

Issue Coordinator's Report (South!):

# Proposed Route 55 Extension Would Be Environmental Disaster

by Douglas Jewell, Cape May Issues Coordinator

Completing Route 55, by extending the current terminus in Maurice River Township, Cumberland County for 20 miles to the Garden State Parkway in Middle Township, Cape May County, has been an off and on proposition since the 1970s. The plan resurfaced with vigor in 2001, with local politicians using the project as their rallying campaign cry leading up to the November 6 elections.

Much of the local populace has embraced the extension, thanks to slick media marketing laced with "sound bites" and "concepts", while proponents purposely and calculatingly avoid the details and facts.

The Shore Connection Committee (SCC) of the South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization (SJTPO) did a two year study of traffic congestion at the shore, releasing its report in November, 1998. The study made 18 recommendations to improve traffic flow. The NJDOT finally implemented the first, alternate route signage, this past summer. The other 17 remain undone.

What did the SCC report say about the Route 55 extension?

"This project would involve the construction of a roadway through environmentally sensitive areas and public lands. It would face extreme environmental problems, particularly wetlands impacts, which would make it difficult to permit and costly to mitigate. It would also be very costly to build."

To the average guy, that would be enough to say, "Forget Route 55". But not in Cape May County, where campaign contributions fuel policy decisions. It's no surprise that the largest contributors are from the construction industry and the Wildwood-Cape May Court House business sector.

The SCC report came to identical conclusions about Route 55's proposed Port Elizabeth bypass and Dennisville bypass, "Environmentally, it may prove very difficult to build, as it has significant wetland impacts."

As for the extension dumping its traffic onto the Garden State Parkway, the report said, "It would increase volume on the GSP, taxing the ability of the roadway to serve its existing demand and the new demand resulting from the completion of Route 55."

Route 55 proponents have totally avoided referring to the study. They have also conveniently failed to publicly mention the following:

The 20-mile extension would cross seven different wetlands, requiring the roadway to be elevated for five miles. (It would cross the Manumuskin River, Muskee Creek, Little Mill Creek, West Creek, East Creek, Willis Run, Old Robin Branch, Dennis Creek, and Sluice Creek.) It would affect the Maurice River, a nesting site for bald eagles, and Delaware Bay, the breeding grounds of countless fish and shellfish.

In addition, it would cut through Dennis Creek Wildlife Management Area and Belleplain State Forest. The road would defoliate 700 acres on its 20-mile jaunt. It would further deplete populations of threatened and endangered species of animals and plants, and reduce migrating bird habitat and aquifer recharge areas. Forests and wetlands would be replaced by concrete and asphalt.

The cost has been understated at \$500 million. Originally pegged at \$483 million in 1991, then adjusted to \$615 million in 1996 and \$747 million in 2000, the true cost would be closer to \$1.5 billion.

In 1995, NJDOT estimated that the project would displace 62 homes. That figure has obviously increased. Also, the completed highway would negatively impact 19 businesses in Dennis Township and 17 in Maurice River Township, plus an untold number in Middle Township. But, for the most part, these are small family businesses not affiliated with the champion of the-Route 55 extension, the powerful and deep-pocketed county Chamber of Commerce.

Cape May County Republicans plastered their campaign billboards this fall with the slogan "Finish Route 55 NOW". The public doesn't know that NOW is 20 years. In fact, NJDEP has estimated that the permitting process alone would take 12 years.

The Club's South Jersey Chapter and Concerned Citizens of Cape May County are carrying the battle against this disastrous highway extension. What can you do? Contact your local State Senator and Assemblypersons and tell them to OPPOSE the Route 55 extension. Together, we can defeat this ill-conceived and destructive behemoth.

Doug Jewell can be reached at jewell@avaloninternet.net.



## Northwest Jersey Group

(Hunterdon, Sussex and Warren Counties, approximately)

Please vote the Group Ballot on this page!

Web site: <http://pepin.home.att.net>. We are also accessible from the NJ Chapter Web site.

**OFFICERS:**

- Chair:** Ellen Pepin 973-252-5137  
 epepin@worldnet.att.net
- Vice Chair:** Joseph Pepin 973-252-5137  
 pepin@worldnet.att.net
- Treasurer:** Donna Rubin 973-726-9278
- Secretary:** Debbie Hambright 973-729-8015
- Political Chair:** Dean Shemenski 908-684-1515  
 dshemenski@billbehrl.com
- Publicity Chair:** Claire Cifelli 973-726-8606
- Outings Chair:** Jim Palmer 908-852-6966

Northwestern New Jersey needs a strong Sierra Club to protect its environment from the challenges of increasing over-development. We need to have the commitment and talents of all of our members. We have a need for people to help us in our conservation efforts and we also need the help of people who are willing to serve as outings leaders. We would also like to see more people attend our monthly meetings. Come and meet your fellow Sierra Club members.

