Statement on SCR-160

Gordon MacInnes
President, New Jersey Policy Perspective
July 18, 2013

Chairman Smith and members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on SCR-160 that would, if passed by the voters, dedicate $200 million from sales tax revenues in each of the next 30 years – a total revenue dedication of $6 billion.

Let me make three, quick points.

First, there is broad agreement that New Jersey should increase its efforts to preserve open space, increase recreational opportunities, acquire more Blue Acres, preserve our historic treasures and protect working farms. But a constitutional dedication of revenues is not the best way to proceed.

Second, there is also broad agreement that we should make public colleges and universities more affordable, reduce property tax burdens, expand high quality preschool, protect the most vulnerable members of our society and invest in improving our highways, bridges and public transit. “Broad agreement” in these areas is converted to specific amounts annually in the adoption of the state budget – this is how we determine which priorities are to be served each year. As untidy as that process is, it is still the best way to sort through competing demands and changing conditions.

The two budget committees have just spent three months reviewing the 2014 budget line-by-line and hearing testimony from scores of interested parties. Would not the public interest be better served by requesting that those committees analyze the potential consequences of passage of this measure?

Third, while the 30-year cost of the proposed revenue dedication has been reduced from the $17 billion OLS estimate for SCR138 to $6 billion under SCR160, the amounts involved are still very consequential.

For example, let’s take a look at the impact had SCR160 been in force for the fiscal year 2014 budget (if passed, it will begin impacting the budget in FY 2015).

The already thin surplus of $300 million in a $33 billion budget would have been slashed to $100 million. Or, the governor and legislature would have had to agree on what important programs and services would be cut to make up the $200 million difference – at a time when many are still sorely underfunded. And except for the increase in the
employer contribution to public employee pensions, the increase in open space spending would be the single largest increase in the FY 2014 budget. If the revenue projections remain on target, 12 cents of every increased dollar of revenue would go to a single program. However, if the $1.6 billion revenue increase comes in short by $400 million—less than the competing projections by the administration and OLS—then one-sixth of every additional dollar would go to open space.

The same could be asked about the consequences had SCR160 been in place as revenues plunged during the Great Recession. Practically every program and service financed by state government was affected. School aid was slashed by almost one billion dollars. The budgets for the performing arts were similarly affected. Tuitions rose dramatically at public colleges as state support for operating costs plummeted. Surely, over the next 30 years a recession or two is probable. Should not future governors, legislators and the public have the right to consider all options for dealing with changing conditions? We think so.
Senate Environment and Energy Committee Hearing
Testimony Regarding SCR 160
July 18, 2013
Submitted by Amy Hansen, Policy Analyst
New Jersey Conservation Foundation and Member of the Keep It Green Coalition

Good morning, Chairman and Committee Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. On behalf of New Jersey Conservation Foundation and as a member of the Keep It Green Coalition, I would like to thank Chairman Smith and Senator Bateman for continuing to be bipartisan champions of SCR 160 which amends the Constitution to dedicate $200 million annually of the sales tax for the preservation of open space, flood prone areas and lands that protect water supplies, farmland and historic properties.

My husband and I own and operate a preserved, working organic farm in the Highlands Region. We sell our produce at farmers markets, which benefits our communities and local economies. There are many more farms in New Jersey needing preservation, and the New Jersey Farmland Preservation Program, known nationwide for its successes, has run out of funding. We must not let this program falter. The Green Acres and Historic Preservation Programs are also in dire need of funds. Please support SCR 160 by passing it out of committee and urging your colleagues to vote affirmatively in the full Senate and Assembly.

Preservation programs provide a myriad of economic benefits to our state, including employment, healthy recreation opportunities and ecotourism as well as protection of our critical drinking water supplies and other natural resources.

