

Extending Permits Would Help Boost Sagging Economy

By Ted Zangari

The bipartisan Permit Extension Act is a much-needed piece of legislation that will help jump-start New Jersey's ailing economy and put people back to work. It will allow good and viable projects to move forward, thereby stimulating economic growth and creating jobs. The fact is, the Permit Extension Act respects New Jersey's tough environmental standards, promotes the concept of smart growth and cleans up polluted "brownfields," with that tab picked up by the private sector, not taxpayers.

The bill's opponents serve up little more than outdated scare tactics and misleading statements. Michele Byers of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation offered a cute analogy in her June 13 op-ed piece, "State permit extension would gut environmental rules." "Like old food, old permits go bad," she wrote. She craftily avoided certain facts and distorted others. Her point, that permit extension is bad for New Jersey and bad for the environment, is fundamentally false.

The Smart Growth Economic Development Coalition, a broad-based group of civic, business, economic, smart growth, planning, labor and redevelopment organizations, offers New Jerseyans a clearer, more diverse point of view.

Byers uses the analogy of perishable foods in a refrigerator to describe permits. But who doesn't freeze perishables to prolong their shelf life, particularly when money is tight and these items remain perfectly good? Permit extension simply freezes these expiring permits for a few years so they can thaw out as soon as New Jersey's economy begins to rebound. In fact, with extended permits, these projects will contribute to New Jersey's economic recovery.

If you've ever put a small addition on your house, you know how cumbersome governmental approvals and bureaucracy can be. Now imagine all that red tape on a larger scale, directly affecting hundreds of projects and thousands of jobs. The building and environmental permitting process in New Jersey can take five years or more to complete and can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars as permits are needed from any combination of governing and regulatory bodies, from the municipal through the county and to the state levels.

It is widely acknowledged that New Jersey has the most stringent environmental regulations in the country. So to say

that this bill, by simply prolonging the shelf life of perfectly good and already approved permits for viable projects "guts environmental rules," is just plain false. In fact, it is irresponsible and misleading to make such a claim. These permits already have met the environmental and regulatory standards in place at the time they were reviewed. This legislation, as amended, would extend them for two years.

Furthermore, some of these projects will remediate contaminated sites, redevelop blighted urban areas, reinvigorate our communities and employ our skilled laborers.

It is unfortunate that special-interest lobbyists such as Byers continue reverting to sensationalism and scare tactics to invoke fear within our communities and our citizens. The "growth versus environment" argument is old. We don't buy into. These permits were granted after having been exhaustively reviewed against stringent environmental regulations — not from 10 or 20 years ago, but from two years ago or even less. It's not an "either-or" argument; it's not "all-or-nothing." We all are environmentally conscious, and these permits uphold the regulations by which they were judged.

That being said, we are realists: Our state's economy is malfunctioning like an old and inefficient refrigerator, in the process allowing permits to spoil during tough economic times, through no fault or wrongdoing of those who put so much of their time and energy into obtaining them.

We all want clean air to breathe, clean water to drink and open spaces to enjoy with our families. But we also want an affordable place to call home and raise a family. Together, we are seeking to balance quality of life objectives with the dire need to create jobs, attract new businesses, retain our residents and to "grow smart" in urban centers and suburban downtowns, on "brownfields" and "portfields" and around transit hubs.

Permit extension is not anyone's special interest. It's everyone's best interest.

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