

Opinion: Overhaul of CEQA Looms Large

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

It's been 42 years since then-Gov. Ronald Reagan signed the landmark California Environmental Quality Act, an early victory for the nascent environmental protection movement that has since become a very powerful force in state and national politics.

Whether CEQA and its legislative progeny, including the most recent anti-global warming laws, have truly protected California's environment or merely morphed into vehicles for those on the political left to pursue other ideological goals remains a bitterly debated issue.

Whatever the reality, with environmental groups now a major component of the Democratic Party and Democrats' holding virtually unfettered political power in the state, CEQA would seem to be sacrosanct.

However, it appears that Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature's Democratic leadership are poised to revise CEQA in some manner, responding to complaints that it has become an impediment to California's recovery from the worst recession since the Great Depression.

It's setting the stage for a potential battle with environmentalists who look upon CEQA as an iconic, almost religious, touchstone.

A hint of that came this year when Sen. Michael Rubio, D-Shafter, introduced a CEQA overhaul.

While it stalled due to pressure from environmentalists, it indicated an appetite among Democrats for change and led to

declarations from Brown and Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg that CEQA reform would sit atop their legislative agendas.

Brown, as is his wont, offered a pithy description of CEQA, once calling it "the blob." While campaigning last fall for his tax-increase measure, Proposition 30, Brown responded to a questioner that he considered CEQA reform to be "very important."

"There are many people who work very well under CEQA and don't want to change it," Brown said during the exchange in Los Angeles. "And yet, changes are needed."

Brown signed a CEQA exemption for a new football stadium in Los Angeles and mused about exempting his pet bullet-train project from its provisions. Farmers and other local interests along the planned route of the train have filed CEQA suits to stop it.

Steinberg, meanwhile, helped enact the law that allows the governor to fast-track certain kinds of projects through the CEQA process over the opposition of major environmental groups. And he not only declared that CEQA reform would be a high priority but named Rubio as the new chairman of the Senate Environmental Quality Committee with a mandate to explore changes in the law, saying they are "needed to eliminate abuses."

If Brown and Steinberg are serious, the forthcoming battle over CEQA is likely to be one of the Capitol's more interesting, and perhaps significant, tests of the Democrats' hegemony.