massive super yachts, which was rejected. It then focused on a site for an indoor structure to house hundreds of yachts in the winter. Meanwhile, Fireman wanted land to build a casino, concert venue, and hotel. But most of all Fireman sought part of Caven Point Peninsula, a 22-acre migratory bird habitat, in order to expand his Liberty National Golf Club, which sits adjacent to the park.

The expansion would allow the superrich members of his exclusive golf club to gape at breathtaking views across the bay. And it would allow him to build posh facilities that would draw more PGA tournaments to the course. “If we are not able to accommodate what these tournaments need, then they will simply go somewhere else that can,” Chris Donnelly, a spokesman for Liberty National Golf Club, told the *New York Times*.

Suntex’s 60-year lease was hammered out in secret over several years between Suntex and DEP officials with the help of 1868 Public Affairs lobbyist Patrick Torpey, who’s held a series of top-level jobs in the state Assembly with the Republican party.

Suntex paid the firm \$635,000 for its help from July 2018 to July 2024, according to lobbying data filed with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC). The issue they were hired by Suntex to deal with was described as “Liberty Landing lease extension” with the Department of Environmental Protection. During the earlier years of this lobbying, Suntex’s focus was also on building another dock at the park for super yachts. Reached for comment about the lease, 1868’s Smith said the firm no longer represents Suntex, but otherwise refused to comment.

The Suntex lease approved by the State House Commission replaces an older one that still had 21 years left on it. But the company wanted a longer-term lease and the permission to build the indoor storage facility. The new lease includes a 70-foot-tall drydock to house 500 boats and a 55-foot-tall office building. It requires the state to pay half of the estimated \$60 million cost of bulkhead reconstruction for the project.

In October 2023 Suntex produced a glossy brochure detailing its plan for expanding the Liberty State Park marina, including the 500-boat drydock.

DEP and Suntex exchanged emails about it, and some, obtained through the Open Public Records Act and reviewed by *TNJD*, show Jones' lobbyist, Torpey, always included in the email chain.

DEP said it was "encouraged by Suntex's 'Proposal for Marina Development and Operation,' dated October 18, 2023 (Proposal) and remains interested in continuing discussions to determine an appropriate path forward to address our shared goals of continuing to provide world-class marina services to the public while NJDEP embarks on its historic Liberty State Park Revitalization Project."

The final lease agreement, unveiled in August 2025 and passed by the State House Commission in January 2026 was met with outrage from Jersey City officials and environmental organizations.

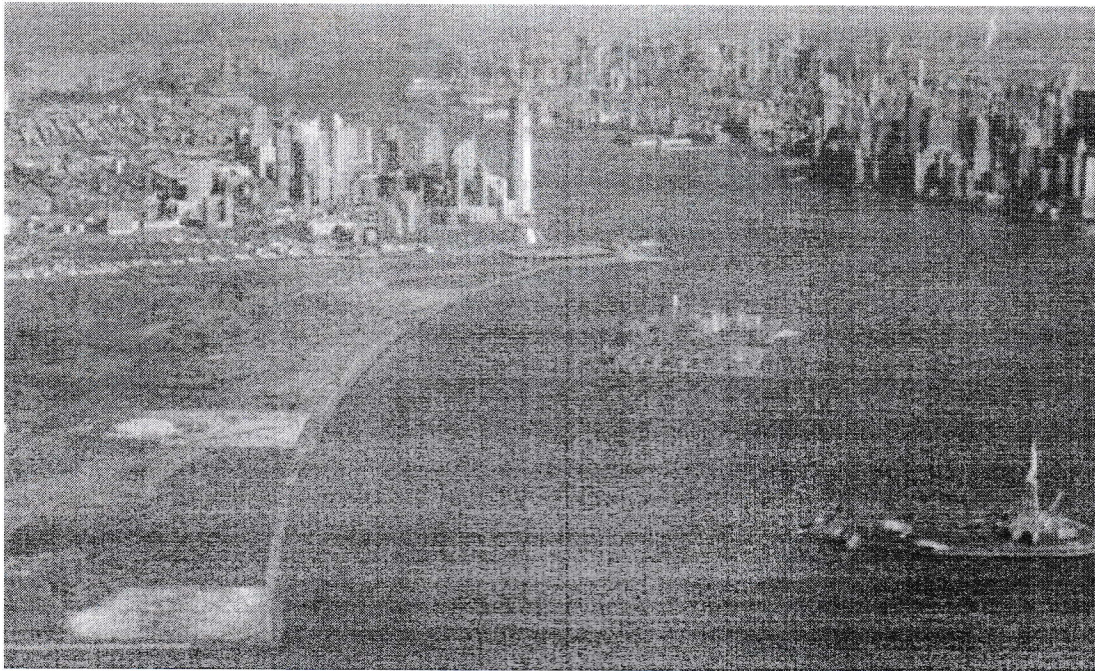
In February, leaders of 20 environmental organizations signed a letter to Sherrill urging her to reassess the lease. "Approving the proposal, would be a grave environmental, and financial injustice to the people of New Jersey," the letter said. Nine environmental groups filed a lawsuit to overturn the lease, including the League of Conservation Voters (LCV), whose former executive director, Ed Potosnak, is Sherrill's nominee to serve as DEP commissioner.

