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SMITH BILL TO INCLUDE PUBLIC VOICE IN SHORE REPLENISHMENT PROJECTS

TRENTON - A bill sponsored by Senator Bob Smith which would require the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to hold a public hearing and allow for public comment on shore protection projects was unanimously approved today by the Senate Environment Committee.

"Over the summer, we held a public hearing in Toms River on a number of shore protection issues, and one of the key points we gleaned from that was that we need to be more responsive to the people we're trying to protect at the Shore," said Senator Smith, the Chair of the Environment panel. "Many of those that testified were never given a proper public forum to object, despite the fact that beach replenishment was going on, in some cases right in their own backyards. We need to ensure that the public's voice is heard before we begin fundamentally changing the way of life for those who live at the Jersey Shore."

Senator Smith's bill, S-2240, would require the DEP to hold public hearings and allow for public comment at the conclusion of the feasibility study phase for proposed shore protection projects. This bill would apply any time the State enters into an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers to assume responsibility as a non-federal sponsor of a shore protection project. The bill is in response to the August hearing of the Environment Committee, in which members of the public requested a way to voice their concerns over pending shore protection projects.

"We cannot in good conscience proceed with shore protection without at least hearing the concerns of homeowners whose property might be affected," said Senator Smith. "We need to be able to achieve balance between the rights of homeowners and the need to preserve our beaches. This bill strikes up a balance, providing transparency in pending projects and allowing the public a voice in the decision-making process."

The bill now heads to the full Senate for consideration.