

Former governors to Senate: Block Christie on Pinelands



Michael Symons, @MichaelSymons_

11:06 p.m. EST March 2, 2015

TRENTON – Four former New Jersey governors are urging the state Senate not to confirm Gov. Chris Christie's pick for the Pinelands Commission, calling the nomination a threat to the conservation agency's independence.

"As former governors for whom the Pinelands represents one of New Jersey's great — but ever-vulnerable — treasures, we ask for your help at this important juncture in the life of the Pinelands," wrote Gov. Brendan Byrne, Thomas Kean, James Florio and Christie Whitman in a letter to Sen. Raymond Lesniak, D-Union.

At issue is Christie's nomination is Robert Barr to replace Robert Jackson on the Pinelands Commission. But the larger issue is a proposal by South Jersey Gas to build a natural gas pipeline through the Pinelands to the B.L. England power plant in Cape May County.

Jackson opposed the pipeline when it fell a vote shy of approval last year. Barr hasn't said how he'll vote, but environmentalists fear he was nominated by Christie, then pushed through the Senate Judiciary Committee last week by Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, under unusual circumstances, for the purpose of approving the pipeline.

Byrne, Kean, Florio and Whitman — two Democrats, two Republicans — governed New Jersey from 1974 to 2001. In 2013, they wrote a joint letter to the Pinelands Commission urging that the proposed South Jersey Gas pipeline not be approved. A vote in January 2014 deadlocked at 7-7, but South Jersey Gas has gone to court seeking to force a second vote.

In Monday's letter, they said the Senate would protect independent agencies and "the integrity of the Pinelands program" by not voting for Barr.

"We believe that at this time and in the present circumstances, this nomination would undermine the independence of the Pinelands Commission," the governors wrote. "For 35 years, the Pinelands Commission has been the bedrock of the Pinelands conservation effort. Its extraordinary success in that mission is due in great part to the fact that it has functioned as an independent executive agency without undue interference in its implementation of the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan. Recent events threaten to erode that independence."

Rockland Capital wants to repurpose the coal and fuel-oil plant as a natural-gas power plant. There has been a ban on new transmission pipelines through the Pinelands forest zone for more than 30 years. The proposed 22-mile pipeline would be built underground in existing highway rights of way.

Barr, president of the Ocean City Community Association and a Democratic activist, is close with Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, a supporter of the proposed pipeline.

Jackson's term expired in 2012, but he remains on the commission in a holdover capacity because he hasn't been replaced.

Michael Symons: (609) 984-4336; msymons@app.com