

Advocates for open space call for dedicated funding

By MICHAEL RISPOLI
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TRENTON — To replenish the nearly exhausted fund for land preservation, a group of environmentalists Tuesday continued its push for a stable funding source, such as a water tax, to protect open space, farmland and historic sites.

The Keep it Green campaign laid out three ways to fund the Garden State Preservation Trust over the long term — borrowing \$800 million through a bond measure, enacting a water-use tax it said could raise \$150 million annually or dedicating \$175 million a year from sales tax revenue.

The trust has \$80 million left from the \$200 million stop-gap funding approved by voters last November. The remaining money is expected to be recommended for allocation by the fall.

The water tax is preferable of the three options, said Jeff Tittel, director of New Jersey's Sierra Club. "Voters will see the direct connection with using money from the water supply to protect open space," he said.

"This program is about to come to a halt while there are still many lands we must preserve, which we cannot do without a long-term funding source," said Amy Hansen, policy analyst for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Using a water tax to fund the projects was proposed in the Legislature this spring but ultimately stalled. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Robert G. Smith, D-Middlesex, would charge

40 cents per 1,000 gallons of water used — estimated to increase the average household bill \$32 a year.

Despite past public support for open space, current economic conditions would make any new tax out of the question, said Michael Egenton, vice president of environment and transportation for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

"Any tax that's even contemplated ... is absolutely the wrong time to be doing it," said Egenton, adding voters should be able to decide how to fund the trust.

Smith's bill does not include money going to historic sites but could be amended.

All three proposed measures would need voter approval to be dedicated to open-space purposes, but the group admitted it is not likely to appear until the 2009 ballot as it would have to be approved by August. The water fee itself can be enacted prior to any ballot question, however, as the question only pertains to dedicating the money.

Gov. Corzine said Monday he does not intend to take up a way to fund the trust until sometime in the fall.

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