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Builders' lobby threatens N.J. environment, water supply

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Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

By Julia M. Somers

The builders have the bucks, the access and the governor on their side. Within the next 30 days, if they succeed in winning over the majority of the state Legislature, the builders will have pulled off a coup. They will have successfully undermined the regulatory framework that safeguards our sources of clean water.

The multipronged attack is occurring outside of public scrutiny because the rules, regulations and land-use planning guidelines being changed are highly technical and not easily grasped by the general public. The dots will get connected only when it's too late and irreversible damage has been done.

It will be too late once the construction of even more pipelines is under way, shredding the Highlands' core forests and other environmentally sensitive parts of the state. There appears to be a rush to carve up New Jersey with pipes to transport the vast supplies of natural gas, fracked from Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region, to East Coast distribution hubs and overseas shipping terminals.

The gas industry is getting its green light from the recently updated New Jersey Energy Master Plan, which calls for increasing the network of natural gas pipelines, and [from Gov. Chris Christie](#), whose vote on the Delaware River Basin Commission is expected to be in support of lifting the moratorium on fracking.

It will be too late when Belle Meade Corp. is permitted to construct a wastewater treatment plant to serve the office park it had proposed in Tewksbury, Hunterdon County, which everyone was assured could never move forward. This huge office complex would be built in an area formerly recognized by the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan as an environmentally sensitive area. However, under the recently and quickly adopted State Strategic Plan, the area has been reclassified and the project is now deemed in compliance.

These are just two examples of an assault that is far more pervasive than a relaxation of the state's energy and land-use planning policies. We expect that before long, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection will adopt its proposed "waiver rule," giving it unprecedented discretion to waive environmental regulations that a builder claims are "unduly burdensome."

Long-awaited Wastewater Management Plans, if pending legislation succeeds, will be delayed for at least another two years. Wastewater management planning is part of a federally funded effort to direct growth and development into areas that have available water and wastewater

capacity and away from environmentally sensitive areas, away from areas that secure our water supply.

Counties and municipalities were supposed to comply by 2009, but the builders' lobby is again succeeding in kicking the can farther down the road. Our efforts to control sprawl and to redevelop our cities will be significantly weakened because new Wastewater Management Plans would have channeled development interest away from our remaining open spaces and into the areas that are in need of redevelopment.

These builder-backed initiatives have traction because they are promoted as the kick-starts we need to stimulate economic growth. And the regulations that are in place that protect our water and other natural resources are derided as barriers to economic recovery.

But nothing could be further from the truth. In this economy, there is no building simply because no one is buying. Inventories of existing homes and office space are at an all-time high.

No amount of relief from the regulations that protect our water supply will change that. Rather, if the regulatory landscape is successfully eased, once an economic recovery is under way, the builders will have created for themselves a financial free-for-all, and the rest of us will be left holding the bag.

The water supply of New Jersey is owned by the people of New Jersey. We have entrusted the state to protect it for us. That is the law. The state could not act more irresponsibly than to squander our shared public trust resources for the short-term financial gain of the few.

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