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In the Region | New Jersey

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Mapping Future Growth

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SPRAWLING The Woodfield housing development in Mount Olive, which received building approvals years ago, is on an area considered by some to be environmentally sensitive.

AFTER years of confusion, disputes and rule changes, New Jersey's 21 counties surprised many last month by meeting a deadline to produce updated sewer service maps — not only locating infrastructure already in place but also detailing where new infrastructure should go. The maps are expected to guide statewide development well into the future.

“It’s important to update these sewer service plans to know where to build,” said Chris Sturm, the senior director of state policy for [New Jersey Future](#), a planning group that focuses on smart growth. “This step spells out where it makes sense to grow, where we have infrastructure, and where it doesn’t make sense to grow, in environmentally sensitive areas.”

Of course, achieving this milestone hasn’t completely put arguments to rest. While planners, builders and the state’s [Department of Environmental Protection](#) hailed the new sewer maps as a first step toward directing smart growth in New Jersey, environmentalists described them as a further example of the Christie administration’s favoring developers over the environment.

In a news release announcing the counties’ compliance with a July 15 deadline to submit their updated maps, the Department of Environmental Protection praised the maps for “protecting nearly 210,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands and better safeguarding the state’s water quality.” But for environmentalists, this number is more than 90,000 acres shy of the 300,000 acres once deemed environmentally sensitive and expected to be shielded from sewer service development.

David Pringle, campaign director for the [New Jersey Environmental Federation](#), said a more accurate headline for the maps would be “Gov. Chris Christie reinstates 100,000 acres into development area.” He added: “This is an area we haven’t lost yet. It’s where we have endangered species’ habitats, wetlands and the source of much of our drinking water supply. Once you develop, you can’t go back.”

Efforts to address water quality management in New Jersey date back to 1996, when the federal Environmental Protection Agency ordered the state to update its sewer service network with an eye toward protecting endangered species and water supply. The state did eventually adopt new water quality management rules and ordered the counties to develop maps that would comply with those rules, but not until 2008. Court challenges by developers were among the factors that dragged the process out over a decade.

It was during that decade that 300,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land within areas designated as appropriate for sewer service were declared off limits (down from a previous 375,000 acres, after the

Corzine administration removed parcels of 25 acres or less).

The current 209,000 acres deemed sensitive reflect more up-to-date data, according to Lawrence Hajna, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection. “The 300,000 acres was just a starting point — a ballpark number to begin the actual mapping process,” he said. “That then had to be ground-truthed for what’s actually happening, what’s been developed and what’s not.” He noted that since previous sewer maps had been published — the oldest of them dating to the mid-1980s — close to 18,000 acres had been added back into the sewer service areas statewide.

The counties’ new sewer maps, which are expected to receive final approval by the end of the year, represent the first in a three-step process to address water management issues. In legislation passed in December, counties were given two additional years to complete the two remaining steps: an analysis of how sewer plants already in place could accommodate the waste generated if everything deemed buildable under current zoning went ahead; and a plan for policing sections outside sewer areas, which use septic systems.

Environmentalists questioned the wisdom of having allowed Step 1 before Step 2, arguing that it was unrealistic to map places where new infrastructure should go, without first knowing the full capacity of the sewage systems already in place. Of particular concern to them is that, with the maps in hand, developers eager to take projects to fruition can use them to apply to counties, and ultimately the state, for amendments — thereby opening the door to encroachment on sensitive land.

“The new legislation said they couldn’t make amendments until the sewer plans were submitted,” said Jeff Tittel, the director of the [New Jersey chapter](#) of the Sierra Club. “So now that they’re submitted, it allows them to come in and add other areas not in the sewer service areas.” He noted, “Where sewers go is what drives overdevelopment.”

Timothy J. Touhey, the chief executive of the [New Jersey Builders Association](#), countered that with the current economic uncertainties affecting the industry, builders were disinclined to spend investment dollars in areas that might be deemed environmentally sensitive. Mr. Touhey saw the new sewer maps as providing some clarity going forward.

“Anytime you bring predictability and efficiency to a process,” he said, “it’s going to save money for builders. They’re not changing the rules along the way.”

But Elliott Ruga, the [New Jersey Highlands Coalition’s](#) senior policy analyst, expressed concerns that the new mapping would allow for development in areas that had previously been restricted, not only in the Highlands, but also the Pine Barrens and the Barnegat Bay Watershed area. He described the rules governing state water management as “part of the governor’s deregulation of the environment to favor developers.”

He said he and other environmentalists planned to attend the upcoming public hearings being held in each county to review the new sewer maps. In addition, the Department of Environmental Protection has invited him to take part in a meeting with environmentalists in September to discuss the state’s overall water management plan, though he doesn’t have much confidence that his voice will be heard.

“They will take under advisement what we have to say, and then do exactly what they want to do,” Mr. Ruga said. “But they’ll be able to say, ‘We’ve consulted with our environmental stakeholders.’ ”