

message is clear: growth a priority

Many environmentalists in New Jersey feel betrayed by Gov. James E. McGreevey for a new program to fast-track development permits in growth areas of the state.

They have good reason. And the governor continues to twist that knife in their backs.

This was all started by what was supposed to be a great environmental victory: a preservation plan for the Highlands.

The governor had long been pushing to protect hundreds of thousands of acres in the Highlands because of their effect on the

Our position

Gov. James E. McGreevey's choice of Susan Bass Levin to help fast-track building permits in the state is another blow to the New Jersey environment.

region's water supply. But to pull it off, the governor made so many concessions to builders that the net result is an environmental defeat.

McGreevey and his aides claim differently, of course, but their ac-

tions speak much louder than their words. And the governor recently angered environmentalists even more when he named Susan Bass Levin as the state's first Smart Growth ombudsman.

That fairly fancy title simply means Bass Levin will be empowered to cut through the red tape in the permitting process for building projects. In other words, she would be able to step in if a permit is delayed or rejected and get it moving again. So, if anything, she is more of a Fast Growth commander or, as critics say with disdain, a sprawl czar.

The new position is part of an effort to speed up building projects in growth areas, which McGreevey sought as a tradeoff to South Jersey legislators in exchange for support of the Highlands bill.

Environmentalists rightly fear that such fast-tracking will short-circuit environmental reviews of properties targeted for development. McGreevey denies that, but if he was serious, he would not have chosen Bass Levin, who is also head of the Department of Community Affairs and the chairwoman of the Council on Affordable Housing, for the ombudsman post.

That's an awful lot of control in one person's hands — and certainly Bass Levin doesn't seem likely to let environmental concerns get in the way of housing projects.

The governor is similarly stacking the deck in his favor by arranging to hand-pick the members of the Highlands Council, the group that will make development decisions within areas of the Highlands where growth will still be encouraged. Officials in Republican-heavy Hunterdon and Warren counties believe growth will ultimately be mandated in their counties by a Democrat-friendly council. It's a legitimate concern.

The Highlands preservation was a worthy goal. But not at the price McGreevey was willing to pay. If the governor wanted to minimize the damage even a little, he could have at least put someone with environmental credentials in the ombudsman post. And he could create a more bipartisan selection process for the Highlands Council. But then he would be relinquishing some control over events, which he clearly does not want to do.

And that's bad news for the New Jersey environment.