

Land value no reason to fight Highlands

The Somerset County Agriculture Development Board has tossed its support behind efforts in Hunterdon and Warren counties to oppose — and potentially overturn — the Highlands preservation law.

Such backing can only help the Hunterdon-Warren cause, and toward that end we are encouraged to see the board take its stand. The Highlands plan is too tainted by politics to

Our position

While the Highlands protection law is deeply flawed, opposition should not focus on trying to preserve the highest possible value of farmers' land.

work as it should, and needs, at the very least, significant changes.

We don't, however, agree with the Somerset board's specific reasoning for opposing the bill: the threat of farmers' land being devalued.

Most everyone agrees that the underlying goal of the Highlands law is an admirable one: Minimize development in those areas in the northwest part of the state that directly affect the quality of drinking water for millions of New Jerseyans. The Highlands plan calls for development to be halted across about 400,000 acres.

The problem, however, is where the growth displaced from that acreage will go. Another 400,000 acres surrounding that preserved core will continue to accommodate building, and the design of the law is to encourage certain counties and municipalities to accept that growth. But what if no one wants it?

That's the rub. Hunterdon and Warren officials fear the growth will be mandated somewhere, and that "somewhere" will be in Republican strongholds, so chosen by a powerful Highlands Council hand-picked by a Democratic governor.

Those concerns are valid ones, and at the very least the 15-person council should be selected in a more impartial fashion representing views from all parts of the region.

What we do *not* think is reason to oppose the law is the realization that farmers' land in the protected areas of the Highlands will lose value because of the lack of development possibilities. That's the Somerset board's main concern, and Hunterdon and Warren officials also have acknowledged that issue as part of the reason for their opposition.

But farmers — or any landowners — only have a right to a "fair" price for their land, not a maximized price based on a developer's interest. In fact, trying to maximize the value of farmers' land is what has fueled much of the sprawl we often bemoan today, with builders paying top dollar for prime real estate as farming families move out of the business.

Farmers may not like the effects of the bill limiting their options and eliminating developers as potential buyers, and we can't entirely blame them for that. But they aren't being cheated.

We're happy to see Hunterdon and Warren officials getting some help, even if we don't agree with the motivation behind that assistance from the Somerset agriculture board. But we hope whatever chances opponents of the Highlands law have to succeed aren't compromised by emphasizing the wrong message. The law deserves to be changed or overturned for several reasons, but not to assure farmers can get top dollar for their property.