

Senator Bob Smith Battles to Preserve Open Space in New Jersey

As Chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, State Senator Bob Smith never backs down when the health of our state and its residents are on the line. A former professor of environmental science with advanced degrees in chemistry, environmental science, and law, Smith has long been considered the foremost steward of our environment here in New Jersey and is the author of some of the toughest environmental laws in the nation. Like most residents of the Garden State, Senator Smith understands that our open space resources, including farmland preservation and historic preservation, are at a premium and he has been fighting for a stable source of this funding for years with strong bi-partisan support within the legislature. Yet, Governor Christie positioned himself as an obstacle to open space programs exhausting all of these funds during the first years of his administration.

Historically, New Jersey has set the national standard for open space preservation, and since 1961, residents have overwhelmingly voted to dedicate funding towards protecting our open space. With this funding exhausted, Smith knew it was important to develop a stable source of funding. This is why he wrote legislation to dedicate a portion of the Corporate Business Tax to forever fund preservation of open space, farmland and historic assets in the Garden State. On Election Day in November of 2014, voters, by a great margin, passed the ballot initiative to amend New Jersey's Constitution to dedicate these funds. The constitutional amendment required enabling legislation, to implement the will of the voters. Despite the overwhelming passage of the 2014 voter-approved constitutional amendment, the Governor conditionally vetoed Smith's enabling legislation (S-969). Smith immediately went on the offense, "Not only has the governor failed our state and our environment for the past two years, leaving open space with inadequate funding, but he has failed in his duty to uphold the constitution. Instead, he is destroying the Garden State's most valuable natural resources by refusing a well-thought and researched bill that received bipartisan support. Unfortunately, it is our children and their children who will pay the high price of his inaction. Shame on him. I will continue to fight to preserve the integrity of our state's environment, and the wishes of the voters on New Jersey." With the Governor facing an override of his conditional veto on June 27, 2016, the legislature and the Governor reached an 11th hour agreement.

As the most densely populated state in the country, open space, farmland and historic

preservation cannot be jeopardized. Protected parcels of land for the enjoyment and health of our children and grandchildren and generations is now a reality. Smith's idea of dedicating the Corporate Business Tax monies will ensure that we do not run out of money again while not hurting our pocketbooks or increasing state debt is a winner for taxpayers. The Green Acres program, in existence for over a half century, has protected over 650,000 acres of land throughout the state. Long term funding of this program has become even more essential as climate change is causing "100 year storms" to occur at more regular intervals. Open space funding can also be used for Blue Acres projects—a willing seller program that buys flood-prone land and land that buffers or protects other lands from storm damage.

This past fall at a State House press conference with the Keep It Green Coalition, Senator Smith said, "This stable source of funding for open space has been the Holy Grail of the environmental movement in New Jersey for 50 years. It's a major, major change in how we do preservation in New Jersey." Senate President Steve Sweeney, in attendance, praised Smith indicating this is legacy legislation for Smith saying, "Bob Smith has done a phenomenal job with this and when I say legacy I don't use it lightly. It's real."