

From clean water rules to school funding, enough of Christie's secrecy | Editorial



Christie leaves a forum on his school funding plan in the suburb of Wall Township. He has yet to do a public hearing in an urban district like Newark. (Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

By [Star-Ledger Editorial Board](#) on July 18, 2016

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Senate President Steve Sweeney recently blocked a vote to reverse new regulations from the Christie administration that endanger clean waters by allowing development closer to our rivers and streams. It was a disappointing move, given that lawmakers had enough support to override the governor.

Sweeney said he wanted to give the administration a chance to work out a compromise. "If we can't fix this, on Aug. 1, we'll pass it," he said.

Too bad Christie officials don't show the public the same courtesy. In the time Sweeney has given them, guess what they've been up to? Pushing forward a second set of rule changes that also threaten our clean water, by allowing sewer and septic tanks to be built closer together and extended even into the protected Highlands area, which supplies drinking water to more than half the state.



[Will Sweeney protect our clean water from Christie's bulldozers? | Editorial](#)

This is the most important environmental bill since the passage of the Highlands Act in 2004.

So much for a show of good faith. This is classic Christie. When his administration does this sort

of dirty work, they almost always try to block public input.

Consider the so-called "stakeholder" meeting the administration held back in March, to gather feedback on how to fix its flood hazard rule proposal that had been rejected by lawmakers— the same one still threatened with a Legislative veto. The administration refused to allow in representatives from the lead groups that protested the rule changes. Many seats went empty, and experts who showed up weren't permitted to fill them. Those who were invited ended up walking out in protest.

The governor's strong-armed brand of secrecy extends to all topics. He also refused to hold public hearings on his school funding proposal in any of the urban districts whose funding he would ruthlessly slash. As evidence of his openness, he points to a meeting at a charter school in Paterson that was, again, invitation-only. Christie refused to take a single question from reporters, and as he left, blew kisses at uninvited parents and teachers protesting outside.

Why, if there are unnecessary duplications in the current rules, can't we fix that without taking away protections for water quality?

Governor, why not hold a real public hearing in Newark, where you've been invited by the mayor?

Perhaps for the same reason he isn't scheduling hearings on the newest rules allowing sewer lines near our drinking water at a time when the public could actually attend. Despite a letter from more than two dozen advocacy groups requesting at least three public hearings, the state held just one, at 4 p.m. — when it's a safe bet the average working person couldn't go.

In response, environmentalists [held their own public hearing](#) in Montclair last week, one of the many towns that gets its drinking water from the threatened reservoirs in the Highlands. They say they will compile the public input they got, and send it to the DEP. Is this really what we've come to?

Instead of dodging public discussion, the administration should extend the comment deadline and hold at least two more public hearings at reasonable times, in parts of New Jersey that get their drinking water from the Highlands. After all, if these new rules are adopted, they will become the law of the land, the same way the flood hazard rules are now – unless the Legislature blocks them.

So, enough. Not only should Sweeney stand up to the governor on stream and river protections, the Legislature should pass a similar resolution that overturns the rule changes on sewers and septic tanks, too. Christie officials shouldn't get to conduct their policy negotiations behind closed doors. Time for a Legislative veto.