

Testimony by Paul King – June 12, 2024

Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Good morning Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury and members of the committee.

My name is Paul King. I am a long-time civic leader on the Rockaway Peninsula which is across Jamaica Bay from Floyd Bennett Field. I currently president of the Belle Harbor Property Owners Association and a member of Queens CB14. I am 60 years old and have lived every one of those years within 4 miles of FBF. I use FBF and Gateway National Recreation Area for youth sports, kayaking, biking and camping.

Uninformed critics mock FBF as just an old airport. It is true the Federal government terribly neglects FBF ...and Ft. Tilden ...and Charles Park, but the park and Jamaica Bay are wonderful natural assets for citizens in our crowded boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens.

From the moment Governor Kathy Hochul said she wanted a migrant camp in FBF, people from across the political spectrum said it was a mistake. Local civic associations, youth sports organizations, park advocates, the Legal Aid Society.

Indeed, my Congressman, Gregory Meeks, a Democrat said putting a tent city in FBF was a terrible idea, even inhumane. The Congressman knows that FBF is exposed and cold in the winter. It a flood plain that is susceptible to storm surges during hurricanes. It made no sense, but the Congressman also said the migrant camp would not happen because housing in a national park is against the law. He said only an emergency declaration by President Biden would make it legal.

And Congressman Meeks was right. This camp is illegal. It directly violates the Act of Congress that created Gateway. It is also a terrible place for people to live. We had one big rainstorm – not even a hurricane or Nor’easter – and the camp had to be evacuated.

Unfortunately, all of the residual effects we warned about –direct harm to our neighboring communities in Brooklyn and Rockaway – are coming true.

Our neighborhoods are where the American dream comes true in NYC. Our parents and grandparents worked hard and sacrificed to create safe places for their children. We do the same for our children.

- Now crime and lawlessness are increasing in our communities.
- Illegal scooters are rampant, damaging beaches in Floyd Bennett Field, weaving in and out of traffic on our roads, and even zipping at high speeds down sidewalks.
- Aggressive panhandling has included migrants coming onto people’s properties to demand money. In one case in Belle Harbor, a mother was just getting her children into the house after school when she was confronted by a migrant demanding money in her left.
- Just last week, a migrant from Floyd Bennett Field was captured on video, climbing onto a second-floor balcony in Neponset and trying to enter a home.

- Many of these migrants are just poor people trying to find a better life, but some are gang members, like the Venezuelan criminal from Trem de Aragua who shot two cops last week.
- Our retail stores are suffering.
- We have migrants with small children standing in the middle of highways trying to hawk fruit and chocolate.
- Our own working class and poor Americans are losing opportunities to earn money.

Almost all of this was predictable.

And, ladies and gentlemen, the worst is yet to come. In July and August, park utilization spikes as does beach usage in Rockaway. Thousands of extra people -- including those who are proving to be bad guests -- will flow into neighborhoods that have limited services and very little police presence. It is a recipe for disaster.

In September, hurricane season kicks in in full force. The NHC is predicting an above-normal hurricane season, with 4 to 7 major hurricanes. Having been literally in the Atlantic Ocean during Sandy, I can assure you that you do not want to be in a tent a few feet above sea level when a big one hits.

Sure, we can evacuate the migrants ahead of a hurricane, but to where? NYC does not have a clear evacuation plan. And if thousands of migrants take slots in the storm shelters, where will our citizens go?

As you know, NYC and the NPS can --and almost certainly will--extend the lease this September. This is a mistake. It must not be allowed. It's bad for the migrants. It's bad for our citizens. It's bad for our National Park.

And it is bad for our National Park System. The NPS Director's memo proclaiming his migrant camp is consistent with the purpose of the park, not only strains credulity; it opens the door to having migrant camps at every national park as long as rent is being paid and used for park improvements.

So I ask the committee to do everything in its power to provide relief to the citizens of Brooklyn and Queens. End this illegal lease in Floyd Bennett Field.

Thank you for your time.