

Groups push for funding to protect open space

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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. Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, would charge 40 cents per 1,000 gallons of water used — estimated to increase the average household bill \$32 a year.

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

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.

Republicans were quick to pan the water-tax plan.

Sen. Christopher Bateman, R-Somerset, said he'd rather cut from the "bloated" state budget than apply an additional tax.

"Raising taxes of any kind should be an absolute last resort, and we are not in desperate need of extra funds for open space," Bateman said. "Higher water taxes should be imposed only when necessary to ensure a safe and abundant water supply."

Another possible solution is to dedicate a portion of the existing sales tax to open space, generating \$175 million a year.

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 Associated Press contributed to this report*

