

## GUEST OPINION: Clean water under attack

By Jim Waltman, Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

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With few people paying attention in the immediate aftermath of the holidays, the state Legislature is poised to roll back key protections for our state's water and environment before the close of its "lame duck" session in early January.

New Jersey's environmental problems are legendary. Two-thirds of all of the state's waterways are impaired from pollution. According to the most recent available data, more than 30 acres of natural lands and farm fields a day are lost to development and according to Rutgers' Center for Remote Sensing, more than half of the lost acres are highly valuable forests and wetlands.

Why does sprawl continue to gobble up undeveloped habitat in our state despite a state policy of "smart growth?" One of the main engines of sprawl is infrastructure. Where roads, water mains and sewer lines go, development is sure to follow.

In 2008, the state Department of Environmental Protection adopted new regulations to help protect critical water resources and sensitive habitats while rationalizing wastewater planning in our state and focusing appropriate growth back into cities and other recognized growth areas.

For the first time, New Jersey directed counties to keep new sewer lines out of environmentally sensitive areas, defined as contiguous areas of 25 acres or more that contain habitat for endangered or threatened species, wetlands, buffers around pristine "category one" water bodies, or natural heritage areas.

The new wastewater rules also add requirements for large developments built on septic systems that were also adopted to protect New Jersey's clean water and environment.

As part of this initiative, counties were required to prepare and submit new wastewater management plans with the reduced sewer service areas by the beginning of April 2009. Many counties received between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in state and/or federal stimulus funding to prepare plans to comply with the rules and the deadline for completing the new plans has been extended several times already into 2010.

Now legislation is being considered that would extend the deadline for counties to comply with new wastewater regulations by more than two and a half more years and take the ultimate authority for approving the new wastewater plans away from the Department of Environmental Protection and give it to the dysfunctional State Planning Commission, which has no expertise or authority over this critical area.

The bills are being fast-tracked in the state Senate and Assembly and are scheduled for action during the first full week of January. But rolling back protection for our critical water and environmental resources is not a sound strategy to lift our economy. These bills would further degrade our environment, thereby harming our economy. The Legislature should reject this effort, but if necessary, Gov. Corzine should veto the bill.

Bringing sewer lines into old, dense developments that were built on septic systems can be an important tool to help clean up polluted waterways. But new sewer lines in undeveloped, environmentally sensitive areas do not make sense, particularly in a state that has already lost so much of its open space and where our streams and rivers are already so heavily burdened.

*Jim Waltman is executive director of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association, central New Jersey's first environmental group. Since 1949, the watershed has worked to protect clean water and the environment through conservation, advocacy, science, and education.*

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