

Rothman Outlines Plan For Environmental Park At Hackensack Meadowlands Symposium

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Shares Vision For 8,400 Acre Eco-Park With Wetlands Experts

Lyndhurst, NJ - Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ9) today outlined his plans for an 8,400 acre Meadowlands Environmental Park during a scientific symposium on the wetlands at the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission Environment Center. Below are excerpts of Rothman's prepared remarks for the Meadowland symposium.

"Reverend clergy, Bob Ceberio -- New Jersey Meadowlands Commission Executive Director, Kirk Barrett and Francisco Artigas of the Meadowlands Environmental Research Institute, James Cramer and Cliff Day of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Leonard Houston of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Eric Kiviat of Hudsonia and all of you who are associated with these groups, Hackensack Riverkeeper Bill Sheehan and all here at this symposium -- good afternoon.

"I am delighted to be in the company of so many wonderful people who are as enthusiastic and committed to the preservation of our wetlands not only here in the Meadowlands, but throughout New Jersey, the nation, and the world. Such efforts improve the quality of life for all of us and ensure that we will share a green future. I want to thank everyone from MERI, Hudsonia, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission who worked so hard to put together this important symposium.

"I also commend everyone here who has committed their resources and energy to saving our wetlands, especially when the pressure is almost overbearing to do just the opposite. Conservation of wetlands cannot be accomplished by just one group - we need government officials, environmental and conservation groups, scientists, and the labor and business communities to all work together to save our precious open space and look for economic development opportunities on already developed property.

"On a personal note, I want to recognize Hackensack Riverkeeper Bill Sheehan, who has been my mentor when it comes to the Hackensack Meadowlands. I have learned so much from him, and the success we have had thus far in saving the 8,400 undeveloped acres of the Meadowlands for the people of this region and all of New Jersey would not have been achieved without his support. I also want to thank New Jersey Meadowlands Commission Executive Director Bob Ceberio and all the members of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission for all of their work in helping to create this environmental park. The NJMC is an invaluable partner in helping to save these precious 8,400 acres of wetlands and it is directly related to their leadership.

"I am a lifelong resident of Bergen County, New Jersey, but up until six years ago I had no idea what existed within the 8,400 undeveloped acres of the Hackensack Meadowlands. And as that lifelong resident of this area, and as a former mayor of Englewood, Bergen County Surrogate, and now a fourth-term Congressman, I don't take pride in the fact that Northeastern New Jersey is wrongly considered by some to be nothing more than an overcrowded urban and suburban landscape across from New York City, pockmarked with toxic superfund sites and garbage landfills.

"But now something big is happening, and it is happening in a place where many least expected it. Within the next five-to-ten years, the Hackensack Meadowlands will go from being written off as swampy wasteland and garbage dump site to a nationally and even internationally renowned environmental park that will be a model for other undeveloped wetlands.

"Three years ago, with the input of the Riverkeeper, the Baykeeper, environmentalists, local elected officials, and members of the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission, I drafted up a map and drew a line around 8,400 undeveloped acres and said we were going to stop anybody from developing these acres.

"There have been several critical junctures on this journey toward an environmental park. One of the most critical moments was when I got the U.S. Congress to authorize a three year, \$5.2 million federal-state study of how to go about saving these precious acres of open space. Once Congress approved the study in 2001, everyone realized that there was no turning back. Our park would become reality. There was a fundamental change in the way people saw this area. They saw these wetlands as off limits -- that the pipe dreams of so many people for so many years -- even the Congressman's pipe dreams -- might actually be more than pipe dreams since we were able to get the federal government involved.

"And as the study continues, so does the process of securing the land that will comprise the park. So far, I have been able to use my position on the House Appropriations Committee to secure \$4.2 million in federal funds for land acquisition, which is being matched by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission for a total of \$8.4 million.

"This is a huge undertaking that will improve the quality of life for all of us. This will occur in the midst of the most densely crowded region of the most densely populated state, just three miles across the Hudson River from Manhattan. It will be an extraordinary accomplishment in which all New Jerseyans and all Americans can take pride.

"What is remarkable about the soon-to-be Meadowlands Environmental Park - which will be ten times the size of New York City's Central Park - is that just a few years ago virtually everyone believed it was destined to be paved over as the site of yet another mega-mall. Now, the governing body responsible for the region has changed its name from the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission to the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, is hosting conservation symposiums like this one, and has become our invaluable partner in working with Congress and making this Meadowlands park a reality. Our great friends at the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission have even gone so far as to redraft its master plan and zoned these 8,400 acres non-developable open space in perpetuity. And people on all sides are coming to recognize that the formation of this environmental park is inevitable. This is what the people of this region want for themselves and I am committed to fighting for them and getting this done.

"In this weak economy, it is easy for people to say that we need to develop these wetlands in order to create jobs for thousands of residents from our area. But what people now realize is that we already have so much developed space that is abandoned, underutilized, and in need of renovation, that jobs can be redirected toward revitalizing those sites instead. Paving over precious open space degrades our quality of life. Instead, we are improving our quality of life both by saving our precious open space and by developing already developed space in order to create jobs for the working families of our area.

"Most significantly, the Mills Corporation, which has rights to a key part of the Meadowlands Environmental Park area - the precious 592 acre Empire Tract - was recently awarded the rights to redevelop the Continental Airlines Arena site, located just a stone's throw away from the 8,400 undeveloped acres. As a result, Mills not only agreed to hand over the Empire Tract for conservation, but also has agreed to provide up to \$25 million for the remediation and restoration of those 592 acres. Both the new multi-use entertainment and retail center about to be constructed at the arena site, and the natural oasis of the Meadowlands Environmental Park will create a much-needed economic shot-in-the-arm for our region, and will improve our area's quality of life.

"By the end of this year, it is expected that more than 90 percent of the 8,400 acres will be in public hands, with the remainder in place by the end of 2004. Once the land is acquired, remediation will begin and the park should be completed within 5-10 years.

"For the people of Northeastern New Jersey, such a goal of saving our precious open space and improving our quality of life 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 vision understood and appreciated as being eminently worthwhile and very much achievable.

"I will continue to stand up and fight for all of New Jersey and to work with local citizens and elected officials at every level of government to ensure that this important and truly historic Meadowlands Environmental Park will be a reality.

"I thank you for inviting me to speak with you this afternoon. I was delighted to be able to join you for this important symposium. Your commitment to preserving the Hackensack Meadowlands and other wetlands in New Jersey and around the world is worthy of great praise. Together we will make this happen. Thank you."

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