

# The Times

## When policy meets politics: Choosing a good DCA boss

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BY DIANNE BRAKE

One of the most important jobs in New Jersey state government today remains open: commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs. Trenton is rife with rumors about who will fill the highly influential post recently vacated by Susan Bass Levin.

Local officials, nonprofits, planners, developers and environmentalists all are paying close attention to this political appointment because the commissioner is a power player, charged with making key land-use and housing policy decisions.

Of particular concern to the smart-growth community is whether the new commissioner will defer critical development decisions to local municipalities.

In the past, the most successful DCA commissioners have stood outside the local government system. They have understood the need to take the lead on difficult issues such as affordable housing and statewide planning --not to abandon their mission and cite "home rule" when the going gets tough. After all, the commissioner's position was established by the Legislature to implement state and regional goals that would be politically difficult, if not impossible, for an individual mayor to achieve.

What are the other important attributes of an effective DCA commissioner? Obviously, the DCA commissioner needs to work well with the governor; for Gov. Jon Corzine, this means advancing his much-praised goals for economic growth that includes "smart" planning. This has five important implications for the new commissioner. She or he must:

- Make sure that housing and state planning rules support the construction of housing that is affordable to the 40,000 new workers the governor hopes to attract to New Jersey.
- Ensure the State Development and Redevelopment Plan has adequately identified the best places to create jobs and build work force housing -- in a way that reduces auto dependency, promotes watershed and environmental protection and improves economic and racial integration.
- Be able to lead the DCA and persuade other commissioners that their rules, infrastructure investments and impact fees must not encourage sprawl or become obstacles to encouraging well-planned development in identified growth areas.
- Be able to persuade the governor that without tax reform and more affordable housing, the growth that he expects and needs will not take place. Local officials resist housing because of the local cost of paying for education. A responsible DCA commissioner could and should champion the reform of New Jersey's tax structure to address this problem. Regional tax-base sharing and targeted school aid to support children of low- and moderate-income households are two effective reforms that could be undertaken without new laws, consolidation and shared services or more money than the governor has put on the table to date.
- Be able to convince the governor that he will never get control of spending on government programs and subsidies unless poverty -- particularly in urban areas -- is reduced and integrated communities of opportunity are established statewide.

The data is available for the commissioner to set quantifiable targets for job growth, housing based on workers' incomes, land and infrastructure needed for redevelopment and development to accommodate these jobs and housing targets. It just needs to be pulled together and used by the appropriate agencies.

To do this kind of work, the commissioner will need not only to understand all the important policy issues, she or he also will need to be a good manager, someone who can bring people together in a state that is polarized by those who want New Jersey to grow and those who oppose all growth in the name of conservation.

At the same time, the commissioner will need to understand when to leave well enough alone. The Council on Affordable Housing and the State Planning Commission were set up to be independent agencies.

Because they often challenge home rule, and must weigh in on the debate between growth and no-growth positions, COAH and the State Planning Commission must be outside of the political fray.

Clearly, much is riding on this appointment. Gov. Corzine would be wise to consider policy over politics when it comes to choosing the next DCA commissioner. The economic future of the state could very well hang in the balance.

*Dianne Brake is president of the Regional Planning Partnership, the state's oldest land-use research and advocacy organization, based in Trenton.*