"We hope the State House Commission's lease approval will be invalidated, and that Governor Sherrill will respect the overwhelming broad public consensus of nearly 50 years against the privatization of Liberty State Park," said Pesin. More than 1,000 people weighed in against the lease as the commission was reviewing it.

### **The Caven Point land grab**

Fireman has coveted Caven Point Peninsula since he opened his exclusive golf course in 2006, the year he sold Reebok for \$3.8 billion. It was enormously expensive to build, costing \$250 million to clean-up the site, which had been a World War II munitions storage facility and oil refinery. There is an initiation fee to join, which when it opened was \$500,000, in addition to a yearly fee. Membership is limited to 200 people, who in its early days included Trump backers

Rudy Giuliani and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft. Fireman told a *Forbes* reporter he wasn't interested in making money from the course, rather he saw it as his legacy.



*Aerial Winter 2008 image with snow of LSP's eastern side (photo: Taylor Cruthers),*

With Fireman circling around Caven Point, Assemblyman Raj Mukherji introduced the Liberty State Park Protection Act in 2019 to block commercialization except for such things as bike rentals, keeping it “public urban green open space.”

The bill had the support of 111 organizations. Over 31,000 people signed a petition backing it. A section of the bill would have specifically quashed the golf course expansion, prohibiting “any concession, conveyance or lease” at Caven Point.

Fireman, through his golf course company, WA Golf Company LLC, hired River Crossing Strategy Group and Shuffler, starting in 2019 to work against the LSP Protection Act, according to governmental affairs agent forms at ELEC.

Shuffler worked both behind the scenes and publicly to get Fireman his golf course expansion. He even testified at legislative hearings on how the expanded golf course and PGA tournaments

would help the local economy. “Each of these PGA events, each one, contributes tens of millions of dollars into the Hudson County and New Jersey economy,” he told legislators.

In January 2020, the bill passed the Senate. With its tremendous public support, it likely would have passed the Assembly. But Coughlin stepped in to kill it and he never allowed a floor vote. It died at the end of that lame duck session.

Coughlin’s efforts to stymie the bill continued into the next legislative session.

“When it got to the Assembly, it was torpedoed by Speaker Craig Coughlin without explanation,” wrote the *Newark Star-Ledger* editorial board, “and two years later he is still engaged in a ‘thorough and thoughtful review of the legislation.’”

Fireman maneuvered to have legislation allowing his land grab embedded into other bills. That July his lobbyists secretly attached to an interim budget bill language that allowed private entities to lease New Jersey parks for development. Many legislators didn’t even know the provision was there. When it was uncovered there was an outcry and demands by the public that Murphy line item veto it.

Instead Murphy signed it. The *Newark Star-Ledger* editorial board said Murphy was channeling his inner Christie,” and it denounced the governor for deciding “to collaborate with plutocrats who believe that the public interest can be sold.”

Opposition was so strong the provisions were never acted upon, however. Instead Fireman changed tactics. He poured money into local community groups and astroturf organizations that demanded a say in shaping the park and hired Shuffler to get the legislative okay for a task force to draw up a blueprint for the park. He hoped to control the panel and with pressure from his local community front groups, get support for his development plans, which were outlined in a brochure that circulated after meetings at Fireman’s golf course. The plans included, “an alternate park plan, complete with a 7,000-seat concert arena, large community center and swimming pool, 5,000-seat stadium and rows of athletic fields and courts,” according to the *New York Times*.

For some two years the task force held hearings, met with community groups, offered suggestions. Fireman conducted heavy handed tactics to steer the groups meetings and proposals. At one point Coughlin and State Senate President Nick Scutari were enlisted to demand that the DEP Commissioner pay more attention to what the task force, filled with Fireman's allies, wanted. And at that same time in 2022-23, Suntex hired Jones' firm to "monitor the status" of the task force and meet with legislative leaders about it.

