

Saving the Hackensack Meadowlands

The Metamorphosis in the Meadowlands:

The tide has irrevocably turned

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RECORD COLUMNIST

HACKENSACK Riverkeeper Bill Sheehan has a vision. He sees a sunny day and a crowd cheering as a governor cuts a green ribbon and declares the official opening of the 8,500-acre Meadowlands Environmental Park.

It could be this governor. Jon Corzine has always been a champion of preserving the wetlands. And any time now would be a good time for a celebration.

In New Jersey's epic war between polluters and developers on one side and Nature on the other, the Meadowlands are a rare case because this time Nature won. The wetlands-once all but lost to decades of pollution, neglect and plans to pave them out of existence-have been saved. They are now being turned, slowly but surely, into a huge and beautiful eco-park.

But many if not most people in North Jersey don't know this. They know Xanadu is rising, because they can see it from the Turnpike. Elsewhere, they see the mud and reeds and that all looks pretty much the same. But looks can be deceiving. The tide has irrevocably turned.

A page turner

Sheehan says he might write a book someday about how it all happened. I hope he does. It would be a page turner, with heroes and villains, David and Goliath confrontations, intrigue and suspense. Best of all, it would have a happy ending.

That's not the way things looked in recent years. Condo communities and malls had already sprung up in the Meadowlands, and the remaining marshes, only five miles from midtown Manhattan, were considered potential prime real estate. Enter Mills Corp., which was determined to turn the Empire Tract into a mega-mall. If that had happened, Sheehan says, other developers were waiting in the wings. "They were saying 'There's gold in them there swamps,' " he adds.

The swamps are a gold mine, but their value isn't financial. They are a precious natural treasure, and some farsighted people have always recognized what they could become if they were saved and restored.

Sheehan says a pivotal moment was a meeting around 2000 called by Rep. Steve Rothman, D-Fair Lawn, whose district includes parts of the Meadowlands. Rothman pointed to a big map of the area, where he'd drawn a black line around thousands of acres, including the Empire Tract.

"This is what we intend to save," Rothman said, putting developers, their political supporters and everyone else on notice that the wetlands would be turned into a first-class environmental park -- 10 times the size of Central Park.

Securing millions for preservation

Since 2001, Rothman has secured \$10 million in federal funds to buy up parcels of the future park. As of today, only 300 of the 8,500 acres remain to be purchased. A new guide lists the places that are already open to the public in the Meadowlands and Hackensack River Watershed District, including Richard W. DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst, Kearny Marsh in Kearny, Laurel Hill County Park and Saw Mill Creek Wildlife Management Area in Secaucus, Skeetkill Marsh in Ridgely and Losen Slote Creek Park in Little Ferry.

In future years, as more sites are cleaned up and restored, there are plans for much more, including a kayak paddling trail from Oradell to Jersey City, a nature walk trail from Bergen County to Kearny, and the River Barge project in Carlstadt, which will be the first environment-friendly public marina on the Hackensack River.

Bird-watchers and hikers, and those who love to canoe and fish already know about the transformation that is taking place, but as Rothman says of the Meadowlands, "We saved them for everybody."

The vision of those who saved the wetlands has always been of an oasis of beauty and calm in one of the most densely populated, heavily trafficked and overdeveloped areas of the country. They dreamed of marshes teeming with hundreds of species of birds and fish and plants, with turtles, otters, muskrats, even harbor seals.

But they also had something else in mind: what restoring the wetlands would do for us. It would give us pride in knowing that the pollution and greed-the dark side of this state-could be defeated and the right thing could be done.

A sense of identity

As Rothman has said, this victory "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."

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