



Hijinks in Trenton when nobody's watching

By Elliott Ruga

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I suspect that most New Jerseyans of voting age couldn't name the legislators who represent them in Trenton. That includes many who might otherwise closely follow world events and the political tugs of war in Washington. Yet very few people in New Jersey are aware of the decisions made in the state capital that most directly impact their lives. Most also never heard of the Economic Opportunity Act of 2013, which may not make for a popular water cooler discussion, yet the consequences for our communities and our pocketbooks will be considerable.

I spend four or five days each month trying to meet with legislators to discuss my organization's concerns. Mostly though, my access is limited to flagging down lawmakers as they move between hearings, caucus meetings and the Assembly and Senate floors in a warren of corridors in the Statehouse basement.

If I were a lobbyist representing a commercial interest, having financially supported campaigns and county and state election committees, our meetings would be over lunch, or at golf outings, and with a legislator's undivided attention. But with the limited budget of a charitable nonprofit and an IRS prohibition against endorsing candidates or contributing to election campaigns, we have little skin to put into the game. Money talks in New Jersey. It provides access. This is the way it is in Trenton because very few people are watching.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 2013 is a complex bill that benefits large businesses and developers by providing hundreds of millions of dollars in tax rebates and grants — hundreds of millions of tax dollars that would be better spent funding already stressed state operations such as environmental enforcement.

Although any further weakening the state's ability to enforce its environmental regulations will negatively affect our quality of life, it would be welcomed by the interests that lobbied against such regulations, the same interests that are behind this bill. And the bill even further benefits such interests — large developers — by providing new incentives for projects proposed in environmentally sensitive areas, such as the Highlands and Pinelands. In fact, the act is so narrow in its generosity that, if developers were asked to pen their fantasy legislation, it would

look similar to this.

The original version of the bill, however, was carefully developed by its sponsor in the Assembly, Albert Coutinho (D-Essex), who solicited input from the environmental and planning communities to balance development incentives with natural resource protection goals, and to employ smart growth principles so the incentives would be consistent with other state policy goals, thus widening the embrace of those who would benefit from the bill. It was this version of that actually passed in the Assembly.

Development interests maneuvered behind closed doors and a Senate version of the bill suddenly materialized that erased many of the environmental constraints and smart growth principles.

This version was swiftly passed in a Senate committee without discussion or any opportunity for public review. Three days later, in a single day, the newer version was reintroduced and was passed in the Assembly, again without discussion or public review. The bill now awaits a Senate vote which, if approved, would go to the governor to be signed into law. If this stinks of mischief, it's what we get in New Jersey when no one is watching.

If I've lost anyone in the details of the bill's lightning-swift legislative progress, a red flag should go up whenever the tea party joins the environmental community in opposing a bill, which is a very rare beast. As Americans for Prosperity states on its website, "Those of us who believe in economic freedom call (the Act) corporate welfare and picking winners and losers in the marketplace. And it's hardly a recipe for opportunity or prosperity for New Jersey." A long list of opponents, including NJ Future, NJ Working Families Alliance, and Good Jobs First; along with think tanks such as NJ Policy Perspective and Rutgers University; even a former assistant state treasurer; either question the bill's fairness or the effectiveness of its incentives to retain or attract business, or to create jobs.

The Economic Opportunity Act will benefit a very few and will hurt a great many. And unless you surprise your state legislators by learning their names, calling their offices and stating your concerns about the Economic Opportunity Act, in a few weeks the bill will become law.

Elliott Ruga is senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.