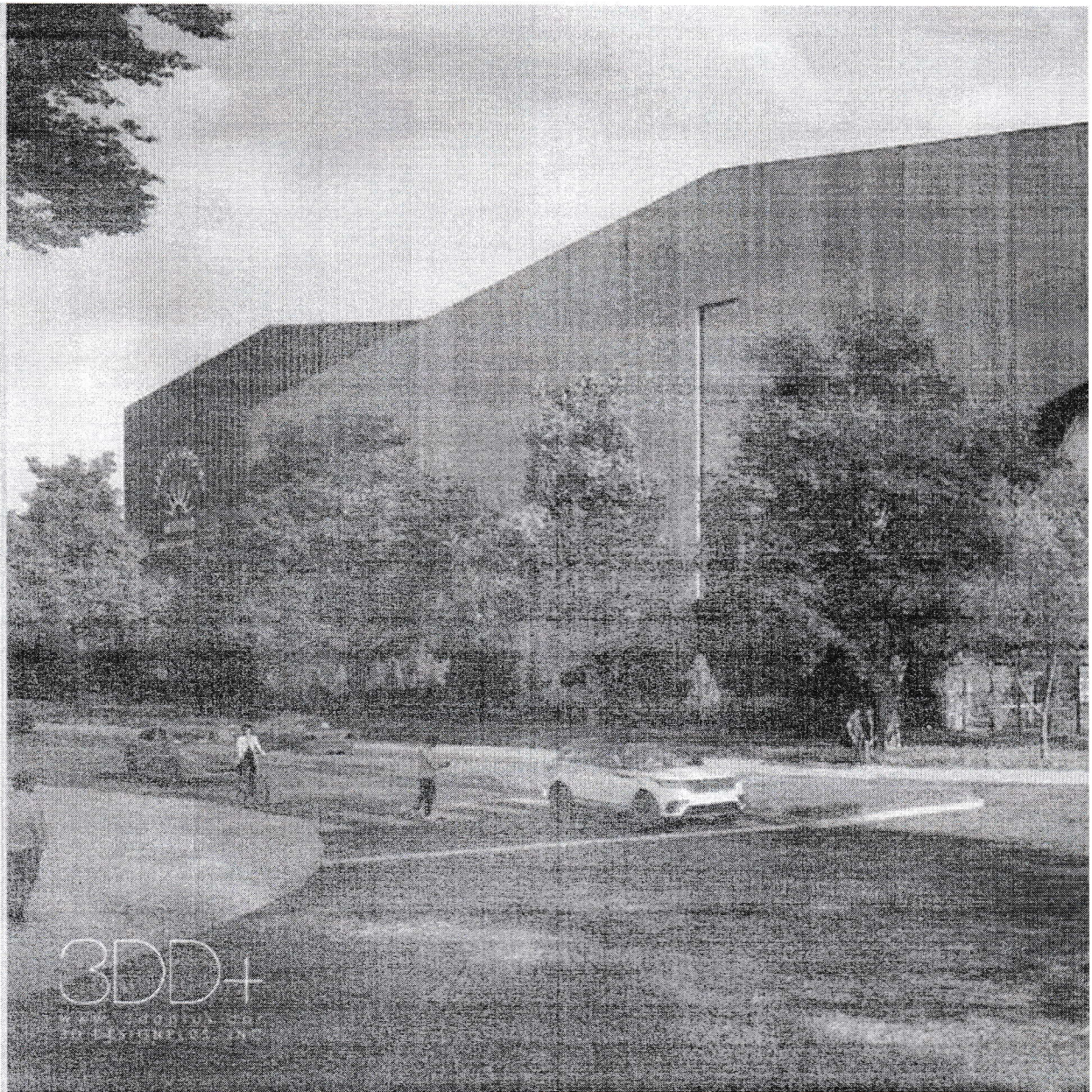
Fireman's efforts ultimately failed. DEP officials ended up writing their own plan for the park and in mid-summer 2025 they unveiled a ten-year revitalization master plan that included restoring natural habitats and building athletic fields, and playgrounds. There were no provisions for stadiums or private golf fairways.

But while the park overall seemed to be protected from large-scale development, the marina area was another matter. Almost at the same time the revitalization plan was unveiled, the DEP made known its lease agreement with Suntex, whose fate will be decided by the Sherrill Administration.

And its opponents worry that if Suntex succeeds it will open the door to another assault by Fireman.

"People have fought time and time again for a free park behind the Statue of Liberty, the world's greatest symbol of freedom and democracy," said Pesin. "I feel that the park itself is as much a symbol of democracy as the statue is, because the park is used by people of all cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds."

***Rendering on next page of what Suntex would like to install in Liberty State Park:***



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