The Jersey City Independent

Guest Opinion: Parks Are Not For Sale

By Jeff Tittel • Jul 13th, 2010 • Category: Blog, News, Politics

Editor's Note: *Gov. Christie is proposing to lease the "operation and management of all state parks," including Liberty State Park, to private firms. You can read about the proposal, and the rest of the administration's privatization efforts, here (the parks bit is on page 26 of the report).*

Gov. Christie is again advocating for increased privatization in the state government. The governor released a report that called for leasing out management of all 58 of New Jersey's state parks. The Christie administration wants to give away New Jersey's most valuable public assets to private companies. These lands were bought by the people of New Jersey for use by residents of the state and for their historical, open space and environmental value. Leasing the jewels of New Jersey to private companies is a violation of the public trust.

Approximately 17 million people visit New Jersey parks annually. The number of park and forest visitors increases every year. The privatization of parks will drastically alter the visitor experience. There is a significant difference between allowing vendors to operate concessions at state parks — such as restaurants, bed and breakfasts, or kayak rentals — and leasing the park lands to be managed by companies like Marriott. Private companies could end up determining public access, use, and costs.

Private companies will emphasize the bottom line over the visitor experience. For example, given a choice between renting a picnic area at Island Beach State park for a company picnic or allowing public use, a management company is more likely to rent the space to increase their revenue.

Privatization in other states and at the federal level has led to increased entrance fees for camping, cabin rentals and swimming. Some privately managed federal concessions have multiple year long waiting lists and exorbitant rates. This shift would put our parks out of reach for lower income families.

The Christie administration report also misrepresents the effectiveness of privatization at the federal level. The federal government severely restricts private businesses to act as concessionaires, they do not outsource management. Despite these restrictions the Inspector General has criticized the management of concessionaires; parks have dealt with theft of artifacts and major battles over turning public spaces into theme parks.

Increasing privatization means we will see more battles like privatization of Fort Hancock at Sandy Hook, or the construction of "Disney Land" in Yosemite. More state lands would be turned into country clubs, amusement parks, or cute historic themed

shopping centers. We don't want to see a historic building where Washington's army stopped turned into a fast food shop.

There is low confidence that the state government can adequately manage these leases. An audit released earlier this week by the non-partisan Office of Legislative Services, shows yet again the state is not doing its job when it comes to leases on public lands.

The Office of Leases is responsible for handling all leases of the Division of Fish and Wildlife and the Bureau of Parks and Forestry. A 2009 audit reveals that 112 of the 236 leases on the Land and Building Asset management are expired. More than half of the leases reviewed could not be validated for fair market value. Some leases on state lands to utilities go back to the '30s, collecting only a dollar an acre. Audits in the past have exposed the same problems that still exist now. The governor is calling for privatization of parks and forests and but the state is not managing the leases they have now.

Companies are paying less than 10 cents on the dollar for use of public lands. This is evident in the recent case of Skylands Manor, where a nationally registered historic place was turned into a hotel and wedding destination. This sweetheart deal limits public access to the monument and pays the state much less than market value, while the 30-year lease locks the property up for decades. At a time when New Jersey is in a fiscal crisis and the state has cut the budget for parks by more than 40 percent, the state is not collecting the income it is owed.

Currently Tennessee Gas Company wants to put a 23-mile pipeline through state parks in New Jersey. The state wants to lease these lands for 24 years for a mere $45,000. That's for the entire lease period, not per year. These types of leases are sweetheart deals to utilities that not only hurt the environment, but cost taxpayers money.

Although not explicitly stated in the report, privatization raises other concerns. The sale of naming rights creates a potential for a cultural and historical disaster. New Jersey could end up with Jello Cheesequake State Park, Jeep Liberty State Park or Fort Mott's Applesauce State Park. This would detract from the historic significance of parks that are public assets, not corporate assets.

Waterloo Village was leased under Gov. Whitman's administration and it turned out to be a disaster. Buildings were left in disrepair. Historic artifacts went missing. The state lost money. The lease of Farley Marina led to scandals in which state employees got favors in exchange for illegally leasing boat slips.

In addition concerns remain over resource extraction from state lands. John Galandak of the task force raised the issue of leasing out public lands to private companies for lumber extraction. Our state forests have always been managed for their recreational value not for resource extraction.

Gov. Christie's report creates a slippery slope, privatization of the parks will lead to privatization of DEP and less government oversight of our air, water, and land.