



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Sean M. Ryan

Senator Sean Ryan To ECHDC: ‘With Covid Restrictions Gone, Hold Public Hearings For Buffalo Outer Harbor Amphitheater Project’

SEAN M. RYAN July 1, 2021

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SENATOR SEAN RYAN TO ECHDC: ‘WITH COVID RESTRICTIONS GONE, HOLD PUBLIC HEARINGS FOR BUFFALO OUTER HARBOR AMPHITHEATER PROJECT’

With COVID Restrictions Removed, Ryan Wants In-Person Public Hearings To Discuss Plans For 8,000-Person Amphitheater On Buffalo’s Outer Harbor – Facility Would Block Public Access To The Waterfront

And Create Unnecessary Competition With Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Centennial Park And Artpark

BUFFALO – Today, July 1, 2021, New York State Senator Sean Ryan joined Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Executive Director of the Partnership for the Public Good, and Jay Burney of the Western New York Environmental Alliance and Times Beach Nature Preserve, to urge the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC) to seek more public input for the 8,000-person capacity amphitheater proposed for Buffalo’s Outer Harbor.

Senator Ryan is concerned that the project will take away valuable public land that could be used for green space, block public access to the waterfront, and create unnecessary competition for events with the planned Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Centennial Park in Buffalo and Artpark in Lewiston.

Senator Ryan also envisions the ripple effects an amphitheater would generate on the Outer Harbor. The ECHDC proposal would create a 750-space parking lot using prime Outer Harbor land. In addition, the amphitheater would continue a concerning trend of large-scale exclusive events cutting off public access to the waterfront. The recent “Thunder on the Buffalo Waterfront” event required people to purchase tickets starting at \$149 to visit the Outer Harbor, and it closed off public access to the area – including the closure of the boat launches at the State Park – for an entire weekend. The proposed amphitheater is likely to create the same situation, closing off public access to the waterfront for extended periods of time.

The amphitheater would also bring a variety of environmental concerns, including damaging effects to the plant and wildlife at the Outer Harbor. Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper reported that a recent Outer Harbor cleanup event yielded 400 pounds of trash and 1,200 cigarette butts from a single Outer Harbor parking lot near Wilkeson Pointe. Large-scale activity near the proposed amphitheater location would likely exacerbate this issue.

ECHDC approved an Outer Harbor master plan in November of 2020 that would convert the Terminal B building on the Outer Harbor into an 8,000-capacity amphitheater with open space utilizing nine acres of land. ECHDC provided 60 days for public comment on the plan, but did not hold in-person public hearings due to COVID-related safety precautions. ECHDC received just 242 public comments during the period, and only 3% of those comments supported their plan.

Now that the COVID state of emergency has been lifted in New York and with much of the state fully reopened, Senator Ryan is urging ECHDC to conduct the traditional public comment period featuring in-person events, so that more members of the public can be heard. In 2018, as part of planning for the Outer Harbor, ECHDC hosted in-person events to receive public input.

Senator Sean Ryan said, “The last 15 months have been a challenge for all of us here in Western New York, and for Americans around the country. We have all been trying to make our way through this pandemic, and I can guarantee that most people in Buffalo and Western New York have not been focused on Outer Harbor planning efforts – as evidenced by the submission of just 242 public comments during the 60-day public comment period. With our state reopened, and our attention moving away from daily COVID concerns, it’s time for ECHDC to reengage the public on plans for an Outer Harbor amphitheater.

Very few people expressed support for ECHDC’s plans during the public comment period, and many cited the amphitheater as the main reason for their concerns. Why would we build another large-scale outdoor event space, when there is already one planned for the nearby Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Centennial Park? On top of that, Artpark in nearby Lewiston has a capacity of 10,000 people. Both of these locations are far more appropriate for outdoor event space.

Our Outer Harbor should be preserved as open green space for the public to enjoy, with limited small-scale amenities to enhance that function. With the pandemic waning, ECHDC needs to listen to the concerns of the public by holding in-person events immediately.”

Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, Executive Director of the Partnership for the Public Good, said, “For years, many community organizations and residents have joined Partnership for the Public Good in expressing a shared vision for our Great Lakes waterfront. ECHDC acknowledged this vision in the public comments on their Outer Harbor Master Plan, noting that residents want a space distinct from Canalside and its many activities, concerts, and attractions. On the Outer Harbor, according to ECHDC, residents want a place where you can get away from an urban environment and enjoy a quieter, simpler waterfront. Residents told ECHDC not to create a second Canalside on the Outer Harbor, yet here we are faced with a plan for an 8,000-person, \$10 million amphitheater.

This is not the right use for our Great Lakes waterfront, and it is not the right way to spend public money. ECHDC should instead invest in natural regeneration and build a world-class park on the Outer Harbor, with well-designed trails and paths for all members of the public to enjoy. Before investing \$10 million in an amphitheater that residents did not ask for, ECHDC should reopen public comments and hold in-person hearings for local residents. These hearings should not just check the box of public engagement; ECHDC should commit to amending its plan based on residents’ feedback, priorities, and collective vision for our public waterfront.”

Jay Burney of the Western New York Environmental Alliance and Times Beach Nature Preserve said, “There has not been an inclusive and fair public vetting process for all of the Erie Canal Harbor development initiatives. While we appreciate that the Outer Harbor looks greener than it would have if we had not intervened as a community – in other words, it is not currently being targeted as a private condo

community – we know that we have to remain vigilant. The state has to respect the rights of our community to set agendas, or to at least comment fairly on publicly funded projects and agendas that so fundamentally affect future generations. The public has overwhelmingly spoken in favor of keeping public spaces public, and against this project. The ECHDC seems to refuse to listen.”

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