

Fast-Tracked Bill Stokes Fears of Private Development in 1,200-Acre Park (600 acres of land)

Proponents of a free and open park, who have battled back decades of for-profit proposals for Liberty State Park, worry new legislation could set a dangerous precedent for parks nationwide.

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June 17, 2022

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With just weeks to go before the state budget deadline, a powerful assortment of New Jersey politicians introduced an expansive new bill tied to an explosive old controversy.

The bill offers \$250 million for park upgrades to Liberty State Park, a popular 1,200-acre recreation destination with spectacular views of New York Harbor and Lower Manhattan. But it also opens the door for the addition of amenities that generate revenue to pay for park maintenance, and for the creation of partnerships with private donors.

The move has ignited a long-simmering fight over the future of the parkland in Jersey City, pitting private interests — most notably the owner of a nearby private golf club — against proponents of a free and open park.

Over the last 50 years, a range of for-profit proposals have been swatted down by people who argue that a reliance on revenue promised by private developers erodes access to the park for poor residents living in densely packed communities nearby, and could set a dangerous precedent for parks nationwide.

“We don’t want any of our parks to be turnstiles for revenue generation,” said Ed Potosnak, executive director of the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters.

“That’s what we pay taxes for.”

The new legislation was introduced last week and fast-tracked for a committee hearing on Thursday. It does not lay out specific plans for new development projects. Rather, it would allow a 17-member task force to prepare recommendations for the park’s future — a prospect that proponents and opponents alike say could mean a drastic reimagining of one of the state’s most popular parks.

The push to develop the park is being supported by Paul Fireman, the owner of Liberty National Golf Club, an elite private golf course along the bay southwest of the park. In a statement, Mr. Fireman said he was backing the proposal to reimagine the park in an effort to create a modern place where children and families from all over the region can gather and play.

But Jeff Tittel, a veteran government watchdog who retired a year ago from his position as director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, said the bill prioritized economic development at the expense of guaranteeing full access to a park founded in the spirit of liberty for all. “This is the biggest threat we’ve ever seen to Liberty State Park and its future,” he said.

It is not the first time Mr. Fireman has taken an interest in the park. For several years, Liberty National had repeatedly sought to take over a 22-acre outcropping of land inside the park to build three new holes — an expansion officials have claimed would make the course better able to attract PGA Tour events.

Then, two years ago, after a third failed attempt to expand into what is today a sandy beach and migratory bird habitat, Mr. Fireman said he was “halting” his push.

Mr. Fireman, a major New Jersey political donor and philanthropist who sold the sneaker company Reebok to Adidas in 2005 for \$3.8 billion, now appears to have thrown his support behind a public-relations campaign related to the park.

The day after the bill was introduced on June 6, a glossy brochure in support of it began appearing at homes throughout Hudson County. It was mailed by a group formed in the last several years, Liberty State Park for All, led by Arnold Stovell, who has been paid by Mr. Fireman for the work he has done for the group.

Written in English and Spanish, it included drawings of 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.

This new vision for the park grew out of meetings held at Liberty National Golf Club among people involved in youth sports in Jersey City, several participants said.

Sean Fallon, the athletic supervisor at Henry Snyder High School in Jersey City who also helps run a 1,000-child soccer program in the city, said he participated in three meetings at Liberty National. The discussion, he said, focused on what he and other area athletic directors thought should be built in the park.

“We have a hard time finding a place to play,” said Mr. Fallon, who said the need for additional artificial turf fields in Jersey City was acute.

“Over the years, it’s turned into: Anything proposed for Liberty State Park is a land grab,” he added. “And I don’t think that’s the case here.”

Bob Hurley, a lifelong Jersey City resident and Hall of Fame high school basketball coach, is the paid president of a new group called the People’s Park Foundation, a nonprofit partially funded by Mr. Fireman. Mr. Hurley, who has known Mr. Fireman since he ran Reebok, said he exercises daily in the park and believes it could be better utilized.

“There isn’t a basketball park. There isn’t a softball field. There isn’t a skate park,” he said.
“There is no concession stand.”

The park, which opened in 1976, has a science center, two high-end restaurants, a yacht club and a memorial to the Sept. 11 terror attacks, “Empty Sky.” Its riverfront walkway is almost always filled with anglers, runners and tourists. Crowds of families picnic and barbecue on warm weekends. (Over Memorial Day weekend, a sign flashed on the New Jersey Turnpike warning drivers that the park was filled to capacity.)

But the park’s roughly 230-acre interior section, some of which is contaminated by pollutants, remains undeveloped. Train sheds from the early 1900s (and on the National Historic Register) are crumbling. And many of the park’s rudimentary amenities were never fully repaired after Superstorm Sandy.

Mr. Fireman, in a statement, did not say if he hoped to one day revisit his plan to expand the golf course into the park. (On Thursday, the Senate Environment and Energy Committee rejected an amendment to the bill that would have barred him from doing so.)

But he acknowledged his support for transforming the park “into a world class, all-inclusive and contemporary park for children, adults and seniors from every walk of life.” He said he came to support what he called a “re-imagining” of the park in part out of gratitude, after receiving lifesaving care at a hospital in Newark.

“Kids need a place to go to avoid the streets,” he said. “Young athletes need fields to play on, local residents need jobs and economic opportunities.”

Last week, Gov. Philip D. Murphy, a second-term Democrat, strongly hinted he was open to the legislation, which the environmental committee unanimously approved on Thursday.

“Sometimes people think it’s in a perfect pristine state right now, doing everything it needs to, particularly for the neighbors that live right around it,” Mr. Murphy said in a radio broadcast. “It isn’t. It needs to be better and it can be better.”

Mr. Murphy, however, made no reference to an effort begun in October 2020 by a state agency he controls, the Department of Environmental Protection, to upgrade the park entirely with public funds.

The agency conducted detailed neighborhood surveys and held five public meetings to finalize cleanup and construction plans for the park’s fenced-off 235-acre interior and 11 nearby acres.

A draft redesign called for almost five miles of forested hiking and biking trails, 61 acres of new ball fields and athletic courts and vast stretches of flood-friendly wetlands, which would be formed by digging a tidal channel from the interior of the park to the river. Funding had already been set aside — much of it from fines paid by polluters, state officials have said.

A task force had been expected to submit a report to the D.E.P. commissioner for final approval by June 30.

The new legislation would, at a minimum, complicate the two-year effort.

On Thursday, Sam Pesin — whose father, Morris Pesin, is credited as the park's founder — urged lawmakers to also pass a separate bill that would bar all but small-scale private development in the park.

“The park is our urban backyard,” Sam Pesin testified. “Please don’t throw away its future.”