



Enviros oppose State Planning Commission redo

Thursday, September 24, 2009

By MICHAEL SYMONS • GANNETT STATE BUREAU

Environmental groups launched a preemptive barrage Thursday against a potential overhaul of the State Planning Commission that could emerge as a priority during the post-election legislative session.

While the governor's race and Assembly campaigns are consuming most political attention, interest groups are already jockeying for legislative attention in the 10-week lame-duck session. Gay marriage, for instance, could be brought to a vote.

But the Sierra Club, Environmental Federation and Environmental Lobby are focused on thwarting a proposal to overhaul the State Planning Commission and make its leader a Cabinet-level officer with wide-ranging powers to promote development.

Supporters of the concept say smart-growth principles would be followed, but the environmental lobbyists used words like "dictatorial," "junta" and "cartel" to ring alarms about the would-be planning chief's sway.

"Under the guise of smart growth, they are going to completely obliterate the current state planning system we have and come back with a system that basically gives extreme and extraordinary powers over land use, environmental protection, transportation, funding for economic development and infrastructure to a very small and select group," said Jeff Tittel, director the New Jersey Sierra Club.

"They get to take away from the regional plans, they get to take away from the state agencies, they get to take away from the county, they get to take away from the local municipalities the right, the power and ability to decide what they want," said Mike Pisauro, lobbyist for the New Jersey Environmental Lobby.

Representatives of groups advocating for the change called the criticisms a bit premature since a bill hasn't yet been completed, though they acknowledge they hope one passes by the Jan. 12 end of the legislative session.

"Why the fear-mongering? Why now?" said Dianne Brake, president of PlanSmart NJ. "... Because of actions taken by administrations over the last eight years, statewide planning is considered by almost everyone to be broken and in desperate need of a complete overhaul. Surely no one can support the status quo."

Ted Zangari, co-founder of the Smart Growth Economic Development Coalition, said changing the State Planning Commission has been part of a 12-bill package the groups proposed two years ago. About half the ideas have been enacted, so far.

"This is a legacy bill. It's not one or two or three pages like some of our other bills. It has serious long-term implications," Zangari said. "What we envision is a master plan, instead of the toothless tiger that is currently the State Plan. No one takes the State Plan seriously."

A New Jersey State League of Municipalities senior legislative analyst, Michael Cerra, said his organization would like to see a draft of the bill sooner than the November kick-off of the lame-duck session.

"The league has always supported the State Plan because it's voluntary and it's a planning document, not a regulatory document, by design," Cerra said. "Any proposal that changes the voluntary nature of it or turns it into a regulatory document would raise flags with us, very quickly."

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