

Meadowlands Environmental Park is Moving Forward

MEADOWLANDS ENVIRONMENTAL PARK IS MOVING FORWARD

It is happening, and it is happening in a place where many least expected it. Within the next ten years, I predict that 8,400 acres of the Hackensack Meadowlands (just a stone's throw from the Arena/Giants Stadium property) will be transformed from a swampy wasteland and garbage dump site into a nationally and internationally renowned environmental park. It will be ten times the size of New York City's Central Park.

When I began in Congress in 1997, this park was my vision for the Hackensack Meadowlands. It would be located on an open wetlands area, thriving with wildlife and safe from development. Establishing the Meadowlands Environmental Park would provide this and future generations with a natural sanctuary from the stress and noise of modern life. It would also represent a beautiful setting for boating, fishing, nature walks, bird watching, observing wildlife in their natural habitat, and for a children's environmental education center. All of this would be in the midst of what was once deemed to be a poisoned marshland thought to be forever irreclaimable.

The first big step toward fulfilling this vision took place in 2001 when I enlisted the help of the Hackensack Riverkeeper, the New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, environmental groups, representatives from the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to draw a line around the 8,400 undeveloped acres in the Meadowlands and to declare that there would be no more development on this land.

An equally important milestone occurred in 2001 when I got the U.S. Congress to authorize a multi-year, \$5.2 million federal-state study of how to go about purchasing, cleaning up and saving these precious acres of open space for an environmental park. Once Congress approved the study, the naysayers realized that there was no turning back. They now saw these wetlands as off limits. The dreams of so many people, for so many years, would actually come true!

The next big step occurred when the far-sighted governing body responsible for the region changed its name from the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission to the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, re-drafted its master plan and re-zoned the 8,400 acres as non-developable open space in perpetuity. The NJMC is now hosting conservation symposiums and using the \$9.5 million in federal funds I have provided, along with its own resources, to purchase and remediate as many of the 8,400 acres as possible, and to plan for the future of the park. To date, 8,100 of the 8,400 acres have been acquired and transferred to the newly created Meadowlands Conservation Trust. The NJMC is actively pursuing the remaining 300 acres of undeveloped land and preparing to add them to the park.

Today, all of the 8,400 acres are protected by re-zoning, most of them have been given to the Meadowlands Conservation

Trust and I am now working with the NJMC on the park's first projects. One of these is to restore a portion of the Meadowlands known as the Richard P. Kane Natural Area and establish proper trail access for the public. This project would be the largest restoration project in the history of the Meadowlands. As part of the overall restoration strategy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey have provided \$3 million for the purchase of upland waterfront land in order to increase public access to the Hackensack River. This land will act as a gateway into the Kane Natural Area, with the remaining funds designated for the construction of the River Barge Marina, the first environmentally-friendly public marina on the Hackensack River.

Additionally, the NJMC recently announced a \$53 million restoration plan to restore Kearny Marsh to what the New Jersey Audubon Society once called the best freshwater marsh in the state. The NJMC is also working with Bergen County to establish the Meadows Path, a pedestrian/bike path linking Little Ferry to the Kearny Marsh. Many other projects are in the drafting and design stage.

New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation and North Jersey is the most populated area of the state. Living in this area, we are used to shopping in crowded malls, driving on congested roads, and facing decreasing amounts of open space. What is remarkable about the soon-to-be Meadowlands Environmental Park is that just a few years ago virtually everyone believed it was destined to be paved over for another mega-mall. Instead, the Meadowlands Environmental Park will now provide a much-needed refuge for quiet and reflection, forever protected from development.

From an industrial waste dump to a nature preserve, the Hackensack Meadowlands is experiencing a remarkable transformation. This transformation, whether in the form of cleaner water or more abundant wildlife, enriches everyone's life in the area.

Our tranquil environmental park will also provide the chance to enjoy recreational opportunities on the Hackensack River and other Hudson River Estuaries, and to observe and marvel at the multitude of plant, animal, bird, and aquatic life in this unique ecosystem. Last, but not least, it will give all North Jerseyans a new and welcome sense of identity. We, and the rest of the world, will now see us as proud and responsible co-inhabitants and custodians of our own fragile and beautiful environment.

For the people of North Jersey, such a goal is worthy of our highest and best efforts. We can change our destiny; how we live; how others regard us; and how we regard ourselves. We are already on our way to making this magnificent dream come true. I will continue to work with local citizens and elected officials at every level of government to ensure that this important and truly historic Meadowlands Environmental Park becomes a reality.

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