



New environmental group to legislators: 'We're watching'

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Published: May 21st, 6:36 AM

Alerting the public to the good, bad and ugly environmental voting records of state legislators is the main goal of a newly formed, statewide organization.

A number of the state's leading environmental activists announced on Wednesday, May 12, that they have formed a new Jersey chapter of the national League of Conservation Voters.

The new chapter is one of about 30 state chapters. It hopes to match the influence of its national counterpart which claims to have defeated 43 out of 67 anti-environmental candidates targeted since 1996 and has helped hundreds of environmental leaders to election in Congress and elsewhere.

The new chapter will grade legislators and endorse candidates, based on their environmental voting records.

"We will be a more powerful voice in the environmental community," said one of the founding members, Michele Byers, director of the N.J. Conservation Foundation based in Chester Township.

The impetus for the new chapter was concerns over current environmental policy, according to another founding member and the group's treasurer, Sandy Batty, director of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) based in Mendham Township.

"We really feel they have been backsliding on environmental legislation recently," Batty said. "We are concerned that the good legislation of the past four decade could be rolled back."

She said the group is concerned with possible changes to the state Highlands Act along with other environmental laws.

"There are measures being considered that will erode the ability of municipalities to do environmental projects," Batty said.

For instance, she cited proposed legislation that would prohibit environmental laws that are stricter than federal laws. Current state law allows for tougher legislation than under federal protection.

Batty said New Jersey is the most densely populated state with the most polluted sites and that laws are needed that exceed the federal laws.

For example, Batty said the state's wetlands laws are tougher than federal laws because of the extensive amount of wetlands and their value to the state.

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Batty said the first scorecard will be issued in the fall even though the next congressional elections are in November 2011. League members will score members of the Assembly and Senate after reviewing their voting records on key environmental bills and after meeting with other environmentalists around

the state.

The governor also will be graded regarding his track record on signing environmental regulations and executive orders.

"We're putting (state) legislators on notice that they will be graded," said Batty.

Byers said the new group was necessary because environmental non-profits are barred from supporting political candidates. The new chapter will form a political action committee so it can endorse and campaign for candidates.

"The N.J. Conservation Foundation is a strong advocacy organization but advocacy based on reasoning and science only goes so far," Byers said. "Without the power of the leverage of an endorsement a lot of legislators don't listen."

Byers said the group hopes to prompt legislators to do better work on the environment and to applaud those who support environmental legislation.

Julia Somers of Harding Township, a member of the chapter and director of the N.J. Highlands Coalition, said the group will do more than publicize voting records.

"(The chapter) will alert the public and the media of key actions of public officials and closely monitor regulatory agencies and executive appointments," said Somers.

In addition to a scorecard, the group may issue a "Dirty Dozen" list similar to the one issued each year by the national organization.

Rep. Michele Bachman, R-Minn, won the dubious distinction of being at the top of the Dirty Dozen list this year for her energy policies including support of the major oil companies. She also was chastised for voting against the American Clean Energy and Security Act.

For more information about N.J. League of Conservation Voters visit www.njlc.org or email information@njlc.org. For more about League of Conservation Voters visit www.lcv.org.