

N.J. officials suspend planned eviction of Camden Children's Garden

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Though they were ready for a fight, officials of the Camden Children's Garden are relieved to know that the state won't try to go through with its threat to shut down the park on Easter.

The Department of Treasury said it had "suspended" the Sunday deadline it gave to the Camden City Garden Club, which runs the garden, to vacate most of the premises.

"We feel we need more time to review the material the Children's Garden gave us," Treasury spokesman Bill Quinn said Wednesday. A new date for eviction had not been set.

In January, the Treasury Department sent a letter to the garden's executive director, Michael Devlin, asking him to remove the garden's property from the site next to Adventure Aquarium.

The state proposed that the garden club could rent a few offices and one greenhouse but that the plot would be transferred to its for-profit neighbor. The notice came after three years of fruitless negotiations toward getting the garden to move.

The sides disagree on who owns the land where the garden is.

The state claims ownership, and city officials affirm it. Devlin says the land belongs to the city. In resolutions in the 1990s, City Council endorsed and provided money for the garden's waterfront location. Deed and tax records are unclear.

When the eviction notice became public, a grassroots campaign sprang up in favor of keeping the garden.

Support has poured in from both sides of the river, including from the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia, which campaigns for design quality in architecture and physical planning.

"The garden is a great example of the most playful work of architect Steve Izenour," said Kiki Bolender, who heads the group. The garden was one of the last works of Izenour, who died in 2001.

"When you are doing something that helps to create a real, green, vibrant public realm where there wouldn't be one otherwise, just don't give up," Bolender said in an e-mail.

The group, like many other residents and groups, has written to Gov. Christie asking that the state leave the Children's Garden as is.

Treasury officials have been speaking with Camden officials and Devlin to try to find a solution. Some weeks ago, Devlin sent the state a description of all the programs the garden operates, detailing its specific uses of the land.

The officials wanted a complete picture of what the garden's operators do at the site, Quinn said.

"We want to work out an agreement with them where they can use a portion of the land," Quinn said.

But Devlin wants full use.

"There's no realistic view of what's going on here," he said Wednesday. "We weren't going to leave [Sunday]. . . . If we have to go to court, we will