



Coastal Areas at Greater Risk from Overdevelopment

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As published in the Asbury Park Press, March 10, 2005

The ability of the coast to support development without environmental damage is limited. Too many houses, too much concrete, too many docks and bulkheads and it simply becomes overwhelmed. At that point, we lose the benefits the coast and bays provide to us – fish and wildlife, recreation, and the basis for much of the Shore’s economy – clean water. We should have learned those lessons from the insults of ocean dumping in the early 1980’s and 90’s.

We are now headed down the same path with sprawl and overdevelopment – the warning signs are everywhere. There is simply too much development along the coast, with more coming. Local and state officials responsible for protecting the coast by controlling development are bent on recklessly promoting it. Ocean County is the fastest growing county in the state, and has all the hallmarks of being ground zero for sprawl – disappearing open space, threatened water supplies, traffic congestion, skyrocketing costs of living. There is absolutely no reason to think that that overdevelopment won’t simply roll on down the Parkway into Atlantic and Cape May counties, and then bounce over to the Delaware Bayshore. State and local politicians are welcoming it with open arms by expanding sewers, designating new high growth areas and rolling back environmental regulations. Most local zoning and development plans pay little attention to the impact that overdevelopment will have on the coast. They are driven almost solely by “the rateables chase.” If you zone it, they will come – and they are coming to the Shore in record numbers.

State environmental laws are meant to offset the narrow focus of municipal land use decisions, and take a longer range view of what’s necessary to protect the coast. The state’s major coastal environmental law, the Coastal Area Facilities Review Act (CAFRA) recognizes that the coast, its watersheds and bays are “an exceptional, unique, irreplaceable and delicately balanced natural environmental resource.” CAFRA’s goal was to put the protection of the coast front and center in development decisions. While the program does provide some benefits on a site by site basis, its purpose of protecting the coast as a region, and sustaining its health as an ecosystem has been lost under the economic and political pressure to develop the Shore. Local elected officials and the builders lobby constantly press to weaken development restrictions and hurry permits. Meanwhile, everyday there are news stories about “massive green blobs” in the bays, disappearing shellfish, beach closings, and another open space bulldozed – warning signs that this is a coast in crisis. The “system” has lost sight of its duty to the public and the coast itself, blinded by money and politics.

The latest attack on coastal protection is an attempt to promote high intensity growth areas (centers) without adequate environmental planning. The Legislature is considering a bill, pushed by local politicians in Ocean and Cape May counties, which would override a decision by the state DEP to end a failed program to promote rational planning along the coast. More than five years ago, regulations were adopted to create “coastal centers”, in an attempt to implement the State Development Plan along the coast. The process by which these high growth areas were created was not

based upon rigorous environmental planning, but rather a negotiation with local politicians. As a result, thousands of acres of environmentally sensitive lands were included in the growth centers. To date, over 30,000 acres of development has occurred within these areas, and 70% of the remainder is wetlands and endangered species habitat. The designations expired in February for those centers where towns had not undertaken responsible, follow up planning to fit development levels to the capacity of the area to support it. Now, major developers and local officials have successfully allied themselves with Assemblyman Jeff Van Drew (D- Cape May) who is pushing a bill to provide an open-ended authorization to continue to build.

The legislative effort to protect the builders' ability to continue overdeveloping is just

another example of New Jersey's failure to wisely protect its coast – to respect its limits. It is part of a broken system that puts greater priority on profits than environmental protection. The consequence is that the coast is disappearing under a flood of development. If the public does not quickly and loudly reject this legislation, much more of what makes the Shore important will be at risk of becoming one more “shore memory.”

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