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No arena, no concert hall at Liberty State Park, DEP chief says

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By Mark Koosau | The Jersey Journal

Visions of a 5,000-seat sports arena, gone. Thoughts of a 7,000-seat concert venue, also gone.

The head of the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) laid out general plans for the revitalization of Liberty State Park Thursday, but he was specific in saying there would be no major commercialization or privatization of the state park on the Hudson River waterfront.

“Privatization of a public asset that is owned by no one because it belongs to everyone is not a thing, period, full stop,” said DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette.

The news would appear to be a blow to the hopes of two groups that have been vocal in their push for more active recreation at the park, Liberty State Park for All and the People’s Park Foundation.

LaTourette’s promise came during a virtual press conference on the new plan for the park, which will cover practically every portion of the park from north to south, east and west, all of which will be worked on simultaneously. Officials are set to unveil more details at an open house next Thursday.

Initial plans for the park, announced in 2021, included dedicating 61 acres of the park to active recreation.

A brief overview of the program includes creating passive recreation and resilience features in the contaminated interior of the park, adding recreational amenities on Audrey Zapp Drive and revitalizing the historic train sheds into arts and craft space, and a “holistic” master plan for the waterfront and the southern end.

The new program comes as Liberty State Park is caught in a tug-of-war over the balance between passive and active recreation, and the risk of privatization encroaching onto the park.

In recent years, the main force behind privatization efforts has been billionaire Paul Fireman, the former Reebok CEO and owner of the nearby ultra-exclusive Liberty National Golf Course.

He has sought to privatize Caven Point, a migratory bird habitat, to expand his golf course, citing at times that improvements could bring in major PGA tournaments. The club is already in the rotation for the President's Cup, a U.S. versus the world competition.

Last year, the billionaire was accused of influencing a fast-tracked controversial bill that created a task force to advise on short- and long-term redevelopment plans for Liberty State Park.

At the same time, Liberty State Park for All and the People's Park Foundation, groups tied to Fireman, supported the bill and linked it to their vision for the park that includes the concert venue, sports stadium and a track and field stadium.

The bill, signed into law in less than four weeks after its creation, prompted renewed fears by park activists of privatization. It was then revealed that the bill was promoted by lobbyists tied to Fireman's golf course, Politico reported.

But for the time being, no privatization will be allowed in the park, LaTourette said. Sam Pesin, the president of the Friends of Liberty State Park, said in a statement that his group is supportive of the DEP's plans.

"I feel most of the consultants' recommendations will have a broad public consensus as long as they respect the quality-of-life needs of urban residents," he said, while also urging for the state Legislature to pass a bill that would protect Caven Point from privatization.

Bob Hurley, the Hall of Fame high school basketball coach who heads the People's Park Foundation, said in a statement that the group "will continue to follow this process closely to ensure Liberty State Park finally meets the needs of the community."

The open house on the revitalization program will be held at the CRRNJ Terminal Building March 23 from 6:30 to 8 p.m.