



Environmentalists lobby for change

Albany-- Smart- growth state infrastructure, expanded bottle bill on wide- ranging agenda

By ERIN DUGGAN, Capitol bureau

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Earth Day came early to the Capitol, as hundreds of environmentalists converged Monday in Albany to lobby lawmakers on Earth Day Lobby Day.

The top issues on their agenda: expanding the state's "bottle bill," regulating where power plants are built and protecting isolated wetlands.

The lobby day's importance "is getting all the issues together, and getting all the people together," said Jason Babbie, environmental analyst for the New York Public Interest Research Group. "This gives New Yorkers a chance to be heard."

The day began with a series of speeches inside the Legislative Office Building, and moved outside for a noon rally. The high temperatures and sunny skies brought a large crowd to the Capitol's west park. Songs, banners, chants and speeches preceded the group's move back inside the LOB to lobby legislators.

The state Assembly marked the day by passing a package of 16 environmental bills. Half of the bills have Senate sponsorship, but only about half of those might pass this year.

The Assembly bills include setting a lower limit in the amount of sulfur allowed in diesel fuel, phasing out the state use of pesticides, and incorporating smart-growth principles into state roads, utilities and other infrastructure to encourage good development practices. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, and Assembly Environmental Conservation Chair Tom DiNapoli, D-Great Neck,

said the bills will protect the state's resources and public health.

"It is our responsibility as stewards of the Earth to make sure that there are safeguards in place to protect our environment, not only for us but for future generations," DiNapoli, who sponsored legislation to expand the bottle bill, said in a statement.

Earth Day is celebrated nationally on April 22, but most state lawmakers won't be in Albany on Thursday.



Environmental activists get a jump on Earth Day, lobbying and rallying Monday at the Capitol. (Skip Dickstein / Times Union)

The most prominent issues have been high on environmentalists' lists for the past few years. NYPIRG is continuing its push from last year to change New York's law on bottle deposits to include non-carbonated beverages like water and Snapple. The expanded bottle bill would also transfer

unclaimed 5-cent deposits to the state, instead of leaving them with the industry.

NYPIRG estimates the state would bring in more than \$170 million a year if it expanded the bill and collected the unclaimed deposits. But that bill hasn't passed either the Assembly or the Senate, and a spokesman for Senate Majority Joseph Bruno, R-Brunswick, said the senator is not in favor of it.

Because Bruno has control over what bills are brought to a vote, his position against the bill makes its passage nearly impossible.