

Opinion

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A new day in the Meadowlands



Sunrise over the Meadowlands, by DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst, looking east towards the Manhattan skyline.

JIM WRIGHT / NEW JERSEY MEADOWLANDS COMMISSION

By ROBERT CEBERIO

IN 2009, the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission celebrates its 40th anniversary – a time to look to the future while giving a nod to the past.

These are tough economic times for the region, with jobs bleeding and investments battered. But with uncertainty comes opportunity.

I believe that the future is bright – especially a future powered by renewable energy. That's why the Meadowlands is doing all it can to attract the start-up companies that make better solar panels or better wind turbines, or the companies that use recycled materials in their products.

Once the land of landfills, the Meadowlands has become a place of possibilities.

By 2028, the 14-town Meadowlands District will be generating, just from renewable energy sources, 30 or 40 megawatts of power. You'll drive down the turnpike between exits 15W and

16W, and the solar panels and the wind turbines will have become such a part of life that you won't even notice them.

By 2048, I see this region as a large center for green technology – green manufacturing, solar panels, wind power, research and development – a "green" Silicon Valley.

If this sounds pie-in-the-sky, let me offer a bit of perspective: When I moved to North Arlington as a teenager in the Sixties, the Meadowlands was literally a dump. There were 3,000 garbage trucks a day



A snowy egret at Mill Creek Marsh in Secaucus.

JIM WRIGHT / NEW JERSEY MEADOWLANDS COMMISSION

carting waste to 2,000 acres of landfills. All the adjacent water and wetlands were targeted to be filled with garbage as well. We were fast becoming the Fresh Kills of North Jersey.

In 1969, the state of New Jersey formed the Meadowlands Commission to turn back the tide of solid waste that was engulfing the region – to stop any further expansion of those landfills, to regulate and clean up those existing dumps, and to come up

with sensible land-use policies for the municipalities in the Meadowlands District.

Back then, in my wildest dreams, I could not envision that today the garbage trucks would be all but gone and most of the landfills would be closed. I never would have thought the water would be measurably cleaner, and the marshes and the critters living here would rebound so well.

Yet that is what has happened. Once the land of

landfills, the Meadowlands has become a place of possibilities.

The Meadowlands' future is important for all of northern New Jersey because it is a crucial driver of the region's economy. The hard part is to keep that driver pointed in the right direction.

To succeed over the next four decades, we need to retool the district. We already have a strong road and rail infrastructure. Over the next few years we need to replace older warehouses with modern facilities that are tied to rail lines.

Green businesses

The other retooling is to get in on the ground floor of what the new Obama administration is talking about – "green" businesses. This is also a crucial concept in Governor Corzine's policies.

In the Meadowlands, we want to create blue-collar jobs as well as "green-collar" ones. Imagine a market for light manufacturing that takes recycled materials and makes products here in the United States.

Being six miles from Manhattan, we have the most tremendous market in the world for these businesses – if we are strategic in how we grow. As we add hotels, convention space and eco-tourism opportunities, the Meadowlands is becoming more of a destination itself, with attractions that run the gamut from amazing natural resources, to the stadiums, to the shopping and entertainment at Xanadu. These elements will flourish more in the decades to come.

Environmentally, the biggest challenge is the financial difficulty of continuing to clean up and close the remaining orphaned landfills, and the cost to preserve and restore the marshes. The commission has always used its own resources, not taxpayer dollars, to address environmental problems, but money is tight – especially in the current economy.

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Another challenge for the commission is resolving the EnCap situation. We're fighting in court, and through discussions, to get the project back on track. The commission has always had a simple goal: to close the landfills on this property – without sticking towns with the bill – and to create jobs. But the greed of those that became involved poisoned these good intentions before major work could even begin.

We are not happy to see how EnCap went off the rails. We believe our commission has a moral obligation to correct this mess. That's why we're fighting to get the project moving again – in the right direction. That could mean somebody responsible coming in and cleaning up this mess – or the commission taking back the project and doing it ourselves, the right way.

Whatever the final outcome, the Meadowlands Commission has a responsibility to these communities and their residents to make sure these landfills get closed properly.

Another challenge is to help the state's major regulatory agencies find sensible ways to shape growth and environmental clean-ups in the Meadow-

lands. As things are now, regulators sometimes work at cross purposes.

For example, we are spending millions of dollars to buy the Barge Club in Carlstadt to create public boat launching ramps and docks and dredge the river to make sure it's deep enough for public access, regardless of the tide. The permitting conditions are literally adding hundreds of thousands of dollars to the project.

This is also true for flood control projects and wetlands restoration. New regulations are literally threatening our ability to restore wetlands in the district.

Simplify the process

The Meadowlands Commission wants to simplify the process. We're also working with state officials to streamline the permitting process in the Meadowlands District. We're meeting with business representatives, local officials and others to figure out how to improve our own land use reviews, and we've launched an economic development blog and will follow with other programs to help people get the help they need.

As for the immediate future, we have to work harder to get people into the district by marketing the region better, and making sure that our regulations ac-



A scene from the Meadowlands in Lyndhurst.

CHRIS PEDOTA / THE RECORD

commodate these emerging technologies – from building size to high-tech needs. The current sense of uncertainty will diminish over the next six to 12 months as the economy gets some direction –

from an overall stimulus package, a public works project, or what looks to me to be the second coming of the New Deal. It comes down to giving people a sense of hope rather than despair, of giv-

ing people direction instead of silence.

This region will get moving again, sooner than many people think. And the Meadowlands Commission will be here to do all it can to help.