

# Burlington County Times

## Open space bill advanced by Senate Budget Committee

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*By David Levinsky Staff writer*

**TRENTON** — Lawmakers have advanced another bill to replenish New Jersey’s nearly empty open space and farmland preservation coffers, using revenue from the state’s corporate business tax.

The latest proposal is a scaled-down version of a measure proposed by Sens. Bob Smith, D-17th of Piscataway, and Christopher “Kip” Bateman, R-16th of Branchburg, to seek voter approval to use a 6 percent share of corporate business tax revenues to fund land preservation programs, which include open space, farmland and historic preservation, as well as purchase homes and land in flood-prone territories.

The new bill calls for voters to approve diverting only a 4 percent share of the revenues that are already dedicated for environmental programs until July 2020, when the share will increase to 6 percent.

Smith told lawmakers on the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee on Thursday that the change was in recognition of the state’s dire financial situation.

“You have an extremely modest proposal in front of you,” he said, noting that 4 percent of the tax revenue is already dedicated to environmental programs, such as underground storage tank removal and hazardous waste cleanup grants, and watershed management.

Smith said that those programs would still receive revenues, but that \$71 million would go toward land preservation beginning in July 2016. In 2020, he said the sum would increase to about \$117 million.

A previous bill introduced by Smith and Bateman called for \$200 million in sales tax revenue to be dedicated to open space and the other preservation programs was approved by the state Senate but rejected by the Assembly.

Gov. Chris Christie spoke out against the sales tax diversion but has not commented publicly on the corporate business tax proposal. However, a member of his cabinet said the 6 percent dedication was a non-starter because it would divert too much money from the existing

environmental programs.

“Shifting the money over to open space, all these programs would be gutted, and those are all critical programs to the state that are critical to the environment,” state Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin said last month during a Budget Committee hearing.

Smith said his latest proposal was as “fiscally conservative as you can be,” and represented a last-ditch effort to get a funding question on the November ballot.

“It’s no new taxes. It’s basically budget-neutral,” Smith said. “The only other available option is to abolish open space and farmland moving forward.”

Environmental groups, which previously bickered over the preferred funding source for open space, appeared to be in agreement on the new proposal.

“It’s not as much money as we need for the program, but it’ll get us by until times are better,” said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

“This really is a fiscally responsible approach. It won’t impact the state budget over the next five years. It won’t increase our debt or increase taxes and fees, and yet it will ensure New Jersey can continue to make a long-term investment (in land preservation),” said Tom Gilbert, chairman of NJ Keep It Green, a coalition of environmental and conservation groups.

There was some opposition, chiefly from Mike Proto, of the New Jersey chapter of Americans for Prosperity, who argued that the state would be better served cutting the tax to attract businesses or applying the revenue to make the state’s pension payment.

“This bill will tie our hands on revenues for 30 years,” Proto said.

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