

Environmentalists Campaign by Bus Ahead of Pinelands Commission Vote

Jon Hurdle | March 12, 2015

Conservationists hit the road to visit five New Jersey senators still believed to be undecided about controversial Barr nomination



Opponents of Gov. Chris Christie's controversial nominee to the New Jersey Pinelands Commission took their campaign on the road on Wednesday, visiting the offices of five undecided state senators days before an expected vote on the issue by the full Senate.

About 35 supporters of 16 environmental groups took a day-long bus tour to the district offices of two Republican and three Democratic senators who were believed to be still making up their minds whether to back Robert Barr, an Ocean City Democrat, for a seat on the Pinelands panel.

At least three of the senators were out of the office so campaigners, standing in parking lots and at strip malls, had to make their case to staffers, who were asked to impress on their bosses the importance of voting "no" on Barr's nomination.

The environmentalists say Barr's appointment would likely lead to the approval of a 22-mile natural gas pipeline through the environmentally sensitive area, undermine the integrity of the

commission, and send a signal to other independent New Jersey commissions that they are also at risk from political manipulation.

“This is much more than about the pipeline,” said David Pringle, New Jersey campaign director for Clean Water Action. “The Pinelands needs to stand above politics, and if on the most important issue, they are going to succumb, there’s going to be more pressure and more bad projects in the future.

“It sets a horrible precedent, not just for the Pinelands but for independent agencies everywhere,” Pringle said.

Barr’s nomination, which was narrowly approved at the third attempt by the Senate Judiciary Committee on February 24, has already been opposed by former New Jersey governors Kean, Whitman, Byrne and Florio who wrote a highly unusual joint letter to the Senate, arguing that approval would “undermine” the commission’s independence.

If confirmed, Barr would replace Robert Jackson, an opponent of the pipeline whose term has expired. Critics fear Barr would end a deadlock over the pipeline, allowing it to be built, and threatening a fragile ecosystem. A Senate vote on the issue could come as early as Monday, March 16, campaigners say.

Doug O’Malley, director of Environment New Jersey, and a participant in Wednesday’s bus tour, said expectations that Barr would vote for the pipeline are based in part on his close relationship with Sen. Jeff Van Drew, a strong pipeline supporter.

“You judge a man by the company he keeps,” O’Malley said.

Neither Barr nor Van Drew could be reached for comment.

Critics say Barr lacks the expertise to sit on the panel, which is charged with protecting and preserving the natural and cultural resources of the Pineland National Reserve, covering about 1 million acres in southern New Jersey.

But the commission’s executive director, Nancy Wittenberg, said the 15 members of the panel, who are volunteers, do not necessarily begin their tenure with expertise suited to their work.

“There are no qualification requirements for this commission,” she said, in an interview.

In her four years as executive director, Wittenberg said eight new commissioners have joined the panel, four of whom have been appointed by the governor; three by counties, and one from the federal government, and that all have worked without disagreement.

“I don’t see why this one is any different,” she said.

Participants in Wednesday’s bus tour chose the five Senators -- who represent parts of Atlantic, Camden, Ocean, Middlesex, and Burlington counties -- because of their past environmental votes; their record of voting on their consciences; and because they are among those who are undecided, said O’Malley of Environment New Jersey.

At Northfield outside Atlantic City, Democratic Senator Jim Whelan’s deputy chief of staff, Michael Suleiman, told campaigners and journalists that the Senator was “running errands” so could not talk to them directly, but was still deciding how to vote on the Barr nomination.

Outside the Audubon office of Democratic Senator Nilsa Cruz-Perez, the tour party met with Christopher Summerhayes, the senator's legislative director, who listened politely and took notes on the campaigners' comments.

And at the Forked River office of Republican Senator Christopher Connors, campaigners presented a press release to office staff and talked to reporters before reboarding their red-white-and-blue "Bus for Progress," which carried banners saying "Pinelands Not Pipelands -- Don't Stack the Commission" and "Protect the Pine Barrens -- NJ's Last Great Wilderness."

Britta Wenzel, executive director of the environmental group Save Barnegat Bay, said at the Forked River stop that she wanted to shield the Commission from political interference.

"The Pinelands Commission has always been a nonpartisan governmental commission that tries to make decisions that are guided by good environmental ethics, not by politics that are happening in Trenton," Wenzel said.