We urge you to support this legislation and help get it passed so that New Jersey voters can ultimately decide. Our children are dependent on us to leave them a better future and passing this legislation will assist us in moving one step closer to achieving this critical goal. Thank you.
Senate Environment and Energy Committee Public Hearing
Written Testimony Regarding SCR160
July 18, 2013
Submitted by Jennifer Coffey, Policy Director, Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

On behalf of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association and our approximately 3,000 members and volunteers, I am here to support SCR160. The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association is preparing to celebrate 65 years in 2014 of protecting and restoring central New Jersey’s clean water and healthy habitats. We are a proud member of the New Jersey Keep It Green Coalition.

Thank you for holding this hearing this morning. It is a pleasure to be here to support legislation that would place a public question on the ballot and give New Jersey voters the opportunity to choose to renew funding for the Green Acres, Blue Acres, Farmland, and Historic Preservation programs.

Through renewed funds to the Blue Acres program, New Jersey will have stable and sustainable funding to support the acquisition of properties from willing sellers to preserve flood prone areas along rivers and our coastline to alleviate costly and destructive flood damage. It is no secret that New Jersey is the most densely populated State in our Nation. This dense population has exasperated New Jersey’s natural flood patterns and widened our floodplains, thereby increasing the number of homes and businesses in harm’s way. The federal funding New Jersey is receiving to address flooding impacts of Superstorm Sandy is a one-time bolster and given the tremendous need associated with flooding impacts, we need a long-term sustainable solution. With Blue Acres funding renewed through a small portion of the sales tax, we will have the resources to secure floodplain properties for the public good and reduce the human and environmental damage associated with increasingly intense floods.

With renewed funding for the Green Acres program, New Jersey will also be in a strong position to continue to preserve lands that can help to keep flooding impacts from getting worse by preserving our open spaces that function to allow rain to percolate and recharge our underground aquifers rather than flood our rivers and adjacent facilities. Through the implementation of funding for stewardship, we can better care for our preserved lands by maintaining natural flood buffers and improving absorption through restoration of our wetlands and flood areas.

In summary, thank you for continuing the bipartisan leadership on open space, farmland and historic preservation in New Jersey. These programs are important to the security of our clean water supply, addressing public health and safety issues related to flooding, protecting our natural habitats, supporting the viability of agriculture in the Garden State, and preserving our state and national historic treasures. I respectfully urge the Legislature to move this bill forward quickly and give voters the opportunity to decide on this important issue.

Thank you.
Good morning, Chairman Smith and Members of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee:

My name is Bill Holland, and I am the Executive Director of the New Jersey Working Families Alliance. New Jersey Working Families is a coalition of community, labor, consumer, and environmental organizations dedicated to a vision of a socially and economically just New Jersey. Our affiliates include New Jersey Citizen Action, Communications Workers of America, District 1, BlueWave New Jersey, SEIU, Health Professionals and Allied Employees, and the American Federation of Teachers – NJ. We also coordinate the statewide revenue campaign Better Choices for New Jersey that actively works to prevent cuts that affect working families.

I am here today to offer recommendations regarding SCR-160, a ballot measure that would dedicate $200 million of sales tax revenue to preserving open spaces. No one denies that protecting New Jersey’s open spaces is a worthy goal, but we are extremely concerned that this measure will ultimately come at a cost to essential services and investments already compromised by years of budget cuts.

New Jersey has already weathered three years of brutal budget cuts that have seen the layoffs of tens of thousands of teachers, firefighters, police officers, and sanitation workers. Our schools are underfunded by over $1 billion, raids of our clean energy fund has become a yearly ritual, and taxes for the working poor are higher than they were four years ago. To divert $200 million dollars per year in revenue would impede your ongoing efforts to undo the damage done by years of fiscal austerity and prevent us from making the smart investments that could create good, green jobs in the future.

