

Yes, A Major Wildlife Area In Northeastern New Jersey



Why Protecting The Hackensack Meadowlands Is So Essential

Steve Rothman (NJ9th) is about to begin his fourth term in Congress, representing 37 towns in Bergen, Hudson and Passaic Counties. He serves on the House Appropriations Committee.

Something big is about to happen, and it is about to happen in a place where many least expect it. Within the next 10 years, I predict that the Hackensack Meadowlands will go from being written off as a swampy wasteland and garbage dump site, to a nationally and even internationally renowned environmental park.

I am a lifelong resident of Bergen County, a former local Mayor, Bergen County Surrogate, and now a Congressman about to begin my fourth term representing the region which includes the Hackensack Meadowlands. I'm not proud of the fact that some people wrongly consider Northeastern New Jersey to be nothing more than an overcrowded urban / suburban landscape across from New York City, pockmarked with toxic Superfund sites and garbage landfills leaching poisonous ooze. We New Jerseyans remember that a century ago the Meadowlands was a vast piece of open space spanning 21,000 acres. Today, only 8,400 of those acres remain undeveloped, blocking river water from flooding the streets of surrounding communities. The Meadowlands still supports a diverse and growing concentration of migratory birds and is home to 65 species of nesting birds, and more than 50 species of fish and shellfish.

I believe we must save this last, largest remaining portion of open space and wetlands in Northeastern New Jersey, clean it up, and turn it back into a magnificent natural, environmental area and quiet recreational preserve. Establishing the Meadowlands

Environmental Park will be a lasting tribute to our own foresightedness and understanding of our place on this planet, and will also provide this and future generations with unparalleled opportunities for eco-canoe trips, nature walks, bird watching, and an environmental educational center for our children. All of this will be in the midst of what was once deemed to be a poisoned marshland that was forever unreclaimable. Some may say that this is impossible. I could not disagree more.

Creating the Meadowlands Environmental Park is not going to be easy, but I am confident that smack in the middle of the most densely populated region of the most densely populated state in the country this will happen. It will be an oasis for all area residents, both physically and spiritually. It will permit all of our residents to not only enjoy this large expanse of open space that is so rare and precious in our overcrowded region, but it will also give all of us a new and welcome sense of identity. Northeastern New Jerseyans and our neighbors will see us as proud co-inhabitants and custodians of a multitude of plant, animal, and aquatic life, in our beautiful and fragile local environment.

Concurrently, as these 8,400 acres of the Meadowlands are preserved for present and future generations, I would like to see any commercial development in the surrounding area occur on the already developed land and brownfield sites in appropriate Meadowlands parcels outside of these 8,400 acres. Even standing alone, however, it is clear that the

region's businesses and local enterprises will be given a much-needed economic shot-in-the-arm as our new environmental recreation area becomes an environmental attraction for visitors.

Congress has secured funding for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study of the best way to save these 8,400 acres in the Meadowlands. Congress has also ensured that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will act as an environmental consultant to the Army during this study and has provided \$1.2 million for land acquisition. Currently, I am seeking additional money in the 2003 federal budget and resources from existing conservation funds, including the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and the State of New Jersey. It will take time, money, and patience, but it will happen.

For the people of Northeastern New 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 vision understood and appreciated as being eminently worthwhile and very much achievable. With the help of local citizens and elected officials at every level of government, this important and truly historic Meadowlands Environmental Park will be a reality.

Steve Rothman

