

The Star-Ledger

OCTOBER 1, 2009

Hitting the campaign trail to preserve open space

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A coalition of 135 conservation, environmental and historic preservation groups launched a campaign yesterday to win voter support for a \$400 million referendum to replenish state funds for open space preservation.

During a press conference in Trenton, members of the "New

Jersey Keep It Green" campaign tried to generate excitement for the referendum, which will appear on the November general election ballot.

"New Jersey voters realize the high stakes in funding open space. We are in a race against time to protect and preserve our natural resources," Assemblyman John McKeon (D-Essex) chairman of

the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee, said. "The loss of land is permanent and irreversible, and there are a finite number of undeveloped acres in our state."

The referendum seeks voter approval to borrow \$400 million to provide new money for parkland and open space purchases, farmland preservation and conservation of historic sites. If the ballot measure is approved, \$218 million would be set aside for open space, \$146 million for farmland preservation, \$24 million for flood-plain and watershed management, and \$12 million for historic preservation.

David Epstein, treasurer of the coalition, said the money will "go even further toward securing a more prosperous future" because land prices are low.

Though they were divided earlier this year, the state's environmental groups are now support-

ing the measure.

Some groups had wanted Gov. Jon Corzine and the Legislature to adopt a more steady source of funding, such as a tax or fee, to fund open space, farmland preservation and to protect historic sites. They also expressed fear the recent economic downturn would leave voters hesitate to endorse another borrowing effort.

In June, the Assembly and Senate scaled back the referendum from \$600 million, hoping to make it more palatable to the public.

Since 1961, New Jersey voters have approved a dozen open space questions, totalling more than \$2.1 billion, to preserve the state's dwindling forests and historic properties.

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