

HIGHLANDS PRESS CONFERENCE

SENATOR BOB SMITH, D-MIDDLESEX AND SOMERSET

MARCH 15, 2004

- LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THANK YOU FOR COMING OUT TODAY AS WE PREPARE TO TACKLE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITY OF LIFE ISSUES FACING NEW JERSEY.
- THE OLD ADAGE STATES, 'WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE, NOR ANY DROP TO DRINK.' I DOUBT THAT SAMUEL COLERIDGE WAS CONSIDERING THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT ON WATER RESOURCES WHEN HE PENNED 'THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER' IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY, BUT I CANNOT THINK OF A MORE APPLICABLE STATEMENT ON THE CURRENT PLIGHT OF NEW JERSEY'S HIGHLANDS.
- THE HIGHLANDS REGION, IN NORTHWESTERN NEW JERSEY, PROVIDES WATER TO NEARLY HALF OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE STATE, AND UNLESS WE MOVE QUICKLY TO PROTECT THIS VITAL RESOURCE, WE MAY SOON FIND OURSELVES IN A SITUATION WHERE THERE WON'T BE A DROP LEFT TO DRINK FOR ALMOST 4 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE GARDEN STATE.

- IN THE PAST 13 YEARS, WE HAVE FACED 5 DROUGHTS IN NEW JERSEY, AND DUE TO THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF DROUGHTS, IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE WE ARE FACED WITH YET ANOTHER WATER EMERGENCY.
- NEW JERSEY MAY SOON FACE A SERIOUS WATER SHORTAGE, AND OPENING UP THE NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS TO UNCHECKED DEVELOPMENT AND SUBURBAN SPRAWL WILL ONLY EXACERBATE THE SITUATION.
- CONSIDERING THIS, IT BECOMES ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL TO PROTECT THE PRISTINE WATER RESOURCES THAT WE HAVE LEFT FROM DEVELOPMENT AND INDUSTRIAL CONTAMINATION.
NEW JERSEY'S HIGHLANDS, AS THE DRINKING FOUNTAIN FOR SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE STATE, DESERVE OUR UTMOST EFFORTS TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE THE FRAGILE WATERSHEDS IN THE REGION.
- GOVERNOR McGREEVEY'S HIGHLANDS TASK FORCE HAS JUST ISSUED ITS RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE WATER QUALITY IN THE HIGHLANDS THIS PAST WEEKEND, AND WITH THAT REPORT AS A STARTING POINT, THE SENATE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE AND THE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND SOLID WASTE COMMITTEE WILL BEGIN A FIVE-HEARING SCHEDULE TO DETERMINE THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION FOR THE HIGHLANDS.

- WE WILL BE HOLDING PUBLIC HEARINGS IN THE AREAS THAT WILL BE MOST AFFECTED BY ENHANCED REGULATIONS AND PRESERVATION. WE WILL BRING THE DEBATE TO THOSE WHO WILL NEED TO BE THE STEWARDS OF WATER PROTECTION, TO AID THOSE WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THE CLEAN DRINKING WATER COMING FROM THE HIGHLANDS.
- WE WILL KEEP IN MIND THE THREE P'S NECESSARY TO OUR GOAL -- PRESERVATION OF LAND, PLANNING BASED ON SMART GROWTH POLICIES, AND PROTECTION THROUGH ENHANCED DEP REGULATIONS.
- WE WILL ESPECIALLY FOCUS ON THE HIGHLANDS' CORE, THE REGION MOST SENSITIVE TO DEVELOPMENT. WHILE MARGINAL DEVELOPMENT WOULD BE ALLOWED IN SOME OF THE OUTLYING REGIONS OF THE HIGHLANDS, WE WILL HAVE TO IMPOSE VERY STRICT LAND-USE RESTRICTIONS ON THE CORE, BECAUSE THE SLIGHTEST IMPACT THERE COULD MEAN DISASTER FOR THOSE THAT RELY ON HIGHLANDS DRINKING WATER.
- WE WILL LOOK AT OTHER PRESERVATION ENTITIES IN THE STATE, SUCH AS THE PINELANDS COMMISSION AND THE NEW JERSEY MEADOWLANDS COMMISSION, AND WE MAY INCORPORATE SOME OF THE BEST PRACTICES THAT HAVE

WORKED FOR THOSE ORGANIZATIONS.

- AT THE END OF THE HEARING SCHEDULE, WE HOPE TO JOINTLY RELEASE A HIGHLANDS LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE, ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE REGION AND ENSURING THE QUALITY OF WATER FOR NEW JERSEYANS, ON APRIL 22ND, EARTH DAY. WE WILL TRY OUR BEST TO GET THE LEGISLATION ON THE ROAD TO BICAMERAL, BIPARTISAN APPROVAL ON THAT DATE.
- I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO THE PUBLIC DEBATE WHICH WILL NO DOUBT HELP TO SHAPE THE BEST POSSIBLE BILL FOR THE NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS, AND ALL THOSE NEW JERSEYANS THAT BENEFIT FROM THE REGION.
- I'D ALSO LIKE TO THANK SENATE PRESIDENT CODEY AND MAJORITY LEADER KENNY, AS WELL AS THE ASSEMBLY LEADERSHIP, FOR ALLOWING US TO HAVE THESE HEARINGS DURING THE BUDGET BREAK. THEIR COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING THE HIGHLANDS AREA IS A TESTAMENT TO THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE, AND THE FACT THAT THE HIGHLANDS WATER SUPPLIES AFFECT SO MANY IN OUR STATE.

- WE HAVE A LOT OF WORK AHEAD OF US, BUT THAT WORK IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY TO ENSURE CLEAN DRINKING WATER FOR GENERATIONS OF NEW JERSEY RESIDENTS TO COME. THE NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS ARE AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE, AND WE WILL DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO MAKE SURE THE SAFETY OF NEW JERSEY'S WATER SUPPLY IS NOT SACRIFICED TO INCREASED DEVELOPMENT IN THE AREA.
- WITH THAT, I WOULD LIKE TO TURN IT OVER TO MY COLLEAGUE, ASSEMBLYMAN JOHN McKEON, CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND SOLID WASTE COMMITTEE.