

OUR OPINION

Highlands measure also needs second look

Lawmakers are making plenty of noise about repealing the so-called "fast-track" bill designed to speed up development in certain parts of the state.

Sounds reasonable to us. But why stop there? Lawmakers should also be closely re-examining the measure that triggered the entire fast-track fiasco: the Highlands preservation law.

Our position

State legislators would do well to reconsider the Highlands preservation law while plotting the repeal of a fast-track development law crafted to gain support for the Highlands measure.

Earlier this year, in what smacked of virtual desperation, former Gov. James E. McGreevey made an ill-advised deal to gain needed support from South Jersey legislators for the Highlands bill. He shepherded through a measure to speed up the permitting process for builders. Supporters said it was merely a way of cutting through bureaucratic red tape and encouraging growth where it is wanted and needed. But environmentalists and others objected, rightly arguing that the bill would short-circuit proper environmental reviews for proposed projects, among other problems.

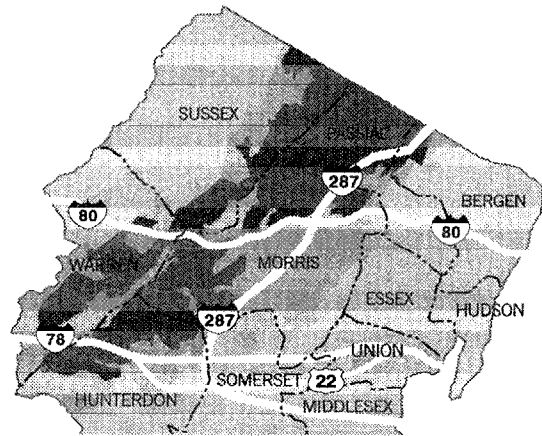
Now, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are conceding that the fast-track bill — which has yet to take effect — was rammed through far too quickly, without enough thought. Many are pushing for outright repeal, although acting Gov. Richard Codey favors revisions.

Either way, major changes are needed at the very least. But the Highlands bill itself also contains many flaws, based on decisions clearly made more for reasons of political expediency than anything else. Lawmakers should include that measure in their reconsiderations.

County officials in Hunterdon and Warren counties are legally challenging the Highlands bill. They have expressed a variety of concerns, including the loss of land-use control and the likelihood that Highlands preservation will prompt mandated growth in other areas. They also complain that the borders designating preservation and growth areas under the law are improperly gerrymandered to favor campaign contributors and other political interests.

Considering the hoops through which McGreevey was willing to jump to get this deal done, is there any doubt that parts of the Highlands law were crafted for something other than environmental reasons?

We urge lawmakers to throw the fast-track bill under a microscope and either fix it or throw it out completely and start fresh. But they should do the same with the Highlands measure. Otherwise they're only doing half a job.



New Jersey Highlands

■ Preservation area: 395,000 acres
■ Planning area: 363,000 acres

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