

Detroit's Belle Isle taken over by state government

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As of Monday, Detroit's 985-acre Belle Isle Park—the largest island public park in America—has passed into the control of the Michigan state government under a 30-year lease. The move comes as an initial step toward the restriction of public access and privatization of the island.

Around-the-clock patrols by deputies of the Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan State Police have already been instituted. The DNP has begun charging an \$11 admission annual fee, after generations of Detroiters visited the park for free.

Governor Rick Snyder signed the deal transforming Belle Isle into a state park after the three members he appointed to the Michigan Local Emergency Financial Assistance Loan Board gave their go-ahead.

Moves by corporate interests towards exploiting Belle Isle are well underway. A Canadian hotel investment group has proposed a \$40 million project to turn the Detroit Boat Club into a privately run luxury hotel. "The property struck me as a real gem. We like the natural setting," Bob Jackson, CEO of Vintage Hotels, told *Crain's Detroit*. "We want to turn this into a four or five-star hotel. It's a historic building, so you have to do it right."

Belle Isle was designed in 1883 by Frederick Law Olmsted—also the chief designer of New York's Central Park—as a monument to social equality, with the aim of providing a beautiful natural setting for workers and urban poor who were otherwise confined to degraded conditions.

Olmsted wrote that the enjoyment of the "choicest natural scenes of the country" had long been a "monopoly, in a very peculiar way, of a very few, very rich people. The great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it.

"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," Olmsted wrote.

In opposition to the aristocratic principle, Olmsted insisted, "The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people under certain circumstances, is thus justified and enforced as a political duty."

The takeover of Belle Isle, along with moves to privatize the Detroit Institute of Arts, illustrate that the ruling class is using the Detroit bankruptcy to reestablish the aristocratic principle.

The emergency manager law (Public Act 436) and the bankruptcy process are being utilized to override all legal obstacles, including the City Charter, to the wholesale privatization of public assets.

Ambitious and bizarre money-making schemes have been floated to transform Belle Isle into the "Monaco of the Midwest," proceeding along the lines of developer Rodney Lockwood's proposal to "turn the island into a private city-state with a focus on free market capitalism and limited government."

The public lighting system has already been given to DTE Energy and trash collection to private sanitation companies. Public land has been handed over to billionaire developers like Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch for next to nothing. Private equity firms are hungrily eyeing the DWSD, one of the largest municipal water and sewerage systems in America.

Other city assets that may be monetized as part of the "adjustment plan" to be released by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr next week include Hart Plaza, the

Detroit Zoo, the River Walk, Eastern Market, the Joe Louis Arena, the Detroit Historical Museum, the electrical grid, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel to Canada, the Coleman A. Young International Airport. Public lighting has already been handed over.

The unions have abetted these attacks at every step. Advocating aggressively for the sale of city assets throughout the bankruptcy hearings, attorneys for the American Federation of County, State, and Municipal Employees and the United Auto Workers claimed that this money would be used to “save” pensions. In fact, Orr and the big banks he represents are determined to gut pensions no matter what happens to the Detroit Institute of Arts.

As part of the “grand bargain” being spearheaded by Snyder, which aims to buy off the unions by establishing a half-billion dollar retiree trust fund, the total assets of the DIA are to be transferred to private foundations. Sometime in the future, the collection is supposed to be put under state control.

The fate of Belle Isle, however, is a warning against any illusions that Michigan state control will protect the museum’s masterpieces from the clutches of wealthy creditors and art speculators. The opposite is the case. The ending of the century-long city ownership of the DIA will subordinate the museum to corporate interests and gravely undermine the right to culture of the people of Detroit.



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