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HIGHLANDS BILL AMENDMENTS PROPOSED FOR REVIEW

Smith and McKeon: Bill will be voted on at next week's meeting

TRENTON - Senator Bob Smith and Assemblyman John F. McKeon, the chairs of the two legislative environment panels, said today that amendments to the historic "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act" will be reviewed this week by legislators, and that the bill will be voted on at the next joint meeting of the Senate Environment Committee and Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee.

"Crafting legislation, especially on this magnitude, is sometimes a slow and deliberate process," said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, the Chair of the Senate Environment Committee. "As we move forward to protect the pristine water from the Highlands region, we want to make sure that we amply address the concerns of those who have an interest in this legislation. The water resources of the Highlands impact more than four million people in New Jersey, and we want to make sure that each one has a voice at the table."

"We must remember that what we do today will have an impact on future generations," said Assemblyman McKeon, D-Essex, the Chair of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee. "With more than 5,000 acres of precious Highlands land and resources being lost to development each year, we need to employ every means possible to stop sprawl from encroaching on this vital ecosystem and jeopardizing our drinking water supply."

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The bill, S-1 / A-2635, known as the "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act," would protect the water resources from the New Jersey Highlands region by restricting development in environmentally sensitive areas, and, using growth incentives, shift development to areas where the impact on the water supply would not be as great. Amendments include greater incentives for municipalities outside of the preservation area to accept growth, a redefinition of the preservation area to remove Picatinny Arsenal, a military base in the Highlands Region that requested exemption from the development restrictions in the bill, and greater grandfathering provisions to allow major developments which meet a minimum permit requirement to be exempt from the provisions of the bill (*see attached for summary of amendments*).

"These amendments should show that we are making a good faith effort to protect the Highlands region without imposing unbearable restrictions on the residents of the area," said Senator Smith. "Ultimately, though, action is required to save the Highlands' water resources for future generations. While there may be some who still are not happy with the final product, I am confident that the amended Highlands bill will be the best bill for the people of New Jersey."

Assemblyman McKeon said that after 40 hours of public hearings, more than 500 witnesses and thousands of written submissions, it's time to stand up and be counted.

"We decided to err on the side of caution and give people the opportunity to digest the amendments for another week," said Assemblyman McKeon. "However, we are poised and ready to vote on the legislation next week. The time for words is over. It is now time for action."

The bill will be before the joint committees for a vote next Monday, May 17th, at 2:00 P.M. in Trenton.

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SEE ATTACHED FOR SUMMARY OF HIGHLANDS AMENDMENTS