Detroit's Belle Isle to be leased to state, ending free access

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14 November 2013

A Michigan state board approved a 30-year lease deal with the city of Detroit on Tuesday to transfer authority over the 985-acre Belle Isle Park to the state government in Lansing.

The deal, which transforms Belle Isle into a state park, was originally signed by Michigan Governor Richard Snyder in October. It was developed by Snyder in collaboration with Detroit Emergency Financial Manager Kevyn Orr. All three members of the Michigan Local Emergency Financial Assistance Loan Board, who voted to approve the deal, were themselves appointed by Snyder.

A new annual entrance fee of $11 for motorists will be imposed as part of the transfer of Belle Isle to state control. Entrance to Belle Isle had been free of charge for over a century. Michigan State Police are already preparing to station a force of troopers on the island.

The fee, which conforms to charges for other state parks, sets a precedent for the imposition of access fees on municipal parks across the US. Belle Isle is the major park in Detroit. Charging for entrance is the equivalent of setting up toll booths guarding the entrance to Central Park in New York City.

State control of Belle Isle could well be a stepping stone to partial or full privatization of the island in the future. Placing the park under state control strips the park of protections against privatization of public assets laid out in the city charter, which states that the city "may not sell or otherwise dispose of property without the approval of the city council."

Speculators have already proposed numerous schemes to makeover Belle Isle as a private enclave. Most blatantly, developer Rodney Lockwood has floated the idea of buying Belle Isle for $1 billion in order to "turn the island into a private city-state with a focus on free market capitalism and limited government."

During his testimony in the Detroit bankruptcy case, Kenneth Buckfire of Miller Buckfire, a firm hired by the city as a consultant, referred to long-term plans to privatize Belle Isle, saying that "converting it into private use would be a long, contentious process."

For their part, the unions openly advocated for the sale of public assets during the bankruptcy hearing, saying that these measures should have been attempted prior to filing for Chapter 9. During the hearings, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) attorney Jack Sherwood listed Belle Isle along with numerous other city assets that could have been sold off.

Before the board voted, Detroit's City Council advanced a counter-proposal, which would only lease the island for 10 years and would contain stronger language requiring that the state implement improvements to the park. This proposal was rejected by the state-level board in favor of the 30-year option, which includes two optional 15-year renewal periods. Nevertheless, Detroit City Councilman James Tate applauded the move and told the *Detroit Free Press* that he and the City Council are "excited about the possibilities for Belle Isle."

The relinquishing of Belle Isle from city control and the overturning of the century-old policy of free admission are justified by the claim that such measures are a necessary response to the financial crisis in Detroit. In fact, the corporate and financial elite are engaged in a systematic looting operation, eyeing every public asset for its possible contribution to paying off wealthy bondholders.

With the support of the trade unions, the political establishment is committed to the sale of these assets, whether or not the Chapter 9 filing goes forward. Main

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city assets being considered for sale are Hart Plaza, the Detroit Zoo, the River Walk, Eastern Market, the Joe Louis Arena, the Detroit Historical Museum, the electrical grid, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel to Canada, the Coleman A. Young International Airport, and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The Belle Isle lease could be a precedent for the attack on the DIA. Orr has insisted that the museum come up with a plan by the end of this month to provide $500 million by selling off art or taking other measures. Among the proposals that have been advanced, one would transfer control to the state, which would likely lead to fees for access to the museum, currently free for Detroit-area residents.

The value generated from the monetization of city property will be shared among the city's most powerful creditors, including UBS, Citigroup, Bank of America and other hedge funds and banks. Unlike Detroit pensioners, many of whom are excluded from Social Security and Medicare, these financial firms have insurance plans to cover their losses if the city cancels its obligations to them.

As the WSWS wrote in June of this year, "Do residents wish to go to a park? They'll have to fork over an entrance fee. Do people wish to borrow a library book? Buy a membership. Do homeowners want the fire department to respond? Make sure you've paid your levy or the fire department may come just to ensure that nearby houses are protected. Every basic social service that has been taken for granted by the populace for decades will now be subordinated to profit."

Belle Isle, as a free park open to all, has long been a symbol of America's democratic traditions, and efforts to charge for entrance and to privatize the park reflect the resurgence of the aristocratic principle in American society. The crown jewel of one of America's greatest cities will increasingly be off-limits to the mass of society, becoming a preserve of the wealthy and upper middle class.

As Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Belle Isle, observed, "It has always been the conviction of the governing classes of the old world that it is necessary that the large mass of all human communities should spend their lives in almost constant labor and that the power of enjoying beauty either of nature or of art in any high degree, requires a cultivation of certain faculties, which is impossible to these humble toilers."

When the wealthy dominate society, Olmsted wrote, "… all places favorable in scenery to the recreation of the mind and body will be closed against the great body of the people." The deal on Belle Isle is a significant step along this direction.

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