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Environmentalists fear N.J. bills will cripple their efforts

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By Brian T. Murray/The Star-Ledger
Star-Ledger Staff

TRENTON -- New Jersey legislators plan to push through a series of bills during the November, post-election session designed to destroy regional planning and undermine environmental protections, local zoning laws and the authority of state agencies protecting the environment, a coalition of environmental groups said today.

During a press conference in Trenton, members of the New Jersey Chapter of the Sierra Club, Environment New Jersey and the New Jersey Environmental Federation said one of the bills will allow the State Planning Commission to name a "planning czar" who would be able to stop or change any protection rules established by the Department of Environmental Protection or other agencies.

"They are setting up a developer junta with a dictator in the governor's cabinet. It's really that all-powerful," said Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club. "They could push an endangered species off the list if it gets in the way of development (or) order the Department of Transportation to build an intersection to help a development favored by the planning commission.

"They are trying to shove this through while no one is looking during the lame duck session after the gubernatorial election...," Tittel said.

But builders contend there is no stealth campaign, and that the Planning Commission bill and other proposed legislation were made public years ago.

"There is nothing to be shoved down anyone's throat," said Ted Zangari, a lawyer and leader of the Smart Growth Economic Development Coalition, a group of 20 pro-development organizations.

"When our coalition formed two years ago, we widely publicized a list of 12 legislative initiatives."

Each initiative, including the Planning Commission overhaul, was intended to attract business growth in New Jersey.

Zangari said the bill, which has yet to be formally introduced, would elevate the chief executive officer of the state Planning Commission to a cabinet-level post to help guide development in areas where the state master plan provides for commercial and residential growth, but where the current planning process makes it impossible to actually build.

Dianne Brake of PlanSmart NJ, a coalition member, said the commission overhaul "would not create a command-and-control system." Rather, she said, it would help improve the process of reviewing and allowing "smart growth" development that still protects the environment.

"While New Jerseyans embrace the State Plan's comprehensive vision for healthy communities and preserved open spaces, the state planning implementation process is ineffective, often trapping towns between competing state regulations or policies," said Peter Kasabach, Executive Director of New Jersey Future, a member of the coalition.

Five of the coalition's 12 proposed bills have already passed.

One allows private engineers to oversee clean-ups at most of the state's 24,000 polluted sites. Another, passed last year, extends by two years the shelf-life of state and local permits required for every development project. The planning commission overhaul, the environmentalists said, would further erode environmental protection in the state.

"The governor, legislators and candidates need to stand up to the narrow, near-sighted interests behind this legislation and nip it in the bud now before it can bloom in lame duck or beyond," said Dave Pringle of the New Jersey Environmental Federation. "We need economic development that protects public health and the environment, while this bill does just the opposite for the benefit of a special few at the expense of the many, citizens and taxpayers."