



Environmental activists try to thwart Pinelands gas line approval



South Jersey Gas Co. will be running new gas lines through sections of Upper Township, to supply BL England with natural gas. Wednesday May 15, 2013. (Dale Gerhard/The Press of Atlantic City)

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By BRADEN CAMPBELL, Staff Writer | Posted 11 hours ago

As a Pinelands Commission ruling on plans to build a 22-mile natural gas pipeline from Millville to Upper Township nears, opponents are raising awareness in the hopes public pressure can halt its approval. Environmental groups such as the New Jersey Sierra Club and Clean Water Action have staged a protest and begun e-mail campaigns to prevent the project, which they believe would set a dire precedent for South Jersey and the Pinelands.

If the Pinelands Commission passes a Memorandum of Agreement, or MOA, between itself and the state Board of Public Utilities authorizing the project - which could happen as soon as November - it would be the first step in allowing further development in the Pinelands, New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel said.

"The real issue here is that the Pinelands can suffer the death of a thousand MOA's," Tittel said. "All of a sudden you can unravel the entire Pinelands Protection Act, one MOA at a time, and that's a big issue."

The Sierra Club joined members of Clean Water Action and the Don't Gas the Pinelands Coalition on Monday in handing out literature outside an environmental forum at Richard Stockton College in Galloway Township. Tittel said the groups protested because South Jersey Gas was an event sponsor.

The Sierra Club has kept its members informed on the project since it was first proposed, and its latest email push outlines its concerns that this project could open the door to further Pinelands development.

The Pinelands are shielded by development restrictions outlined in the 1979 New Jersey Pinelands Protection Act. The act largely forbids Pinelands development unless it is of significant benefit to residents.

The act also created the Pinelands Commission, whose 15-member board serves as the area's steward. The board can approve Memoranda of Agreement with public agencies allowing them to undertake development activities not fully consistent with Pinelands standards as long as the other party commits to providing an equal level of protection to the Pinelands to offset a project's impact and can prove a need.

Following its September meeting, the Pinelands Commission directed staff to draft a Memorandum of Agreement between itself and the state Board of Public Utilities on the pipeline project. Once the memorandum is drafted, it will be subject to a public hearing before a final vote by the commission.

The pipeline would provide natural gas to the B.L. England power plant in Beesleys Point, Upper Township, allowing it to meet state and federal clean-air requirements. The plant currently burns coal. South Jersey Gas has said the pipeline would also back up the fuel supply for as many as 140,000 customers in Atlantic and Cape May counties.

Tittel said he's worried that if the Pinelands Commission approves the Memorandum of Agreement, it will lead to a slippery slope of relaxed restrictions.

"It's a clear violation," Tittel said. "You have to think about it in these terms, if you allow the BPU to do it for a private company, why can't the Casino Control Commission come in and build Caesars Pinelands?"

The advocacy group Pinelands Preservation Alliance has also taken steps to fight the project, penning letters to the state Attorney General's Office and the Pinelands Commission, urging them to stop the project, Director of Monitoring Programs Theresa Lettman said. The group is now turning its focus to educating the public, which will be invited to speak on the project before the Pinelands Commission at its resolution.

Pineland Commission Executive Director Nancy Wittenberg said the board of commissioners will take into account and address public comments before it makes a final decision.

If his group and the others in opposition are able to properly inform the public and pack the meeting, Tittel said he's hopeful the board will see it their way.

"If the Pinelands Commission follows the law and votes their conscience, they'll stop this pipeline," Tittle said.

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