

# California Assembly members push to speed up water storage construction

By Dakota Smith , Los Angeles Daily News

Amid a crippling state drought, several state Assembly members are pushing a bill intended to speed up construction of water storage facilities by changing the state-mandated environmental review process.

Introduced last month, AB 311 creates a window to resolve litigation over environmental reviews of new water storage facilities.

Assemblywoman Kristin Olsen, R-Modesto, co-author of AB 311, said her bill addresses the “abuse” within the environmental review process, which has “stifled California’s economic growth.”

“We have to move away from outdated thinking in state government,” Olsen said.

Olsen’s bill and eight others were part of a package of proposed legislation highlighted Thursday by Assembly Republicans, laws that “will keep California at the leading edge of the modern economy,” backers said.

Both AB 311 and AB 641, a similar bill announced Thursday to speed up the environmental review process for housing projects, target the California Environmental Quality Act, a state statute that requires the environmental impacts of a project be studied.

AB 311 and AB 641 are similar to bills written for the Sacramento Kings stadium and the now-defunct Farmers Field football stadium in downtown Los Angeles, an Olsen spokeswoman said. Both those projects got CEQA exemptions intended to stave off lawsuits that could slow down construction.

Environmentalists credit CEQA with protecting California from overdevelopment, while business groups say opponents file frivolous CEQA-related lawsuits to kill or slow down projects.

AB 311 and AB 641 drew praise Thursday from Stuart Waldman, president of the Valley Industry and Commerce Association. “We have been fighting for CEQA reform for decades,” Waldman said.

Los Angeles City Councilman Mitch Englander, the lone Republican on the council, also said in a statement that “sensible” CEQA “reform supports our environmental goals while creating a competitive business climate in the state.”

David Pettit, attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said shortening the time frame to resolve lawsuits is a measure that isn’t enforceable.

Pettit, who supported the Farmers Field legislation, said that a better solution would be to shorten the time the city or state has to prepare the paperwork during a lawsuit.

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In general, “chipping away at CEQA is a bad idea,” Pettit said.

The other bills highlighted Thursday by Assembly Republicans include legislation addressing state workers’ use of transportation network companies when traveling on business, flexible work schedules and vehicle weight fees.

