

Senate Committee Blocks Two Appointments to Pinelands Commission

Tom Johnson | October 17, 2014

Nominees questioned about their stand on controversial natural-gas pipeline that would cut through the preserve



Credit: Pinelands Preservation Alliance

In a move viewed as a victory by conservationists, the Senate Judiciary Committee yesterday held off action on two nominees to the Pinelands Commission whose appointment they fear would tip the balance of the agency to support a controversial 22-mile natural gas pipeline through the heart of the preserve.

At a hearing where senators repeatedly questioned the nominees about their views on the project, few specific answers were forthcoming on how they stood on the proposal, which was blocked by the Pinelands Commission in a vote this past January.

The nominations are viewed as important because the nominees would replace two commissioners who voted to block the pipeline, which also sparked opposition from four former governors -- Democrats Brendan Byrne and Jim Florio and Republicans Tom Kean and Christie Whitman.

The pipeline project would feed natural gas to the B.L. England plant in upper Cape May County from Maurice River Township in a \$90 million proposal advanced by South Jersey Gas. The plant is expected to close its coal-generating unit under a consent decree signed with the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), but could remain open if the gas pipeline is built.

Senators on both sides of the aisle asked the nominees on how they stood on the pipeline project.

Sen. Christopher (Kip) Bateman (R-Somerset) asked Dennis Roohr, a farmer and an elected official from Cookstown in Burlington County, his opinion on the pipeline.

"Sir, I do not. I don't have the facts," Roohr said, explaining that since he was nominated by Gov. Chris Christie in January, he has refrained from reading news stories about the commission and its policies.

The answer clearly concerned Bateman. "This is the biggest issue facing the Pinelands. I find it very disturbing," he said.

The other nominee, Robert Barr of Ocean City, was similar noncommittal on the project. If confirmed, he said he would seek to protect the Pinelands, which he described as a jewel of the state.

Barr did add that the former governors' opposition would have some influence on him. Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen) asked him if that would be a positive influence.

"Yes," he replied.

Environmentalists complained that the appointments would shift the direction of the Pinelands Commission.

"These nominations are a transparent effort to pack the Pinelands Commission with reliable 'yes' votes for a pipeline that directly violates the protections of the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan," said Carleton Montgomery, executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

David Moore, chairman of the board of the alliance, agreed. "Given the circumstances, it is clear the governor seeks to punish and remove people who served the public with integrity because they voted to enforce the clear protections of the Pinelands rules -- protections they are bound to implement faithfully and consistently," he said.

The pipeline project would deliver natural gas to Rockland Capital Energy Investments LLC, a Texas-based energy investment fund.

The pipeline, although opposed by many environmental groups, is backed by just as many business interests, who say the project is crucial to providing reliability to the region, particularly with the expected closure of the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant in 2019.