In fact, if it were enacted this proposal could even compromise the state’s ability to protect the environment. The Department of Environmental Protection is funded in part by revenue from the sales tax, and the agency is a shell of its former self after years of budget cuts. DEP staff is down to 2,735 from 3,237 in 2008, and the agency’s ability to fulfill its core mission has been undeniably compromised. This week the Star-Ledger reported that enforcement actions against polluters over that same period of time dropped from 29,579 to 13,555. Preserving open spaces will mean very little if it comes at a cost to the most basic of environmental safeguards.
No one is saying we shouldn’t protect and preserve open spaces. But the funds to do so must come through new revenue, not by diverting streams already dedicated to essential services. As a candidate, Governor Christie pledged to find new dedicated funding for open spaces preservation. Four years later that promise remains unkept, but members of the committee and your colleagues in the legislature have the chance to hold him to it.

Several major environmental groups have offered innovative revenue solutions to fund open spaces preservation, including a water user fee. Proposals like these could potentially fund open spaces preservation without unduly burdening taxpayers or diverting funding away from other critical priorities. For the sake of New Jersey’s green spaces and its working families we urge you to consider them carefully.

Thank you for consideration of these comments.

Submitted by:

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STATEMENT - Freeholder Lillian G. Burry, Monmouth County - July 17, 2013
Senate Environment & Energy Committee

Chairman Smith, Senator Bateman & members of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee.

My name is Lillian G. Burry, a Monmouth County Freeholder and liaison to parks, open space, farmland and historic preservation in Monmouth County. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue of great importance to the residents of Monmouth County and the entire State. Additionally, I personally wish to thank you both for your sponsorship of SCR160.

We have recently seen MetLife announce intentions to close a major office facility in New Jersey & consolidate operations in North Carolina. It isn’t the first major corporation to make such a decision and there’s nothing we can do about it. Offices can go anywhere. What we can do and what I believe we MUST do, is intensify our support for the resource-based industries that cannot be taken away. The list is short. We have coastal tourism, we have agriculture…and we have the synthesis of the two in agri-tourism.

We have tragically seen what a single sudden storm can do to the coast and we must invest in its reconstruction. At the same time however, we must not lose sight of the far slower but more permanent threat that is destroying our agricultural base. This is not a storm that can’t be avoided. This is the ongoing march of development that is consuming agricultural acreage year after year. Two simple facts make this need increasingly pressing. Developable land is becoming scarce and farmland is typically the easiest land to develop. As the housing market recovers, demand will drive up land prices and make preservation efforts more difficult and costly.

Perhaps one of the hardest things for some segments of the public to understand is the need to preserve farmland. Most people aren’t farmers and to many, food is something that simply comes from the grocery store and how it got there is not their concern. The truth is that farmland is the essential anchor of a multi-billion dollar industry that includes planting, growing, harvesting, packing, shipping & selling New Jersey farm products across the world. It employs people who work directly in it and indirectly supports jobs for all the people who produce everything from tractors and fertilizer to the small containers for strawberries & blueberries that come in through the summer.

And farmland does more than support farming. In much of New Jersey, farmland either sits on top of aquifer recharge areas or in water supply watersheds. Keeping open land like this open and not paving it over for the next subdivision, protects the water supply that millions of New Jersey residents, many who have never seen a farm, rely on in their daily lives. Preserving farmland also provides another benefit to every homeowner in New Jersey. Taking land out of the market means fewer homes can be built and demand for housing will necessarily be directed back onto existing homes making them worth more.
Preserving farmland isn’t just about providing a pretty scenic landscape to drive through. It is about sustaining a vital resource-based industry, protecting our drinking water supply and helping to support the value of homes across the entire state. It is almost inconceivable to me that there would be any opposition to this legislation. To those of us who don’t own homes, eat food or use drinking water, I can understand your disinterest in the preservation of farmland. However, everyone else should make preserving farmland one of their highest public priorities. Right now, the need is to preserve a minimum of 500,000 acres to maintain our farming industry. And time is running out. Once this land is lost, it cannot be replaced. We must have a dedicated source of funding for this effort and vocal public support. That is why I am raising my voice now and hope more of you will join me.

A stable source of funding is vital to the continuation of preservation and conservation efforts throughout our Garden State.

Thank you for you efforts.

Lillian G. Burry

Monmouth County Freeholder