



Green-group bus seeks out senators to thwart Pinelands pick

By CINDY NEVITT, Staff Writer , March 11, 2015

NORTHFIELD — At midday Wednesday, the Bus for Progress rolled into the parking lot in front of state Sen. Jim Whelan’s office and met the same result it had at its two prior stops: The man of the house wasn’t home.

Whelan, D-Atlantic, was out running errands, deputy chief of staff Mike Suleiman told the two dozen passengers who disembarked from the red, white and blue bus and assembled outside the headquarters on Tilton Road. The representatives from 17 different environmental groups were halfway through a daylong ride to five state senators’ offices to voice their protest against the pending appointment of Ocean City resident Robert Barr to the Pinelands Commission.

“We’re talking to key state senators who haven’t definitively said how they’re going to vote,” said Doug O’Malley, 35, director of Environment New Jersey. “It’s going to be very close, and these five votes are critical.”

Barr did not return a phone call seeking comment Wednesday night.

Earlier, the caravan — consisting of the Bus for Progress and cars carrying protesters who were participating in shorter legs along the route — was told that state Sen. Robert Singer, R-Ocean, Burlington, was out of the country, and state Sen. Christopher Connors, R-Ocean, Burlington, Atlantic, wasn’t in. Later in the day, the group was told that state Sen. Nilsa Cruz-Perez, D-Camden, wasn’t in, either, although all the legislators had been informed ahead of time to expect visitors. Only state Sen. Peter Barnes, D-Middlesex, met with the group.

O'Malley said Barnes rearranged his schedule to meet with the protesters and that, while still undecided on how he would vote on Barr's nomination, he wanted to hear the group's opposing arguments. The nomination could occur as soon as Monday before the full Senate.

Unlike Barnes, who is unsure of his position, Marianne Clemente, 68, of Barnegat Township, has no doubt Barr is the wrong choice for the job.

"We're asking these senators to vote no on Robert Barr's appointment to the Pinelands Commission," she said, standing by the bus outside Whelan's office, clad in a green sweatshirt that listed the "Top 10 Reasons to Preserve the Pinelands." The Bus for Progress is a grass-roots organization based in central New Jersey, whose goal is to bring attention to local, state and federal issues and to encourage citizen participation in government.

"They're replacing Robert Jackson, an outstanding member with nothing but the best interest at heart for the Pinelands, with this Barr person who has absolutely no experience and no background," Clemente said.

Jackson, of Middle Township, is among those who voted against a memorandum of agreement last year that would have permitted a natural gas pipeline to be constructed through the protected Pinelands to the B.L. England Generating Station in the Beesleys Point section of Upper Township.

He and other commissioners were then removed by Gov. Chris Christie, who has since been accused of trying to stack the deck in favor of the pipeline by nominating candidates seen as yes-men. Barr is a legislative aide to state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, who is a staunch supporter of the pipeline.