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SMITH BILL PERMITTING COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES ON PRESERVED FARMLAND APPROVED BY SENATE

TRENTON - A bill sponsored by Senator Bob Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, which would allow certain preserved farmlands to engage in commercial, nonagricultural activities, was approved today by the full Senate, 31 to 5.

"Over the course of the past decade, we've steadily been losing farmland in the Garden State to development, bankruptcy and a host of other financial issues," said Senator Smith, the Chair of the Senate Environment Committee. "This legislation will allow the owners of permanently preserved farmland to engage in commercial, nonagricultural activities on their farm, supplementing their income so that we can preserve agriculture as an industry and a way of life in New Jersey."

The bill, a committee substitute for S-206, would authorize the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) to issue special permits to farm owners participating in the State farmland preservation program, allowing them to engage in commercial nonagricultural activities. The SADC would also be responsible for balancing the interests of maintaining the character and beauty of the preserved open space with the interests of sustaining the agricultural industry when making determinations regarding permit applications.

Applicants would pay a non-refundable \$1,000 permit application fee, which would be used towards farmland preservation purposes. Under the bill, permits would only be issued if the farmland meets a stringent series of requirements, including: the land in question must be a commercial farm; the footprint of the entire site of the commercial nonagricultural activity does not exceed 1,000 square feet; the commercial nonagricultural activity must be consistent with local zoning and planning laws; the commercial nonagricultural activity does not interfere with the use of the land for agricultural purposes; and no adverse impact is created that would affect soil, water or air quality.

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"New Jerseyans have a commitment to preserving our farmlands and open space that is

nothing short of admirable," said Senator Smith. "However, if we preserve these farms only to watch them be condemned or go bankrupt, then we are defeating the purpose of the very preservation we fought so hard to enact. By allowing farmers to engage in nonagricultural business on their land, provided it is strictly monitored and regulated, we will keep farming a viable industry in this State for years to come."

The bill, which has the support of the New Jersey Farm Bureau, now heads to the Assembly for consideration.

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