

Former NJ Pinelands Commissioner Claims Politics Led to Her Replacement

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By Lauren Wanko
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“It came as a total shock that they had replaced me,” said former New Jersey Pinelands Commissioner Leslie Ficcaglia.

Ficcaglia says she never saw it coming. The Cumberland County Board of Chosen Freeholders unanimously voted to replace Ficcaglia, who’s been a commissioner for the past 18 years. Ficcaglia voted against the controversial 22-mile natural gas pipeline proposed to run through portions of the Pinelands. She thinks Gov. Christie or other politicians who support the pipeline project had a hand in her departure.

“It’s hard to think he had no part in it and I know that it obviously had to be political,” Ficcaglia said.

Cumberland County Freeholder Director Joe Derella says there’s nothing political about it. Ficcaglia was in a hold-over position within the commission. She was last appointed in 2003. Terms last three years, but since Ficcaglia hadn’t been reappointed in more than a decade, she could have been replaced at any time. Derella insists the pipeline vote had nothing to do with the board’s decision and he didn’t know how Ficcaglia voted on the pipeline project when he voted to replace her.

“We didn’t make a decision on that. Our decision was strictly based on we had someone very interested who wanted to get involved. We felt like what we’ve done with other boards, we wanted to make a change and give someone else an opportunity to contribute,” Derella said.

Real estate agent and former Cumberland County Freeholder Jane Jannarone was appointed the new Pinelands commissioner effective May 1. Jannarone was unavailable for an interview with *NJTV News*.

New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittle calls the move political.

“It seems this was done not only in retaliation, but to try to weaken the commission and put someone in there whose role isn’t to address the Pinelands but to address special interests,” said Tittle.

Critics insist Gov. Christie is behind the commissioner replacement and will stack the New Jersey Pinelands Commission with political allies.

A Christie spokesman tells *NJTV News*, “This is just as laden with hyperbole and conspiracy theory as it sounds and is completely without merit.”

Ficcaglia says there was a lot of pressure from Pinelands Commission staffers to approve the pipeline project.

“We’re wondering who’s next. And I’m afraid that this sort of pressure and action is going to chill the other commissioners and they’re not going to feel free to vote their conscience and that’s what we’re there for,” Ficcaglia said.

“No pressure, no calls, no questions,” Derella said.

Derella, a Democrat, says the Christie administration and other South Jersey Democratic leaders like Sen. Norcross and Senate President Sweeney had nothing to do with the board’s decision.

“Never a discussion about anything in regards to pressure for any governmental agency or anything like that. It was just a direction we wanted to go,” said Derella.

As for the new Pinelands commissioner’s opinion on the proposed pipeline project, Derella says he doesn’t know where Jannarone stands on the issue.