

Legislature passes green 'super bills'

By James Gormley

A coalition of environmental organizations is applauding the Legislature for unanimously passing what they call environmental "super bills" for 2011 — legislation that would restrict large water withdrawals from lakes and rivers and another to encourage pedestrian- and bike-friendly streets.

"By passing legislation that will safeguard New York's waters from wasteful withdrawals and encouraging 'complete streets,' the Senate and Assembly accomplished two major environmental priorities," said Rob Moore, executive director of Environmental Advocates of New York. "These actions put New York State on the path to a cleaner, greener, and more sustainable future."

The groups cited the efforts of Assemblymen Robert Sweeney and David Gantt, and Senators Mark Grisanti and Charles Fuschillo, as deserving of recognition this year because they put "extra effort" into garnering passage of the two super bills.

Bill A.5318-a / S.3798 would require anyone with the capacity to withdraw more than 100,000 gallons of water per day to first obtain a permit from the Department of Environmental Conservation. The law, if signed, could be used to further regulate the process of hydrofracking, a controversial procedure to extract natural gas from bedrock. Gas drillers often need to extract water from nearby rivers, streams, lakes and ponds to pressurize and drill into the rock below ground.

"Right now only one-third of New York's waters are protected from overuse. Large industrial users can take as much as they want, whenever they want, from the rest of our waters. The Water Withdrawal Permit Program fixes that," said Brian L. Houseal, executive director of The Adirondack Council. "Requiring the industries that benefit from our world-class water to first obtain a permit is a small price to pay, but one that will reap big dividends for all New Yorkers for generations to come."

Bill S.5411-a / A.8366 will ensure that future road projects take into account the needs of all users — bicyclists, public transportation vehicles and passengers, motorists, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities — and help reduce climate-altering greenhouse gas emissions.

"The Complete Streets bill will save lives and make it easier for New Yorkers to leave the car at home," said Kate Slevin, executive director of Tri-State Transportation Campaign. "Making it safe for people of all ages to walk and bike will lead to healthier communities and cleaner air. We applaud Senator Charles Fuschillo for championing the Complete Streets bill and ensuring its passage."

Darryl Banks, Deputy Director for Conservation Strategies and External Affairs for The Nature Conservancy in New York, said, "The Nature Conservancy commends Senator Grisanti and Assemblyman Robert Sweeney for their work as champions for New York's water resources during this legislative session.

"Senator Grisanti, hands down, earned the Rookie of the Year recognition. As Chairman of the Environmental Conservation Committee, the freshman Senator preformed like a senior statesman," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment. "Sen. Grisanti did an exceptional job championing the Water Resources Protection Act and his leadership secured critical protection for our state's priceless fresh water resources."

"Environmentalists have had a good year legislatively, in no small part thanks to Sen. Grisanti's strong freshman year and the spectacular leadership of Assembly member Sweeney," said Richard Schrader, NY legislative director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"Assemblyman Sweeney and Senator Grisanti are true champions of New York's Environment, and we applaud their bi-partisan efforts to improve protection of our freshwater," said Albert E. Caccese, executive director of Audubon New York. "As Governor Cuomo already declared his commitment to our natural resources by maintaining the Environmental Protection Fund in this year's budget, we urge him to build off this strong start by signing this important bill into law."

The coalition is now urging state lawmakers to pass three remaining "super bills" this year or in 2012. The bills are:

Bill A.7013/S.4616 which would end special exemptions that allow the gas industry to circumvent requirements for hazardous waste disposal. This bill would require all gas drilling waste that meets the definition of hazardous waste be subject to regulations related to its generation, transportation, treatment, storage, and disposal. The Assembly passed this bill in June.

Bill A.5346/S.2742-a would require that climate-altering pollution from all sources is cut by 80 percent by the year 2050. These are the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that scientists say will help us avert the worst impacts of climate change.

Bill A.5713-c would create new jobs and jumpstart investment in New York's growing solar energy industry by requiring state utilities and energy service companies to purchase solar renewable energy credits. Neither house acted upon this legislation.

"The passage of two super bills this year is a good start," said Laura Haight, Senior Environmental Associate for the New York Public Interest Research Group. "We look forward to bigger and better environmental victories next year."

"The contrast between this year's environmental progress and 2010 is great," said Marcia Bystryn, president of the New York League of Conservation Voters. "Although New York missed a major opportunity by not passing the solar jobs bill, the Assembly and Senate made headway in other important areas, including green jobs and Article X power plant siting

legislation. We strongly encourage Governor Cuomo to sign these two 'super bills' into law, and we look forward to continued discussions about ways to finally make New York the clean-energy leader it should be."