

Coalition urges state review of 'fast track' developing

By LAUREN O. KIDD
Gannett State Bureau

TRENTON — The Save New Jersey Coalition, made up of 49 organizations opposed to controversial smart growth legislation, requested that Attorney General Peter C. Harvey review the "fast track" bill before Gov. James E. McGreevey signs it into law.

In a letter addressed to the governor, the organization — representing groups across the state with community development, environmental protection, environmental justice and smart-growth interests — claimed the proposed law would violate property protection provisions of the state constitution.

"We need the attorney general to weigh in and provide legal advice to determine if the bill is con-

stitutional so the governor can weigh the issues," said Thomas Borden, an attorney with the Rutgers Environmental Law Clinic, which found regulatory and constitutional flaws in the bill.

"No governor can sign a bill that's determined to be unconstitutional," said Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

The Save New Jersey Coalition also requested that all state agencies affected by the bill present their opinions to McGreevey. If McGreevey approves The Permit Streamlining in Smart Growth Areas Bill, permit applications in the Departments of Community Affairs, Environmental Protection and Transportation, not reviewed and acted upon within 45 days of being deemed complete, would receive an automatic approval.

Idea to save highlands has been around for a century

By COLLEEN O'DEA
Gannett New Jersey

Among the biggest complaints by those testifying on the proposed Highlands preservation bill was that lawmakers were moving too fast in trying to pass the bill in less than two months.

But the Highlands have been waiting for a savior for more than 100 years.

The first calls for preserving the region came in the late 1800s when Abram S. Hewitt, a wealthy industrialist and former congressman, mapped out an area encompassing the forests of northern Morris, Sussex and Passaic counties that he said needed to be preserved. He couldn't convince officials to create a preserve, but did his own part — giving his home, Ringwood Manor, and its 6,000 acres to the state as parkland.

In 1907, the Potable Water Commission recommended the state buy and preserve watersheds in the Highlands because of the pristine quality of the water.

"These watersheds should be preserved from pollution at all hazards, for upon them the most populous portions of the State must depend for water-supplies," according to the commission's report. "There has been too much laxness

"There has been too much laxness in the past regarding this important matter."

Potable Water commission report from 1907

in the past regarding this important matter."

Preservation attempts failed again in the 1930s and 1950s.

Outrage stopped a plan by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to build a jetport in Jefferson or West Milford in the early 1960s, but went no further. Legislation to preserve what was then called the Skylands — the area north of Interstate 80 between the Wallkill and Ramapo rivers — died in the Legislature in 1970 when its sponsor died in office.

Preservation efforts seemed promising in the early 1990s. A task force called for a Skylands National Greenway of protected open space and a Highlands Commission to serve as a planning and regulatory body to manage the most critical areas. A year later, the first U.S. Forest Service report on the Highlands recommended a similar planning council.

"People have been at this for well over a decade," said Tom Gilbert, executive director of the Highlands Coalition.