

# The Star-Ledger

## N.J. must not weaken land preservation programs

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New Jersey's land preservation programs provide a model for the rest of the nation. The Highlands and Pinelands are our greatest treasures for the protection of relatively cheap, clean and abundant drinking water. The suggestion that either of these be compromised has met with disapproval from the public, with good reason.

That is why it is so disheartening to see a bill working its way through the Legislature that threatens to use a backdoor approach to emasculate these successful programs. The bill would provide for a further expansion of the Permit Extension Act of 2008.

That law extended all development permits for two years. The rationale for the bill was that shovel-ready projects, held up by a lack of capital financing, should not be prevented from moving forward because state permits were about to expire.

Understanding the challenging fiscal times and respecting the need to put New Jersey residents back to work, the Legislature consented to the extension on the condition that environmentally sensitive areas be carved out of the law.

The downside to extending development permits is that approvals are based on laws, rules and regulations in place at the time of approval. Permits were extended that would have expired as long ago as Jan. 1, 2007.

As we consider a third extension of these permits in 2012, we must remember that new construction is not the only thing hindered by economic upheaval. The financial downturn also stripped resources from agencies charged with planning, smart growth and environmental protection. While New Jersey's planning isn't perfect, we unquestionably know more today than we did five years ago about areas where development should be barred or limited to protect our water supply.

In addition to extending permit approvals for two more years, the 2012 bill authorizes permits to be extended in areas that were removed from the 2008 law.

We're not talking about a couple of bird-feeders. The bill moves half of the Highlands and the entire Pinelands into a designation in which old development permits are extended. The so-called "Dracula clause," which resurrects expired permits in these areas, exacerbates the problem.

Although legislators agreed to the extension in 2008, it was understood that critical resources would be left out. The prospect of risky development in these areas should give us all pause. If

the integrity of our drinking water is compromised, the cost to clean it will reach into the billions, devastating our long-term economic viability.

These amendments make the bill much more than a simple extension, but they are not the only reasons stop the Permit Extension Act.

State and regional planners have improved mapping and designated areas that are appropriate and advantageous for growth. The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours to develop local planning ordinances that are in compliance with the Highlands Act. Extending old permits that do not take this planning, mapping and investment into account is plainly irresponsible when one considers the potential for appropriate development that will be lost.

The Highlands and Pinelands are critical investments in New Jersey's economic well-being. Rolling them into the Permit Extension Act is a clever maneuver to eviscerate regulations that gird up these highly successful preservation programs. There are real questions about whether an additional extension of development permits is appropriate. As we deliberate about how best to balance the issues, one thing is for sure: The protections for our natural resources must be respected if we are to preserve the integrity of our water supply.

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