

'Friends' fill the void of state funding for parks



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When Robert Moses built Jones Beach State Park in 1929, he didn't scrimp.

His vision of a beach club for the middle class included architectural gems such as mosaic images embedded in the sidewalks, trash receptacles camouflaged to look like ocean liners' funnel ventilators, and doors and railings of mahogany.

Over the decades, the sheen has faded from his groundbreaking masterpiece. This year, the state has allocated \$4.6 million in infrastructure repair funds, while the unfunded backlog of capital projects for the park totals \$75.3 million.

Budget cuts have closed an Art Deco bathhouse and pool. Intricate design details have fallen into disrepair or been replaced with cheaper materials.

But the neglected treasure has joined the list of state and county parks and historic sites finding private patrons to fill the void where public money has evaporated. Experts say it is a trend born out of necessity, the best chance for preserving parks in a time of slashed budgets.

Volunteers welcome

The need for "friends" groups intensified this year when the state's financial crisis briefly closed several Long Island parks and threatened to shut more all summer. Some of the groups volunteered to operate the parks before Albany lawmakers and the governor agreed on a deal that eliminated any shutdowns.

Nine of the 26 state parks and historic sites on the Island are getting support from nonprofit groups. On the county level, Nassau has 10 groups helping out with parks and historic sites while Suffolk has 15. Jones Beach, the flagship of the Long Island's state parks, is the latest facility to attract its own benefactor - the Jones Beach Rescue Organization. "Our state parks and historic sites would look a lot bleaker today if we didn't have them," state Parks Commissioner Carol Ash said of the 75 groups that

have been established across New York since 1914.

Ash said some raise money for programs or facilities like the group at upstate Olana, the Hudson River estate of artist Frederic Church, that generates millions of dollars annually. Others, like the Friends of Caleb Smith Preserve in Smithtown, raise modest amounts of money but supply many volunteers. "But all of them are enormously important," Ash said, so much so that the agency is trying to establish a group for every park.

The two Long Island fundraising leaders are the Planting Fields Foundation, which raises \$250,000 annually for a park that receives \$1.4 million in operating funds from the state, and the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association. Through events and grants, the association provides almost all of the \$200,000 needed annually to operate the West Hills site.

Ronald Foley, state parks regional director, said, "We deal first with all the health and safety issues and infrastructure issues, and that sometimes leaves the niceties languishing. These groups can deal with these things in a way that we can't." Foley said the state provides \$8 million in annual operating funds for Jones Beach, an amount that has been essentially flat for a decade while costs have continued to rise.

Among the unfunded \$75.3 million capital projects are rehabilitation of the two bathhouses, a pool and tollbooths.

'Be part of the solution'

While money and volunteers are vital, Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, an Albany-based advocacy group, said the groups also take on the critical role of lobbyists and public watchdogs.

"People have seen the writing on the wall: that government is just not going to be able to do what it's done in the past," she said. "If people want their parks open and in good condition, they are going to have to be part of the solution."

That's how Richard and Lisa Schary of North Bellmore felt when they founded the Friends of the Massapequa Preserve 10 years ago after the 423-acre preserve became a target of vandals and illegal dumping. "It was out of control and nobody was doing anything about it," Richard Schary said.

The couple formed the nonprofit corporation, which claims a membership of more than 300 families, lobbied the county to improve security, organized cleanup drives and even produced a 40-minute documentary about the preserve.

The results have been dramatic, he said. "Now, people ask me for places to clean up and I say 'I can't find any.' "

At Jones Beach, the major issue for the new friends group is restoring the highlights that Moses incorporated into his first major project for the state.

In 2004, a Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities report documented what had been lost from Moses' legacy and recommended creation of a friends group. Last year, supporters began organizing the Jones Beach Rescue Organization to tackle restoring some of the park's former glory.

Malcolm MacKay, an executive recruiter who lives in Oyster Bay and Brooklyn, is heading the group. He said restoration of the sidewalk mosaics was chosen as the first project because raising the estimated \$25,000 cost is doable and "because we think it's not the kind of thing that the state will be able to do."