



Opinion: Shift environmental focus back to the future

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By

By Barry Chalofsky

A Monmouth University poll conducted for New Jersey Future on Oct. 11, 2011, found that New Jersey residents rank "protecting the drinking water supply" as the highest priority for the state, even higher than "attracting businesses and creating new jobs." According to Poll Director Patrick Murray, "What's interesting here is that even when the economy is bad, New Jerseyans are still worried about the environment around them." Unfortunately, this sentiment comes at a time when we are faced with unprecedented financial constraints at the federal, state and local level that inhibit government from being most effective in accomplishing that protection.

For the past 20 years, environmental advocates in New Jersey have focused much of their attention on the hazards of new development, often to the detriment of other environmental advocacy. This is largely due to the effects of urban sprawl that started after World War II. Certainly, the massive environmental damage that occurred as a result of rampant development and poorly planned environmental protection from the 1950s through to the 1980s was to blame for much of this reaction. Even when environmental laws were strengthened in the period from 1970 to 2000, there was still considerable concern as a result of development on ever-decreasing landscape.

Yet, as early as 2000, shifts were beginning to take place in the building community. Redevelopment and infill were taking precedence over new development on large lots. Many major builders actually either left New Jersey or significantly scaled back their operations during the last decade. However, the environmental advocacy movement continued to make new development its primary target.

As we all know, housing led us into the current recession. However, the collapse of the mortgage market, the rise in foreclosures and the reduction in house prices have all combined to essentially nullify any real impact from new development. It is highly unlikely that we will see large-scale development in New Jersey, with the exception of certain commercial development, for many years. Even when the economy picks up, there is too little buildable land left and too much housing stock waiting to be resold. So what's an environmental advocate to do?

It is critical to note that the pollution in our air and water is not due to new development; it is due to us. Therefore, the environmental movement needs to redeploy its supporters to work on improving the existing

environment that we live in and stop worrying about new development. Its members need to rebuild their relationship with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection — even if they don't agree with all of the changes the administration wants to make. They need to reprioritize their efforts to focus on those programs that have the best chance of success and the least impact on the economy.

If we are to succeed in making environmental progress in a time of very limited resources, we need to find ways to work with the private sector, including builders, as partners rather than as enemies. To prosper in the long run, New Jersey needs to build a new industrial/commercial base, but one that is sensitive to environmental impacts, particularly in terms of energy, clean water, air pollution and water supply.

The environmental community needs to focus its resources on assisting industry and the building community in achieving the goals of sustainability, green technology and clean energy. More important, it needs to form partnerships with government and the private sector to help direct and support efforts to rehabilitate and redesign deteriorating infrastructure — notably buildings, roads and sewers — so that they produce less pollution and are still viable resources.

Much of our infrastructure was built at a time when pollution and energy efficiency were not sufficiently considered in its design. We now have an opportunity to work with the industrial/commercial community to take old buildings and redesign them to be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, or at least more "green." This is not only good for the environment, but it also is good for business and for the nation's energy supply. We may need to rethink our housing infrastructure in certain areas (as other metropolitan centers such as Cleveland are doing), tear down houses that cannot be resold, create urban open space and craft storm water management measures.

Most environmental advocates will say that these challenges are too big for the average environmental group to manage or too broad in terms of focus. However, what we need is to not look at this as "us versus them," but rather as an opportunity to take a group of dedicated citizens who want to see changes and have them work creatively with government and the private sector during a time of economic constraint. I believe that this truly represents the best opportunity we have had since the early 1970s to really make a difference in the future of our environment and our state.

Barry Chalofsky, P.P., former chief of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's storm water and ground water programs, is an environmental and land-use planning consultant (bchalofassociates.com).

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