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SMITH-SWEENEY BILL TO AUTHORIZE OPEN SPACE BONDING APPROVED BY BUDGET PANEL

TRENTON – A bill sponsored by Senate Environment Committee Chairman, Senator Bob Smith, and Senate Majority Leader Steve Sweeney which would give voters in November the option to approve up to \$400 million in open space borrowing was approved by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee today by a vote of 12-2, with one abstention.

“Since the 1960s, in good times and in bad, through Republican and Democratic administrations, New Jersey voters have approved every open space preservation bonding initiative put before them,” said Senator Bob Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “That’s a testament to just how important this cause is to the people of the Garden State. Open space preservation is an issue that transcends party politics and municipal and county boundaries, and I hope everyone can get behind efforts to protect and preserve undeveloped lands in the State.”

“In my district and around the State, open space preservation has been a major tool in preserving the quality of life for communities facing pressure from over-development and sprawl,” said Senator Sweeney, D-Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem. “As one of the most densely-populated states in the nation, undeveloped land is at a premium, and many land owners cannot afford to protect their lands for the public good without some help from the State. We need preservation programs to ensure that rational development – which preserves parks, open spaces and farmland – is the model for development in the State, rather than rampant suburban sprawl.”

The bill, S-1858, would authorize the State to borrow \$400 million, subject to voter approval, to provide funding for open space preservation programs, such as the Green Acres public recreation and conservation program, farmland preservation, the Blue Acres program for flood plain and watershed land, and historic preservation. Under the amended bill, \$218 million would be spent on the Green Acres program, \$146 would be spent on farmland preservation, \$24 million would be spent on Blue Acres preservation, and \$12 million would be used for historic preservation purposes. Voters would have an opportunity on Election Day to either approve or deny the bonding through a ballot question.

“Open space is so very valuable to the quality of life for all New Jerseyans,” said Senator Smith. “Open space preservation isn’t simply some high-minded State policy to conserve land – it’s responsible for creating parks, protecting vulnerable watershed, establishing wildlife preserves, maintaining our agricultural heritage and preserving historic landmarks. Through the many programs funded under the umbrella of open space preservation, we have touched the lives of nearly all State residents, and hopefully, with their approval, we’ll continue to fund efforts to protect our precious natural resources.”

Both lawmakers added that in a recent poll, commissioned by The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy, nearly 6 in 10 New Jersey voters polled said they would support a ballot question giving the State the authority to bond for open space preservation efforts. Eighty percent of voters polled said they want their State legislators to support legislation to give voters a say in November.

“People recognize the importance of open space preservation, even in this difficult economy, and are willing to give the State the approval it needs to fund preservation efforts,” said Senator Sweeney. “But more importantly, they want to have a voice in the process, and believe that this bonding initiative should be put to the voters for approval. Whether my colleagues support the bonding initiative or oppose it, I would hope they would appreciate the value of the democratic process, and move this bill through the Legislature and onto the ballot so that the people can have a voice in open space preservation.”

The bill now heads to the full Senate for consideration.