

Environmental groups sue to stop Oakland housing development

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Oakland - Two environmental groups are suing the state for granting approvals for the construction of a 204-unit housing development on a scenic Highlands ridge, a project opponents say could harm the environment and jeopardize local wildlife.

In a joint lawsuit filed on March 12, the New Jersey Sierra Club and the Highlands Coalition followed through on a pledge to oppose building permits issued by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in late January. The permits allow Bi-County Development Corp. of Brooklyn to break ground on the project by building a roadway for the first 14 homes.

Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel in a statement called Bi-County's plan "one of the worst projects ever to be proposed in the Highlands" and said the permits would result in the destruction of important wetlands in an environmentally sensitive area.

The project's sewer plan may also pose a threat because it could deplete the Ramapo River, which provides drinking water to 650,000 people and feeds the Wanaque and Oradell Reservoirs, Tittel stated.

The 80-acre tract off Long Hill Road in Oakland sits within the New Jersey Highlands, an 860,000-acre sweep of forested land that stretches across seven northwest counties. Strict state regulations against development have been implemented to protect the region's diverse wildlife population and maintain clean drinking water supplied to 5.4 million residents, more than half of New Jersey's population.

A legal squabble involving the town, state, developer and now the environmental groups has stalled the project for years. But tensions hit a boiling point in 2008 when the DEP reached a settlement with Bi-County despite opposing the plan for years, citing

environmental protections in the Highlands Act of 2004. DEP officials had said bureaucratic confusion during a changeover in administrations led to its reversed stance. During its appeal, Bi-County argued that the DEP already had approved a sewer line connection to Wayne in 1991, an agreement that predated the Highlands Act. As a result, the state said it had no choice but to reach a legal settlement with Bi-County because the 1991 approvals were grandfathered-in.

The environmental lawsuit was filed in the Appellate Division by Susan Kraham of the Columbia Environmental Law Clinic.

Officials from Oakland and Wayne did not return calls.

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