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“Proposed Boat Storage Facility Has Liberty State Park Advocates Fuming”

New Jersey has an expensive dilemma in Liberty State Park: The aging bulkhead at the marina needs major repairs, and the state would like more acreage for a key component of its park revitalization plan. Repairs and land cost money, however, and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) — flat on cash — is looking for creative ways to solve the problem.

Enter Suntex, the current leaseholder of Liberty Landing Marina. Working together, Suntex and the DEP have worked up a proposal that would get the state \$30 million towards bulkhead repairs, plus 8.7 acres which the marina operator would give back to the park. In exchange, Suntex would get the right to build a new asset, which it could monetize, and get a new 60-year lease on the premium location. But now the two entities have a new problem: park activists and members of the public who think the plan, in its current form, would ruin what they consider to be the jewel of state parks.

At issue is a 75-foot tall boat storage facility that would be built at the entrance to Liberty State Park at Jersey Ave. and Audrey Zapp Drive. At a public hearing hosted by DEP in Jersey City last week, residents heard presentations from Suntex and the state regarding the proposal and offered an earful on the most divisive features of the plan.

DEP and park advocates at odds?

Liberty State Park is already a popular destination among people who enjoy such outdoor recreational activities as jogging or biking. The state wants to add some new amenities in hopes of making the park appealing to more people. One new feature that is in the works is Marina Green, a picnic area that would include open space for pickup sports, BBQ grills, and tables and seating. The spot that’s been designated for Marina Green is part of the land currently being leased by Suntex.

Meanwhile, some of the infrastructure at the marina site is in dire need of repair. Approximately 3,500 linear feet of the wooden bulkhead is failing, since wooden bulkheads are subject to rot and decay. The total cost to replace it is an estimated \$60 million, according to the DEP.

“The marina is in need of a full replacement of that bulkhead,” said DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette. “That is necessary to ensure the integrity of the land itself, and to maintain the Hudson River Walkway.”

Under the current lease with Suntex, LaTourette explained, the state is on the hook to pay the total cost of the bulkhead replacement.

Suntex and DEP thought there might be a way for the two parties to help each other out: Suntex would give back 8.7 acres of its leased land, which the state could use to build Marina Green.

The company would also cover half of the cost to repair the bulkhead, or \$30 million. The state, in return, would give Suntex a new long-term lease on Liberty Landing Marina — 60 years — and allow the company the right to build a vessel storage facility that would house 500 boats in dryrack. (If approved by the state, Suntex's current 31-year lease would be set aside, even though it still has 21 years left on it.)

The boat storage facility that would sit at the entrance to the park would roughly be the height of a 5-to-7-story mid-rise building. No details were provided regarding the length and depth of the boat shed, a major criticism of residents who oppose the plan, including the advocacy group Friends of Liberty State Park (FOLSP). However, comparing this plan to others run elsewhere by Suntex, the boat shed would likely take up about three acres of land.

Based on renderings supplied by Suntex last week, the storage facility would also obscure much of the lower Manhattan skyline that is currently visible from the park entrance, a feature many residents find appealing.

The shed, which would be built at Suntex's expense, would include a showroom in the front, and boat staging in the rear, which could impede joggers and pedestrians who currently use the Hudson River Walkway along the marina. Boat owners who want to use the storage facility would pay Suntex rent for the service.

David Filler, chief development officer for Suntex, said the storage facility would declutter the shipyard and make it look tidier.

"One of our primary objectives is to enclose as many of the vessels as we can," said Filler. "Some vessels will be too tall, because their sailboats may have masts that just can't fit inside a barn. But vessels that don't have masts over 60 feet could fit, potentially, inside the barn."

Some of the marina's infrastructure would also be shielded from public view.

Most residents at the hearing weren't having it.

"Park visitors from our city, state, nation, and world deserve better than a damn giant building at the northern entrance," said FOLSP President Sam Pesin. "The building is a shocking act of sacrilege against the powerful meaning of this park behind Lady Liberty, and is a giveaway to a multibillion dollar corporation."

Several residents who attended the hearing framed the Suntex-DEP proposal as a David vs. Goliath-level fight against another big developer. Maureen Crowley, for example, said she sees the DEP-Suntex proposal as another indicator of the "growing wealth inequality" in Jersey City.

"There's a gap between what developers promise in their pretty pictures and what the public gets," Crowley said.

"The park is a precious piece of what all people of New Jersey, and throughout the country, enjoy," said longtime Jersey City resident Bill Willis. "What is a concern to me is when any

private entity is going to be given 60 years [for a lease]. To think that is always going to be for the good of the people, I struggle with that. And I think the structure does not honor what this park was intended to be.”

This proposal is subject to the approval of the New Jersey State House Commission, which reviews and approves land lease agreements and sales of state-owned properties. Willis said he hopes the commission weighs these concerns.

The shed has its fans

Other residents are onboard with the proposal.

“I think the plan presented today is a solid one. It considers many different aspects of what the park could be,” said Joe Albanese, president of the Hudson River Fisherman’s Association. “It looks like your plan has done a lot to consider other things the marina brings to the park beyond boating and fishing.”

Eugene Ferrara was also supportive. “The marina looks like hell now,” he said. “An enclosed facility opens up a lot of things. It gives those people who want to have a boat a place to put that boat for much less expense than docking it, and it keeps them safe.”

Ferrara, a boat owner himself, said the storage unit could be redesigned slightly to make it more visually appealing, adding the shed rendering “Looks a hell of a lot better than what’s there right now.” Ferrara implored Filler not to raise boat storage rent because, “the rent is too damn high.”

‘Flat is the new up in state government budgets’

While the size of the boat shed overshadowed most of the hearing, some residents questioned whether the state is getting fair market value rent for the premium 50-acre marina land that Suntex rents.

Suntex currently pays the state \$300,000 in dedicated lease payments annually. That amount would increase to \$800,000, annually, under the new lease. The guaranteed rent would increase by 10 percent every five years.

“Those payments sustain the workforce at this park, which is not funded wholly through the state budget,” LaTourette said. “We have 52 parks in our state park system and our budget...has been relatively flat. We’re lucky that it hasn’t gone down, since flat is the new up in state government budgets. So, how we work with our leaseholders to sustain this park is incredibly important.”

When pressed by resident Stephanie Daniels why Liberty State Park seems to be under constant pressure to “pay for itself,” LaTourette said New Jersey funds its parks at a much lower per capita rate than many other states, thus Garden State parks are underfunded. Still, he said, Liberty State remains the best funded park in the state.

The DEP will host a second public hearing on the marina plan on Thursday, Sept. 4 at 2:00 p.m. in Trenton. This meeting will also be streamed online for those who can't attend in-person.

Members of the public can also write letters through September 18 to offer input.

The New Jersey State House Commission could vote on the deal in early December.