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SMITH BILL TO INCLUDE PUBLIC VOICE IN BEACH REPLENISHMENT **APPROVED**

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 approved today by the Senate by a vote of 39-0.

"This past summer, the Senate Environment Committee held a public hearing on beach replenishment in Toms River, and we were able to learn a lot by taking the hearing to the people of the Jersey Shore," said Senator Smith, the Chair of the Environment panel. "Those who testified let us know that, other than our hearing, they were never given a chance to have public input on shore protection projects, even when those projects were taking place in their own back yards. As a matter of fundamental fairness, we need to give property owners and beach advocates the chance to let their voices be heard before we begin major shore protection projects."

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.

"It is patently unfair to ask shore residents to live with the ramifications of major shore replenishment and protection projects without at least giving them a voice in the process," said Senator Smith. "While I understand that many of these projects are necessary to preserve the shore ecosystem, we need to be able to achieve balance between the rights of homeowners and the needs of the environment. By allowing property owners and beach advocates to be a part of the decision-making process, we can get a localized perspective and achieve balance."

The bill now heads to the Assembly for consideration.