



Campaign to preserve New Jersey's parks, natural areas, clean water, farmland, and historic treasures

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PRESS RELEASE

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Group of State Legislators and Bond Act Supporters Call for Voter Choice on Open Space

(Trenton) Senator Bob Smith, Senator Stephen M. Sweeney, Senator Thomas H. Kean, Jr., and Assemblyman John F. McKeon joined representatives of the 126-organization NJ-Keep It Green coalition in urging legislators to support letting voters decide on the future of the state's open space investments this November. The legislative leaders and coalition members gathered following approval of legislation (S1815/A3901) to place a bond measure on the November ballot by the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee and the Assembly Budget Committee on Monday. The Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee and the Assembly Budget Committee approved the bills today with strong bi-partisan support.

The legislative leaders highlighted the broad support for legislation that would continue the state's tradition of listening to the voters' decision on open space funding. They also emphasized the economic importance of investing in New Jersey's open space. There are 37 Assembly sponsors or co-sponsors of A3901 and 12 Senate sponsors and co-sponsors of S1858. The legislation would let voters decide in November on authorizing \$400 million in bonding to continue open space investments at level funding for the next two years.

"In a week that lawmakers map out New Jersey's financial road for the next year, it is crucial to give voters the choice to protect and continue our investment in open space which delivers a high economic yield to our state including saving taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars in water purification costs every year and providing a much-needed stimulus to our agriculture and tourism industries," **said Assemblyman John F. McKeon, D-Essex, Chairman of the Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee.** "It is imperative to prevent a break in funding so we do not permanently lose valuable tracts of land including pristine watersheds and valuable farmland. It is important to let voters decide on funding open space. A-3901 does that," he added.

The full Assembly is scheduled to have the opportunity to vote on the legislation on Thursday. The Senate's board list has yet to be announced.

"Open space preservation is one of our best tools for protecting New Jersey's quality of life, by creating vibrant parks, preserving vulnerable watershed, and maintaining our State's agricultural roots," **said Senator Bob Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, Chairman of the Senate Environment Committee.** "New Jersey voters have a long-standing record of supporting State preservation efforts because they recognize just how important protecting undeveloped land is to their communities. We hope voters will once again recognize the importance of open space and make a statement at the ballot box this November."

"Ultimately, the decision to authorize open space bonding belongs to the people of the State, not political insiders or special interest groups," **said Senate Majority Leader Stephen M. Sweeney, D-Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem.** "Since the 1960s, bonding initiatives have won voter support because the people of

New Jersey recognize that preservation of our pristine natural resources is in the public’s best interest. I am hopeful that voters will once again lend their support to open space funding, but either way, they have to be given a voice in the process.”

Senator Thomas H. Kean, Jr. (R-Essex, Morris, Somerset, Union) Senate Minority Leader, also spoke at today’s media event in favor of giving voters a choice on open space.

In addition, **Agriculture Secretary Douglas H. Fisher** stated, “New Jerseyans have steadfastly recognized that preserving our farmland and other important natural and historic resources is a smart investment in ensuring that future generations will be able to buy farm-fresh, locally grown food and other farm products, and that we retain our rural and open landscapes that are so vital to the quality of life here in the Garden State. Voters deserve the opportunity to decide whether we renew that investment now by weighing the cost of preservation today against the benefits they and their children and grandchildren stand to lose if we don’t act now.”

The NJ-Keep It Green groups highlighted the urgent timing of their call for continued support. If the Legislature heads to its summer recess without approving the voter choice bill, New Jersey will suffer its first gap in statewide open space funding in over two decades.

“We thank Senators Smith, Sweeney and Kean, and Assemblyman McKeon and the many sponsors, co-sponsors and others for their leadership in letting voters decide on the state’s preservation efforts,” **said Thomas J. Gilmore, Chairman of the NJ-Keep It Green coalition.** “If we don’t give voters a choice about our investments in open space now, when land prices are relatively low, we’ll miss a big opportunity to afford the people of New Jersey a healthier and more prosperous future.”

New Jersey’s voters have demonstrated strong and consistent support on 12 statewide open space ballot questions since 1961, approving all 12. “This is clearly something voters deserve, and want,” **said Tom Wells of The Nature Conservancy**, citing an April statewide poll of 600 likely voters showing that 80% favored voter choice. “It would be a shame to deny voters the choice this year.”

The benefits of assuring open space in New Jersey go well beyond the initial costs, said representatives of the NJ-Keep It Green coalition, which has 126 organization members and hundreds of thousands of individual members among them.

“With a \$400 million investment in open space and farmland (which would cost \$10 annually per household), every \$1 invested would return \$10 in economic value through natural goods and ecosystem services over the next 20 years,” **said Tom Gilbert of the Trust for Public Land**, citing new analysis based partly on a major 2007 report by the NJDEP. “Benefits such as clean water, flood control and agricultural products all have a very significant value, for instance.” The bond measure would also create jobs and provide additional economic benefits from historic preservation and park development projects, he added.

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The New Jersey – Keep It Green Campaign is a coalition of 126 organizations from across the state working to renew the Garden State Preservation Trust, and strengthen funding for the Department of Environmental Protection’s Divisions of Fish and Wildlife and Parks and Forestry. For more information on this Campaign, please contact us directly or visit www.NJKeepItGreen.org