

EDITORIAL: Stay firm on protecting Highlands

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The battle over septic tanks in the Highlands continues, with the state Legislature now considering an unusual step to block new rules that would encourage more development in the environmentally sensitive region.

Lawmakers have little choice but to take that step if Gov. Chris Christie's administration isn't going to stand down on its own.

At issue is a plan to increase the allowed density of septic tanks in the area, which would lead to more development in a region that has been highly protected since the Highlands Act was approved in 2004. That law was

designed to significantly limit growth across nearly 900,000 acres in northwest New Jersey, protecting a watershed that provides drinking water to millions of New Jerseyans. Environmentalists warn that the septic systems threaten the water supply with leaking nitrates, a common source of groundwater pollution.

Under Christie, however, the Highlands Commission that oversees the region has shifted its emphasis toward *increasing* growth within the protected area. Critics say existing restrictions are unnecessarily harsh, and that changes can be made responsibly without jeopardizing water quality.

That *might* be true, to a point. But the Christie administration's environmental record is abysmal, and the Highlands Commission has been shaped under Christie to be less environmentally conscious. Trusting their opinions on responsibly loosening restrictions would be ill-advised and reckless, especially with a new governor taking office in two months.

Administration officials are bowing to pressure from developers and from Highlands landowners trying to recover some of their property value lost to the Highlands Act. Those landowners were promised compensation in some form, but that has not been forthcoming, as fresh revenue-generating suggestions such as a new water tax have gone nowhere.

Those property owners have reason to gripe. But the solution isn't to scrap land protections to allow more construction.

Lawmakers earlier this year approved a resolution declaring that the proposed new septic rules were inconsistent with legislative intent, forcing the administration to either withdraw or amend the proposal. Neither was done, however, and now legislators must decide whether to use the same rationale to block implementation.

They should. The Highlands protections weren't put in place on a whim. The massive watershed contained in the region is an invaluable resource the state can't allow to be jeopardized by the kind of thoughtless development we've seen in far too many parts of New Jersey. While we can appreciate the frustrations of landowners still waiting for that promised compensation, satisfying them cannot be the top priority. The state also should not be doing any favors for developers looking to pave over more of our precious green spaces.

The timing matters too. Gov.-elect Phil Murphy figures to be far more environmentally responsible than Christie. Voters just approved a referendum that guarantees future pollution settlements are devoted to cleanup and not diverted to other budget needs. New Jerseyans care about the environment and their drinking water, and a plan for more septic tanks in the Highlands does not fit that profile.