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EDITORIAL

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OUR OPINION

Fast-track law needs review, challenge

It is natural these days to look askance at most everything Gov. James E. McGreevey has accomplished during his gubernatorial tenure. But while *some* of his actions have made it clear his resignation is necessary, it would be unfair to dismiss all of his efforts as tainted by poor judgment or bad politics.

Our position

Federal concerns over a new state law expediting permits for development only reinforce the view that the measure should be reconsidered.

Still, though, if any of his "achievements" deserves a thorough re-examination, it is the law he shepherded through the Legislature speeding up the permitting process for development in many parts of the state.

And the skepticism and concern of at least a pair of federal agencies only adds to the realization the fast-track law is a big mistake.

To gain needed support for his Highlands preservation plan, the governor made a reckless concession to South Jersey legislators and builders. He signed off on a law that will, in effect, truncate many environmental reviews for proposed development by expediting the permitting process. The governor and other supporters of the law insist it merely cuts through red tape and more quickly grants permits that would be granted anyway. And by doing so, they say, they will encourage growth in urban areas and other regions that can accommodate further development.

But in some cases, the new time frame for considering permit applications simply won't allow for the necessary environmental studies. And state officials are kidding themselves if they believe the effects of the law will accelerate *only* good projects and in no way facilitate bad ones.

Two federal agencies have expressed their own concerns about the plan. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has told the state \$3 million in annual funding could be at risk if the law weakens coastline protections. And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has sent its own letter to the state warning the fast-track law could hurt environmental protections of wildlife and hamper the agency's efforts in the state.

The federal fears echo the concerns of state environmentalists who have denounced the fast-track law, saying it will turn back the clock on decades of environmental protections. McGreevey clearly made a bad trade in getting the Highlands bill through the Legislature. It demands another look, and some changes, either now or under a new administration. The sooner the better.