

NEW JERSEY

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En route to greatness, Washington crossed here

N.J. promises help in saving historic New Bridge Landing

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RIVER EDGE - Until recently, if you wanted to find the bridge that saved America, your best landmark was a junkyard along Hackensack Avenue.

The Bergenfield Auto Parts Co. junkyard is gone now, but its tired old office and its chain-link fencing, just north of an ugly Jersey jughandle, are still the public face of New Bridge Landing, one of New Jersey's most historic sites.

A little ways in from the junkyard, a road runs past historic houses owned by preservation groups, ending at a restored stone farmhouse that serves as a small museum of Colonial times. It overlooks a bridge on the site where Gen. George Washington crossed the Hackensack River in 1776.

"This bridge became the critical path. If

the British, who were three miles away, had stopped Washington's army before he crossed the Hackensack, the war would have stopped right there," said Kevin Wright, a trustee of the Bergen County Historical Society. "This is the bridge that saved the nation. We always say, he wouldn't have crossed the Delaware if he hadn't have crossed the Hackensack."

This neglected nook of history already draws up to 20,000 schoolchildren a year to see a slice of the past up close - though it doesn't even have a public bathroom. Historians want to change that, building an interpretive center on the site of the former junkyard that will display artifacts, explain the site's history, and illustrate how one small crossing changed the course of history.

"There is no monument on this site that identifies the significance," said Robert Griffin of the Historic New Bridge Land-



CAMPBELL

ing Park Commission, which represents the government agencies and non-profit groups that have a stake in the historic site. He said people "can drive by the junkyard, or pull in there by mistake because it's a dead end, and never realize the history and significance here."

To do that, they have to buy the junkyard first - ahead of developers who would salivate over a high-traffic site near Route 4. And while preservationists have a \$1.1 million federal grant in hand to help buy the property, courtesy of former Sen. Robert G. Torricelli, they have not been able to reach agreement with the family that owns the 1.7-acre site.

The state's environmental commissioner, Bradley Campbell, who oversees the

state's parks and historic sites, visited New Bridge Landing on Friday and pledged to work toward buying the land and giving the site the profile it deserves.

"It will be a high priority for me," Campbell said. "There are a number of funding streams we can take advantage of."

The state could negotiate a purchase with the family that owns the former junkyard, or could condemn it using the state's powers of eminent domain, Campbell said. But the price would depend on what environmental problems might be found on the junkyard site, he said, and a condemnation proceeding could drag on far longer than a simple sale.

"It doesn't seem like the price discussions can be realistic until we know what the cleanup obligations will be," Campbell said.

Assemblywoman Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, a longtime supporter of reclaiming the site, helped set up the meeting. Bergen County Executive Dennis

McNerney also attended and pledged support.

Bergenfield Auto Parts bought the junkyard in 1963, but the cars, tires, and other parts were hauled away four decades later, a few months after the death of owner Leonard Lehr. Members of Lehr's family did not attend the meeting with Campbell and could not immediately be reached for comment afterward.

In an interview with The Record last year, Lehr's widow, Rose Lehr, said he had always wanted to sell the land to the state, rather than a private developer, but that the state failed to capitalize on many chances to do so.

"My husband wouldn't deal with anybody else until he was done with them, and he could have many times," she said. "That's why I want to do his wishes. But now I'm getting ... antsy, you know. The time has come where they've had more than enough time."

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Stalemate on hospital contract ends

Horizon clients can seek care

well," she said. It was the seventh time in the last five years that hospitals and insurers in New Jersey resolved