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Environmental issues / Keep pressure on

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This was a shocker (or should have been):

A recent Zogby International poll commissioned by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy in Pomona found that only 2 percent of 601 southern New Jersey voters listed the environment as one of their top two concerns.

In the past, the environment has polled as a top issue for large numbers of New Jersey voters, particularly in southern New Jersey. That's why every candidate in this region goes out of his or her way to say how concerned they are about clean air and clean water, open space and stopping sprawl.

Of course, even as they say that, many of them are taking large campaign donations from developers and working behind the scenes to undermine environmental rules.

And that's exactly why it's so scary that environmental issues are not a chief concern of voters right now. Once the pols realize they don't even have to *pretend* to be environmentalists, they'll be building condos in the middle of Barnegat Bay.

At a forum last week at the Hughes Center, the general consensus was that the two main candidates for governor were pretty much ignoring environmental issues. Economic recovery and the state's fiscal health are what this election is about.

And that makes a certain amount of sense in these difficult economic times.

But the N.J. Sierra Club, the N.J. Environmental Federation and the N.J. Environmental Lobby says it's even worse than simply bypassing environmental issues in favor of economic issues. The groups claim that a powerful group of developers and their friends in the Legislature are using the recession as a smokescreen to push through a host of measures that will undermine environmental protections.

And the \$400 million open-space bond issue on November's ballot could very well be the first

open-space question to ever fail in New Jersey.

So what's it all mean? And how concerned should you be if you consider yourself someone who cares deeply about the environment?

Well, putting economic recovery at the top of the issues list makes sense as the state and nation struggle to work their way out of a recession.

Ditto for putting the fiscal health of state government at the top of the agenda.

But this is also true: Times like this, when voters' attention is diverted by economic matters, pose a serious threat to the environment.

It is critical for voters who are concerned about environmental issues to remain vigilant - and vocal.

Insist that candidates tell you where they stand on the environment - and how far they will go to protect it.

Let them think you don't care, and we'll all come to regret it.

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