

| Editorial - Christie, Sweeney scam on Pinelands could spell disaster



By **Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

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The debate over filling vacancies on the Pinelands Commission with responsible people has often been an ugly but fair fight, but now it's been subverted with a political gambit fashioned by the governor and his legislative Sancho Panza.

In the end, Gov. Christie and state Senate President Steve Sweeney won the only way they could - by **stacking the deck** on the Judiciary Committee that advanced Robert Barr's nomination to the full Senate, a remarkable development since the same committee found him disingenuous and unqualified the first two times they showed him the door.

Barr, a Cape May County Democratic operative, has persistently **refused to express an opinion** on the natural gas pipeline being proposed for the Pinelands region, but he will likely be the deciding vote that gives the controversial project the green light.

That should worry anyone who believes in the sanctity of the preserve, one of the largest tracts of open space and sources of drinking water on the East Coast, not to mention home to endangered species that cannot be found anywhere else on the planet.

Indeed, the idea worried **four former governors** from both parties enough to denounce it in a very strong statement last year.

But there is an interesting backstory about how an environmental advocate, Robert Jackson, can be tossed off the Pinelands Commission and replaced by business-friendly pol with little interest in preservation, which is ostensibly the mission of the commission.

How did Barr clear the hurdle this time? Sweeney got curiously lucky that Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D-Union) happened to be late for the vote, so his spot on the committee was filled by Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May).

Unlike Lesniak, Van Drew supports the pipeline, which will run 22 miles -- mostly through the forest and on the shoulder of Route 49 - and feed natural gas to the B.L. England power plant in upper Cape May County.

For some reason, it didn't occur to anyone to question Van Drew's objectivity: His campaigns have been generously financed by Barr's organization. Nor did anyone ask whether Barr would recuse himself if some contributor to the Cape May Democrats - who are heavily financed by pro-pipeline unions - ever submits an application to build near the Pinelands.

There is nothing wrong with a pipeline, per se, if it proves to be the best fuel-delivery alternative for the environment and doesn't damage property values and public health.

But desecrating an ecological masterpiece is another matter, and getting it started with a **Machiavellian power grab** just reinforces the worst perceptions about our state representatives.

Sen. Christopher Bateman (R-Somerset), who voted against Barr, put it best Friday: "Environmentalists should worry," he said. "The governor stacked the deck, we've stepped way over the line, and who knows what can happen next."

For now, an honorable commission could lose its independence. Even worse, its mission to protect the Pinelands could be compromised by Trenton, which may change our geography with just one slick move - one that is transparently political, shamelessly indulgent, and dangerous in scope. Take a bow, gents.