As President of the Delaware Ornithological Society (DOS), I am writing to express our organization’s objection to the plans to build a restaurant in Cape Henlopen State Park next to the current bathhouse on the ocean side of the Point. DOS, an all-volunteer organization with over 300 members, has a long history of partnership with the DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife and Delaware State Parks and a strong record of advocacy and land preservation in Delaware. Our expertise is in birds, their conservation, and protection.

Seaside and dune habitats are among the most fragile and endangered worldwide - important to plants and the fauna that use them. The proposed restaurant siting will result in direct impacts to fragile dune habitat. The site is immediately adjacent to the Cape Henlopen Hawk Watch, a collaborative avian monitoring project of DOS, in partnership with DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife and State Parks. The Hawk Watch has been running continuously since 2002 from September 1 through November 30, represents a valuable source of long-term data about the populations of hawks migrating along the east coast, and is part of a nationwide network of raptor migration sites. Migration data must be collected in a consistent way each year. The proposed restaurant will most likely obscure the view of a common flight line of hawks coming in low off the water from Cape May, a change which will limit and compromise the data collected in the future.

Night lighting from the restaurant and adjacent parking lot will disorient nocturnal migrant songbirds and will reduce the biomass of insect prey available for resident insectivorous birds. There is significant potential for window strike mortality of songbirds at any glass doors and windows of the restaurant. In addition, nightjar species such as Chuck-wills-widow and Common Nighthawk have large populations in the park and increased traffic going to the restaurant will result in disturbance to these species. Currently, closing this area of the park at night gives the wildlife a needed respite from human disturbance.  This respite will be shortened by keeping the park open until 10:00 pm for the restaurant.

In addition to the direct and indirect impact on birds, their habitat, and their migration route, many people come to the park because they appreciate its natural state and the natural views of the ocean. Many residents of Rehoboth, Lewes, and elsewhere in Delaware appreciate the protection given to the natural areas in Cape Henlopen when so much of Sussex County is suffering from overdevelopment. Local and regional visitors who come to the Hawk Watch have become educated about our avian visitors and recognize Cape Henlopen as a very special place because it is so undeveloped. Allowing commercial development in this area will damage the aesthetics and natural beauty of the park.

While we acknowledge that the parks are developed for some recreational uses, we believe that the recreational focus of the parks should be on unique outdoor recreational opportunities not available outside the parks and on amenities that enhance such recreational use. A private restaurant does not serve that function since many restaurants are available close by in Lewes.

We believe that this proposed restaurant will negatively impact wildlife, damage the aesthetic beauty of the park, and erode the natural areas so important to our collective mental and physical health.  We oppose the building of this restaurant and strongly urge you to stop plans for its construction.