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SMITH-GORDON-BEACH BILL TO AUTHORIZE OPEN SPACE BONDING SIGNED INTO LAW

TRENTON – A bill sponsored by Senate Environment Committee Chairman, Senator Bob Smith, and Committee members, Senators Bob Gordon and Jim Beach which will give voters in November the option to approve up to \$400 million in open space borrowing was signed into law today by Governor Corzine.

“Simply put, New Jersey cannot afford the consequences if we fail to act to make an investment in open space preservation,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “Allowing programs like Green Acres and farmland preservation to lapse would be a huge setback for open space preservation, and would open the doors for developers to pave over sensitive open space throughout the State. This bonding initiative provides necessary stop-gap funding for our various open space preservation programs, and buys us a little more time to develop a consensus around permanent funding for open space in New Jersey.”

The bill, S-1858, will ask voters, through a question on the ballot this November, to authorize the State to borrow \$400 million to provide stop-gap 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. If the voters approve the ballot question, \$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.

“I know that many of the State’s most vocal environmental advocates – as well as some of the sponsors of this bill – would have preferred permanent, dedicated funding over stop-gap bonding,” said Senator Gordon. “We have to recognize political realities, and understand that, as New Jersey families are facing one of the worst economic crises in a lifetime, dedicated funding was not an option this year. This bonding initiative allows us to take advantage of historically low real estate prices to continue to preserve land, until a permanent solution can be found.”

All three lawmakers pointed out 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.

“New Jerseyans deserve healthy and well-funded open space preservation, but more than that, they deserve a voice in their government,” said Senator Beach. “Without the support of the electorate this November, this bonding initiative to preserve hundreds of acres of land across the State will fail. As policymakers and caretakers of New Jersey, we owe it to future generations to do everything we can to encourage voters to approve this bonding, and continue our State’s very successful open space preservation programs. Failure is not an option.”

The bill was approved by both houses of the Legislature in June.