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Bill would protect environment, help economy

By Jay Ziegler and Meea Kang

Next year, California's population will surpass 40 million. That's twice as many people as were here in 1970 when the state passed its landmark resource protection law, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

CEQA, which governs the environmental review process for most construction and infrastructure projects, has been at the heart of some notable achievements, such as saving Mono Lake and looking at the

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cumulative impacts of proposed development. While the law has protected the environment by improving planning processes and stopping many ill-conceived projects, critics can fairly point to cases where competitors have used it to obstruct projects, even where the environmental benefits and job creation opportunities were obvious.

Forty years later, it's time to make changes to CEQA to better align the law that governs most growth decisions in the state with 21st century challenges, like climate change and how to support a rapidly growing population.

One such reform is on Gov. Jerry Brown's desk now. He should sign it.

Senate Bill 226 by Senators Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, and Juan Vargas, D-San Diego, allows infill projects - that is, projects within already-

developed areas - that meet state-of-the-art environmental standards to take advantage of a streamlined review process. The bill rewards applicants whose projects have the best environmental features with faster and lower cost approval, and it provides other projects with a meaningful incentive to improve. It also eliminates duplicative levels of review, eliminating waste and allowing sponsors of infill projects to take advantage of previous environmental analyses and rely on good local planning.

Californians face a choice: do we foster a new, smart-growth strategy or continue to treat infill development as the conventional path-of-least-resistance growth into open space? Smart growth is a community-focused strategy to reduce energy use, minimize our carbon footprint and reduce

impacts on the natural resources that sustain us and the economy.

California has adopted path-breaking legislation, including SB375 of 2009, which encouraged infill development. Simitian's and Vargas' bill helps achieve the promise of SB375 by ensuring that redundant levels of review and the threat of expensive lawsuits don't discourage the types of building we know are most effective at reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions.

The environmental quality act is not very good at distinguishing the development of big-box stores on green fields, miles from population centers, from desperately-needed housing close to jobs and transit in cities and towns. We need to provide incentives for a long-term smart-growth strategy that puts our state on a path to leadership in the development of a sustainable

energy, water use, air quality and planning strategy to enhance our quality of life and our reputation as a place to do business.

Forty years from now, there will be about 60 million Californians. It's going to take a strong economic foundation and the ability to use resources efficiently to support so many people. If we're going to support the attributes that make California such a desirable place to live, we're going to have to reduce our impact on the natural resources that make our state unique.

Our laws should be responsive to the challenges we face -- addressing climate change, reducing our footprint on the land, cleaning the air we breathe and the water we drink and ultimately providing a more sustainable way of life. SB226 is a worthy step in that direction.