

Statement of Council Member Joann Ariola 32nd Council District, NYC City Council before the House Committee on Natural Resources Wednesday, September 27, 2023

“Destroying America’s Best Idea: Examining the Biden Administration’s Use of National Park Service Lands for Migrant Camps”

"The primary duty of the National Park Service is to protect the national parks and national monuments under its jurisdiction, and keep them as nearly in their natural state as this can be done in view of the fact that access to them must be provided in order that they may be used and enjoyed"

These words were written by Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Parks Service, back in 1925. For much of the last century, they have held true. Until now.

With the offering and signing of the lease at Floyd Bennett Field, the federal government is going directly against what Mather and countless other officials through the decades have repeatedly said should be the primary duty of the National Parks Service. Rather than providing access to this national park space, the federal government is restricting the ability of the public to fully enjoy the 1,300 acres of parkland on the shores of Jamaica Bay. Instead of enabling public access, the National Parks Service is instead agreeing to house 2,000 people on the former runway of this aviation landmark.

Not only is this decision to house thousands of people a violation of the founding ideals of the National Parks Service, but it is also a violation of the agreements made to establish the Gateway National Recreation Area as well. On September 26, 1972, then-Congressman Frank Brasco

made clear why this site is incompatible with any plans for housing at the location: “there are no sewers, no sidewalks, no curbs, and no streets. There are no schools, medical facilities, or houses of worship. Floyd Bennett Field is totally filled land with water 8 feet below the surface... transportation facilities are virtually non-existent... the nearest subway station is 4 miles from the site. A single bus route now serves the area.”

The Congressman also explained that New York City faces a serious lack of open recreation area, and Floyd Bennett Field would provide access to open green spaces for countless residents of Brooklyn, Queens, and beyond.

Thanks to Congressman Brasco’s argument, a state proposal to construct housing at Floyd Bennett Field was removed, and, by a vote of 76 to 13, Floyd Bennett Field was made a part of the Gateway National Recreation area.

Today, the situation is not much different than it was back in 1972. The closest subway station is still 4 miles away. The area still has no schools, medical facilities, or houses of worship, and it is still only served by one bus line. What has changed, however, is that the park now welcomes as many as one million people a year to enjoy its open spaces and programmed events. It is also home to specialized NYPD units, the training facilities for the Department of Sanitation, and even a Marine Reserve unit, among other assets. All of these stand to be disrupted by the placement of 2,000 people – or if the Mayor’s office is to be believed, as many as 7,500 people - in the area.

The decision to house thousands of people at this site has also been done without following the proper protocols necessary for such an endeavor. Namely, the decision is being pursued without following the federally mandated NEPA processes. Pursuant to NEPA, the National

Environmental Policy Act, federal law requires agency decision makers to make informed decisions via a codified system of studies, assessments, and input sessions, and the NEPA handbook itself states clearly “actions taken in response to an emergency are not exempt from NEPA review”.

Therefore, the NEPA process must be completed before an agency makes a final decision on a proposed action. This was not done. Additionally, there was no process of public notice, effectively shutting out the ability of local communities to voice their concerns about this sudden and radical change to their local park land. This has effectively turned our national parks – something Wallace Stegner once called “the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic” into something entirely undemocratic indeed.

Already, we have seen programming that should have taken place on Floyd Bennett Field be cancelled to accommodate this base camp. Already, an art festival from the Jamaica Bay Rockaway Parks Conservancy has been scrapped, and we can be sure that additional planned events will follow.

The placement of a migrant base camp at Floyd Bennett Field flies in the face of the founding ideals of the National Parks Service, and erodes the democratic underpinnings that have been the hallmark of our parks since their inception. For these reasons, it is vital that the federal government revoke the lease at Floyd Bennett Field, and enable the public to fully use this space, just as they have continually since 1972