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SMITH BILL TO AUTHORIZE OPEN SPACE BONDING **APPROVED IN COMMITTEE**

TRENTON – A bill sponsored by Senate Environment Committee Chairman, Senator Bob Smith, which would give voters in November the option to approve up to \$600 million in open space borrowing was approved by the Environment panel today by a vote of 4-1.

“Open space preservation is absolutely vital to preserving the quality of life in New Jersey,” said Senator Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset. “As the most densely populated state in the nation, there is more pressure to build on every open area in the State than anywhere else in the country. While I believe we need a healthy, consistent and sustained effort to preserve open space through dedicated funding, this bill will make sure that pristine open space isn’t gobbled up by suburban sprawl before we can finally come to agreement on just what that dedicated funding should look like.”

The bill, S-1858, would authorize the State to borrow up to \$600 million, subject to voter approval, to provide funding for open space preservation programs, such as the Green Acres public recreation and conservation program, farmland preservation, the Blue Acres program for flood plain and watershed land, and historic preservation. Under the Committee substitute, funding would be spent over 3 years, with \$327 million going to Green Acres, \$219 going to farmland preservation, \$36 million going to Blue Acres, and \$18 million to be used for historic preservation purposes. Voters would have an opportunity on Election Day to either approve or deny the bonding through a ballot question.

“Since the early 1960s, New Jersey voters have supported every ballot question put before them to approve open space bonding,” said Senator Smith. “Even in difficult economic times, New Jersey voters recognize the importance of preserved open space, as parks, wildlife refuges, preserved farmland and historic and cultural sites. While the State is facing one of the toughest economic periods in modern history, I remain confident that voters will do the right thing and again re-authorize the State’s open space preservation efforts.”

Senator Smith noted that the current level of \$600 million in bonding to be spent over three years represents a change from the original bill, which advanced \$300 million in bonding to be spent over one year.

Senator Smith said that because of the State's current economic difficulties, a three-year preservation program is more appropriate to find a dedicated funding source for open space acquisition and preservation.

Before the Committee considered the bill today, Senator Phil Haines, R-Burlington, withdrew his sponsorship, jeopardizing bipartisan support for the bill. However, Senator Kip Bateman, R-Somerset, signed on as co-prime sponsor of the new three-year version of the bill. Senator Smith expressed his disappointment that Senator Haines had dropped his sponsorship, and encouraged him to re-join the bipartisan effort to fund open space preservation in the Garden State.

"I think the fact that this bill has consistently won bipartisan sponsorship is a testament to the fact that open space preservation is one of those State priorities that should be above partisan politics," said Senator Smith. "While I'm disappointed that Senator Haines has withdrawn his support for this vital open space reauthorization effort, I look forward to working with Senator Bateman to shepherd this bill through the legislative process. I hold out hope that at the end of the day we can all put our differences aside, and present a united front to the voting public, to send the message that open space isn't a Democratic issue or a Republican issue, but a New Jersey issue."

The bill now heads to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for review, before going to the full Senate for consideration.