**LOCAL ISSUES:**

**Mountain Creek Development:** In June, 2000, the Vernon Twp. Council voted to change the zoning map to allow the Intrawest Corp. to build a massive development on Hamburg Mountain. The Planning Board has approved the general development plan.

This development would consist of up to 2000 housing units as well as hotels, shopping areas and condos. Much of this land is the former Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area. There are many environmental problems. The land is environmentally sensitive and contains wetlands, steep slopes, and possible endangered species.

Judge Stanton has ruled that roads, sewers and other infrastructure must avoid the deed-restricted lands on the top of the mountain. The judge has not yet ruled on the golf course that is planned for the top of the mountain. These court actions have resulted in some changes to the development plan.

We need to get lots of people involved to oppose this project. We need people to attend meetings, write letters and spread the word.

**Route 15:** Another issue we have been involved with is the proposed plan to widen Rt. 15 from Wharton to its terminus at Rt. 206. The widening would not only disturb the central part of the highlands, but would lead to more sprawl development and more congestion. We must convince people who live in the area that this is a bad plan.

**Highlands:** In addition to other local issues, we would like to continue to work for the protection of the Highlands region.

**MEETING SCHEDULE:** There will be an executive committee meeting on January 9 at 8pm in Sparta. Please call 973-729-8015 or 973-252-5137 for directions.

**GENERAL MEETINGS:**

**Jan 22:** There will be a general meeting and pot luck supper on January 22 at 6:30pm. This will take place at the home of Joseph and Ellen Pepin in Succasunna. Please RSVP to 973-252-5137. This should be a fun event so come and help make it a success.

**Feb 20:** 8pm in Sparta: We will have a program on the Alaskan Rain Forest given by Tina Schvejda, our NJ Chapter Chair. The date may be subject to change so please go to our web site for the latest information or call Ellen Pepin.

**Mar 20:** 8pm in Sparta: topic TBA. The date may be subject to change so please go to our web site for the latest information or call Ellen Pepin.

## Hunterdon Group - Newly Forming!

(Hunterdon County, approximately)

Please vote the Group Ballot on this page!

### HOW TO IDENTIFY YOUR GROUP (BY COUNTY)

**Northwest Jersey Group:** Sussex & Warren  
**Hunterdon County Group:** Hunterdon  
**North Jersey Group:** Passaic & Bergen  
**Raritan Valley Group:** Somerset & Middlesex  
**West Jersey Group:** Gloucester, Camden & Burlington  
**South Jersey Group:** Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland & Salem  
**Essex County Group:** Essex  
**Hudson Group:** Hudson & SE Bergen  
**Loantaka Group:** Morris & Union  
**Jersey Shore Group:** Monmouth & Ocean  
**Central Jersey Group:** Mercer

*These designations are approximate: members are welcome to participate in whichever Group(s) they find convenient*

**OFFICERS:**

- Acting Chair:** Ruth Prince 908-284-9103

On Nov 10 the Chapter Executive Committee voted unanimously to form a new Sierra Club Group to serve Hunterdon County. Meetings will take place at 7pm on the THIRD WEDNESDAY of each month at the Flemington Public Library, 118 Main Street, Flemington, NJ. Upcoming meetings are scheduled for:

January 16 • February 20 • March 20

The Group is currently focusing on the proposed re-zoning of the Flemington Speedway property from Industrial to Commercial. Such a change would allow the owner to sell the property to an interested mall developer. The Speedway is listed with Preservation New Jersey as one of the top ten most endangered historic sites in New Jersey.

For more information about the group, please contact Ruth Prince, Acting Chair, at (908) 284-9103. Provisional Group ExCom Members (please use the ballot on this page):

- Ruth Prince Lois Zarish  
 Arnold Kushnick Jeannie Geremia  
 Rosemary Yaecker Kate Spann  
 Rob Parente

## North Jersey Group

(Southern Bergen and all of Passaic Counties, approximately)

**OFFICERS:**

- Group Chair:** Betsy Kohn 201-461-4534  
 BetsyKohn@aol.com
- Vice Chair:** Hugh Carola 201-692-8440  
 HCarola@aol.com

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### Membership

**Yes**, I want to help safeguard our nation's precious natural heritage. My check is enclosed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_  
 State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_  
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Check enclosed, made payable to Sierra Club  
 Mastercard  Visa Exp Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

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Contributions, gifts and dues to the Sierra Club are not tax deductible; they support our effective, citizen-based advocacy and lobbying efforts. Your dues include \$7.50 for a subscription to *Sierra* magazine and \$1.00 for your Chapter newsletter.

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CONTRIBUTING	<input type="checkbox"/> \$150	<input type="checkbox"/> \$175
LIFE	<input type="checkbox"/> \$1000	<input type="checkbox"/> \$1250
SENIOR	<input type="checkbox"/> \$24	<input type="checkbox"/> \$32
STUDENT	<input type="checkbox"/> \$24	<input type="checkbox"/> \$32
LIMITED INCOME	<input type="checkbox"/> \$24	<input type="checkbox"/> \$32

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 FOUNDED 1892  
**Sierra Club**  
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