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IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Act Now for Clean Air, Water, Health and Life

By Michele S. Byers

"Right now, we are on track to become the first state in the union to run out of open space. I love New Jersey being first in a lot of things, but that's not where we want to be."

That was former Gov. Christine Todd Whitman speaking at a New Jersey Conservation Foundation event a few years ago.

Former Gov. James Florio agreed with Whitman, adding that it is incorrect to believe that the state must choose between a healthy economy and a healthy environment. "We're not going to have one without the other," he said.

"Knowledge-based, post-industrial businesses tend to locate in high-quality environments," noted Dr. James Hughes, dean of Rutgers' Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. "To the degree that investments in open space and farmland preservation produces a higher quality environment, it's going to make New Jersey that much more attractive for these industries of the future."

For more than 50 years, New Jersey has led the nation in land preservation, spending millions of dollars every year to buy parks, preserve farms and wetlands and protect natural and historic landscapes and landmarks. But today, in 2014, funds from our last bond referendum in 2009 are spent or allocated, and land preservation is coming to a halt.

With roughly 2 million acres of land not yet preserved or paved, this state we're in is at a crossroads.

According to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), more than 650,000 acres of lands valuable for water, recreation and wildlife habitat are in need of preservation. New Jersey's agricultural industry, the historic heart of our state's economic history, needs an additional 400,000 acres of preserved farmland to remain viable.

In tough economic times, many folks question the wisdom and value of continuing land preservation when so many vital programs and services are struggling. But take a look at a few of the health, economic and environmental benefits of saving land and decide for yourself:

- One tree provides $62,000 in air pollution control benefits;
- For every 10 percent increase in forest cover, water treatment and chemical costs decrease by 20 percent;
- Access to parks leads to a 25 percent increase in people exercising three or more times a week;
- A 2009 study by The Trust for Public Land found that every $1 invested in state land preservation programs returns $10 in economic value through nature's services, such as flood control and filtering air and water of pollutants.

With benefits like this, should we stop preserving land? What will our future be like without clean water, clean air, parks, scenic vistas and healthy food from local farms?

Studies consistently show that educated and skilled employees demand a good quality of life. Not surprisingly, they want clean water, clean air, and parks and natural areas for outdoor recreation and a sense of openness.

Preserving parks, open space, farmland, historic sites, watershed lands and flood-prone properties are investments we can't afford *not* to make if we care at all about the future of our state and its residents.

With the state out of land preservation funds, the Legislature is considering a bill that would ask voters to dedicate a portion of existing corporate business tax revenues to land preservation. The legislation must be passed by June 30 to put a question on the November ballot.

This plan is a modest, fiscally responsible proposal that will allow the Garden State to continue to be a great place to live and work. It would initially provide about $71 million annually, increasing to about $117 million annually in fiscal year 2020.

This funding is far less than we've been spending during the last 15 years and it will not impact the state's budget – the bottom line – for five years.

Time is running out!

Please urge your legislators to support this legislation, SCR84/ACR130, and secure our state's quality of life for current and future generations. To send an email to your legislators, go to www.capwiz.com/njaudubon/issues/alert/?alertid=63243776&type=ST and fill out the easy form.

And to learn more about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S, Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

COURTESY DORN'S CLASSIC IMAGES

Two River Moment

Bathing beauties and the Jersey Shore, perfect together! These women were competitors during a contest in 1944 in Long Branch.

N.J. Millionaires Tax: Pushing the Wealthy Away

By Joseph M. Kyrillos Jr.

Nobody ever felt sorry for a millionaire. At least that's the principle some Democrats in Trenton are banking on as they resurrect former Gov. Jon Corzine's "millionaires tax" to close the expected budget gap for fiscal 2015.

Proponents of this tax increase promise it will hit only the wealthy, but in fact, poor and middle-class families will ultimately shoulder the burden.

Of course, the term "millionaires tax" is a misnomer. New Jersey already taxes the income of millionaires at one of the highest rates in the nation — higher than 44 other states do. The so-called millionaires tax is just an expired tax increase that raises New Jersey's top tax rate to about 11 percent, the third-highest in the United States.

Proponents of the millionaires tax imagine that the only reason people could oppose this tax hike is that they're worried New Jersey's well-to-do will run low on caviar if it's passed.

Actually, what we're worried about is the impact on New Jersey's working families.

As it turns out, millionaires don't like paying high taxes any more than the rest of us do. But unlike most of us, they can easily move out of New Jersey to avoid new tax hikes. For many, changing their tax residence is as simple as spending a few more weeks a year at their vacation home in Florida. They can keep a house in New Jersey to spend time with the grandkids, live for six months and one day in the Florida home, and voilà, they are Florida residents who no longer owe a dime in New Jersey taxes. As a bonus, their children will escape paying New Jersey's highest-in-the-nation estate tax.

It's little wonder that in 2010, the last year we had the old Corzine millionaires tax on the books, 88,000 individuals left New Jersey, taking with them a total annual income of $5.5 billion.

The millionaires tax could be more aptly named the "Goodbye New Jersey Tax."

Remarkably, just 50 high-earning individuals in New Jersey pay 5 percent of the entire state income tax bill. That means the exit of just two or three top-earners can cost the state tens of millions of dollars in lost tax revenue. Those losses result in cuts to services for the poor or tax increases elsewhere. In short, the millionaires tax proposal suffers from a math problem: The numbers don't add up.

Now Democrats in the Statehouse imagine that when millionaires leave, they take only their Lamborghinis with them. In fact, many of them take their businesses too.

A quarter of a million small business owners pay taxes on their income as individuals in our state. Many of them will be hit by the millionaires tax. The original millionaires tax kicked in at incomes of $500,000 — roughly the annual income of a small construction business. In New Jersey, small businesses employ about 1.6 million workers, and these workers are at risk of losing their jobs as operations move south to escape a mounting tax burden.

That's why the Goodbye New Jersey Tax is a great job creation program – for Florida.

Don't shed a tear for the rich as they head off to spend a few extra weeks at their vacation homes. They'll be fine. But poor and middle-class New Jerseyans will be worse off, in terms of both job opportunities and access to public services funded by tax dollars once paid by the wealthy.

Even Democrats in other "deep blue" states have recognized that now is no time for tax hikes. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is actually trying to cut taxes on high-earning New Yorkers. As he puts it: "We're trying to attract business. We're trying to keep business here."

Maryland and Massachusetts now tax millionaires' income at roughly 5 percent; in Pennsylvania, it's 3 percent. Meanwhile back in Trenton, Democrats threaten job creators with an 11 percent tax rate.

As our nation is still in the grips of a weak recovery, we should be working to attract job creators and capital to our great state – not to drive them away.

Joseph M. Kyrillos Jr., R-Monmouth, is a state senator from the 13th Legislative District.