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SMITH RENEWABLE ENERGY PACKAGE APPROVED BY FULL SENATE

TRENTON – A package of bills sponsored by Senator Bob Smith which would promote renewable energy throughout the State of New Jersey was approved by the Senate today.

“During this time of economic uncertainty, we need to push for home-grown, cost-effective and environmentally friendly energy alternatives,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, the Chair of the Senate Environment Committee. “Promoting wind, solar, photovoltaic or tidal power in New Jersey will give customers a cheap, clean alternative to meet their energy needs and will reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and foreign oil. This bill package would make New Jersey one of the leaders in the green economy, spawning jobs as well as cost savings for energy consumers.”

The first bill in the package, S-1299/A2550, would permit the location of certain wind and solar energy generating facilities in areas zoned for industrial use. The bill stipulates that any lot which is at least 20 contiguous acres, owned by a single person or entity, and zoned for industrial use would fall under the provisions of this bill. Senator Smith noted that the intent of the legislation is to supersede local zoning ordinances, which can sometimes be guided by a NIMBY (Not-In-My-Back-Yard) mentality, prohibiting development without regard to the public benefits of the project.

“Renewable energy shouldn’t be the sole dominion of off-shore wind farms or rural solar energy farms, though I remain hopeful that those kinds of projects will become more common,” said Senator Smith. “However, as we begin to redevelop our aging urban core, and make significant investments in public infrastructure, we should look to include renewable energy in the redevelopment equation. By locating renewable energy facilities in blighted urban areas, we can promote a smarter model of redevelopment, and provide assistance to low-income families who need help with their heating or electric bills.”

S-1299/A2550 was approved by a vote of 35-3, and now heads to the Assembly for concurrence with Senate amendments.

The second bill in the package, S-1303, would codify the definition of “inherently beneficial use,” for the purposes of zoning use variances under New Jersey’s “Municipal Land Use Law.” Under the bill, “inherently beneficial use,” would be defined as a developed property which is universally considered of value to the community because it serves a fundamental need, such as hospitals, schools, child care centers, group homes, or in the case of renewable energy, wind, solar or photovoltaic energy facilities. Through the “inherently beneficial use” label, many of these sites would be considered eligible for a variance that would ensure they could not be blocked by existing local zoning ordinances.

“I don’t think anyone can argue against the societal benefits of cheap, clean renewable energy,” said Senator Smith. “Through the federal economic stimulus package, we’re going to see an unprecedented investment in public construction projects that serve the public interest. By classifying renewable energy systems as ‘inherently beneficial,’ we may be able to channel some of the stimulus funding into the State’s burgeoning green economy.”

S-1303 was approved by a vote of 36-1, and now heads to the Assembly for consideration.

The final bill in the package, S-2265/A1558, would require a developer of new residential development of 25 or more dwelling units to offer to install a solar energy system when a prospective owner enters into negotiations with the developer to purchase a dwelling unit. Under the bill, developers would be required to disclose in advertizing that a prospective owner may have a solar energy system installed in any unit; the total cost of installation; and a comprehensive information packet on solar energy systems. The Commissioner of Community Affairs, in consultation with the Board of Public Utilities, would be responsible for setting technical standards

for the solar energy equipment through the legislation, and developers would have to comply within 90 days of the adoption of technical standards.

"During the current economic crisis, homeowners are being stretched to the limit in terms of the rising costs of maintaining a home in the Garden State," said Senator Smith. "We should give new homebuyers the option of making an up-front investment which will pay dividends in the future in terms of reduced energy costs. If homebuyers are offered the option of going green, I think we will see a substantial reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases, and cost savings for hard-hit utility payers in New Jersey."

S-2265/A1558 was approved by a vote of 38-0, and now heads to the Assembly for concurrence with Senate amendments.