

Senate panel grills Pinelands Commission nominees over gas pipeline

By MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, October 16, 2014 7:00 pm

TRENTON — The Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday asked a series of tough, pointed questions to nominees to replace Pinelands commissioners who voted against a South Jersey Gas pipeline in January.

The senators wanted to know if the two, nominated by Gov. Chris Christie in May, have been instructed to vote for the pipeline should it come before the commission again.

Both Robert Barr, of Ocean City, and Dennis Roohr, mayor of New Hanover Township, Burlington County, insisted no one from the governor's office has discussed the pipeline with them. Both said they have not formed an opinion about it and had decided on their own to stop reading news reports related to the pipeline after being nominated, so they could remain neutral.

Their nominations were made public in May, but both estimated they stopped reading about the issue earlier in the year.

During Roohr's testimony, which came first in the Judiciary Committee meeting, some senators seemed particularly angry.

"This is the biggest issue to hit the Pinelands ever. To come here and not have an opinion I find very disturbing," said state Sen. Christopher Bateman, R-Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Somerset. "Without an answer I could not support your nomination. I'm shocked you don't have an opinion."

Barr was introduced by state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, a vocal supporter of the pipeline who called Barr a friend.

"Bobby has CP (cerebral palsy) and considerable challenges, which he decided at a young age to overcome," Van Drew said of Barr, who uses a wheelchair and is an advocate for people with disabilities as well as a Democratic Party organizer. "I hope you will give him due consideration."

When asked if he believes he's been nominated to try to change the pipeline vote, Barr scoffed.

"If that's why they nominated me, it's a risky proposition," Barr said.



crowd at the rally (2).jpg

Pinelands demonstration at Statehouse Oct. 16, 2014

Committee Vice Chairwoman and state Sen. Nia H. Gill, D-Essex, Passaic, said she is looking for people with a strong knowledge base as commissioner, and was surprised that nominees would say they had chosen not to be informed about Pinelands issues.

At one point, state Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen, asked Roohr if there are newspapers serving his hometown, which is on the Pinelands border.

“You don’t seem to be aware of anything to do with the Pinelands. Yet you would replace Robert Jackson and D’Arcy Rohan Green, both of whom have expertise and are actively involved.”

Christie nominated Barr and Roohr to the seats currently held by Democrat Jackson, of Middle Township, and Republican Rohan Green, of Bay Head in Ocean County.

Jackson and Rohan Green had voted against the commission entering into a memorandum of agreement with the Board of Public Utilities that would have allowed South Jersey Gas to build a pipeline through about 10 miles of protected Pinelands Forest to the B.L. England Generating Station in Beesley’s Point, Upper Township.

Roohr held his ground.

“I have no inclination. I’m in the center,” said Roohr, a farmer who said he has promoted farmland preservation and advocated larger lot sizes to contain sprawl in his hometown. “I want to learn and do the best thing for the Pinelands mission statement.”

The meeting adjourned without a vote being taken and before members of the public had a chance to speak. The consideration of the two nominees will continue at a later date, said Committee Chairman and state Sen. Nicholas P. Scutari, D-Middlesex, Somerset, Union.

Environmentalist Steve Fenichel, of Ocean City, who opposes the nominations and attended with his wife, Georgina Shanley, said he left the meeting hopeful.

“The senators are really doing their due diligence,” Fenichel said. “It’s not just a rush to do the politically expedient thing.

Both Barr and Roohr said the governor’s office had not discussed any specific energy or environmental issues with them, and that they never had a face-to-face meeting with anyone in that office. Instead, they each had a few phone calls, strictly about the nomination process, they said.

They both professed a belief in the Pinelands Commission mission statement and a desire to protect the Pinelands National Reserve.

Barr said he had asked Van Drew years ago to help him become a Pinelands commissioner, but acknowledged he has never attended a Pinelands Commission meeting.

The governor’s office has tried to minimize the attempted replacements of Jackson and Rohan Green,

saying their terms were up and the new nominees are qualified, hard-working and independent. But it is highly unusual for Pinelands commissioners to be replaced. Many have served for decades, some for many years past the expiration of their last official term.

Jackson, a businessman, former West Cape May mayor and the only African-American on the commission, was appointed by Gov. Jon Corzine in 2008. Rohan Green was appointed by Christie in 2011, and had only served one term. Terms are for three years, but commissioners serve until replaced.

Earlier in the day, about 30 environmentalists from the New Jersey Sierra Club, the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, Clean Water Action/NJEF; Environment New Jersey, and the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters rallied on the steps of the State House to protest the attempt to replace Jackson and Rohan Green, said attendee Joel Fogel, of Somers Point and Waterwatch International.

They carried signs that read “No Means No!” and “Don’t Gas The Pines.”

None of the senators on the Judiciary Committee represent Pinelands districts. They are all from Central and North Jersey.

Contact Michelle Brunetti Post:

609-272-7219

MPost@pressofac.com

@MichelleBPost on Twitter