

Nomination of Ocean City's Bob Barr to Pinelands Commission draws mixed reactions



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Provided photo

Robert Barr of Ocean City, has been nominated by Gov. Chris Christie for the Pinelands Commission.

By CINDY NEVITT Staff Writer | Posted 3 days ago

Who is Bob Barr?

A 32-year-old Ocean City resident and six-year 1st District legislative aide to pipeline-through-the-pines supporter state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, Robert S. Barr was nominated last month to the Pinelands Commission by Gov. Chris Christie.

Mostly unknown outside his community, where he is active in a number of organizations, Barr has been held up to public scrutiny since Christie, in the words of his detractors, began “stacking” the Pinelands Commission with nominees expected to give him the “yes” votes needed to push the pipeline through the pines. In January, the commission voted 7-7 on a memorandum of agreement that would have allowed a 22-mile natural gas pipeline, a 10-mile section of it within the protected Pinelands, to be built between Maurice River Township and Upper Township. The agreement needed eight votes to pass.

Along with Barr, president of the Ocean City Democratic Club, Christie nominated Dennis Roohr, the Republican mayor of North Hanover in Burlington County, to replace two

commissioners who had voted against the pipeline. Christie appoints seven of the commission's 15 voting members, seven are appointed by the counties that contain Pinelands ground, and one is named by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Most of Christie's appointees voted against the pipeline, while most of the county appointees voted for it.

Barr's nomination, endorsed by Van Drew, has generated a fair share of criticism. There is some concern that his views on the pipeline are as unknown as he is, and some concerns his overall inexperience are not equal to the position. Yet others are confident he is up to the task.

"I don't know anything about Barr that would qualify him for a really important position like this to safeguard our natural resources," said Sam Lavner, former president of the Ocean City Democratic Club. Lavner, who said he had no opinion on the pipeline itself, said he compared Barr's credentials to those of the current and former commissioners before concluding Barr's experience did not measure up.

Mac McCarthy, an Ocean City resident who clashed in April with Barr over his handling of Ocean City Community Association's debates for candidates running for municipal office, said it was "pretty insulting" Barr had been nominated.

"Anybody who takes the job is being put in there to be a stooge," McCarthy said. "What other conclusion can you draw? I can't for a minute imagine his name popping up in Trenton without Van Drew."

"He may be a nice guy, but he's not competent to make heavy battle decisions like the ones regarding the Pinelands," said McCarthy's wife, Jane, who added that she was so "dumbfounded" by Barr's nomination that she called Christie's and Van Drew's offices to voice her objections.

"For Gov. Chris Christie to replace Pinelands Commissioner Robert Jackson with Bob Barr is simply disgusting," wrote Ocean City resident Steven Fenichel, a community activist and environmental watchdog, in a May 26 letter to the editor of The Press of Atlantic City. "Jackson is a man of integrity, and Barr is state Sen. Jeff Van Drew's tool."

"Robert Barr, decline this nomination and catch hold of your integrity," Maryjane Genestra, of Ocean View, wrote in a June 10 letter to the editor of The Press.

Barr has his supporters, too. Those who have worked with him in various capacities are convinced he is capable of acquitting himself admirably.

Curt Gronert, president of the Ocean City Community Association immediately prior to Barr, who now holds the office, has gotten to know Barr over the last five years from organizations to which they both belong. He lauds Barr, a member of the Ocean City Exchange Club Board of Directors, for "his eagerness to serve and to be involved in the public service arena."

"I have tremendous respect for him," said Van Drew, for whom Barr has served as a volunteer legislative aide since 2008, attending constituent meetings and assisting with cases that often

involve disability issues. “Nothing stops him. He’s a hard worker and a fierce advocate for the disabled.”

Barr is a representative for the Regional Family Support Planning Council in Cape May County, which falls under the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. As such, Van Drew said, the wheelchair-bound Barr has given “more of a voice” to the disabled community.

“He enjoys politics and government,” Van Drew said. “He’s a declared Democrat, but he’s not like some people who are all Republican or all Democrat. He’s very tolerant and open-minded.”

Keith Hartzell — for whom Barr acted as campaign manager during Hartzell’s recent successful run for a third term on Ocean City Council — said he has not discussed the Pinelands Commission nomination with Barr, other than to congratulate him.

“We didn’t talk about the board or what it does,” Hartzell said, “but I’m sure he’s qualified. He’s got a good adviser in Jeff. From the standpoint of a mentor, he hit a home run there. Jeff will give him good advice.”

“I’m not going to talk about the Pinelands with Bob,” said Van Drew, who added he hoped Barr’s nomination would be approved by the full membership of the state Senate before the body recesses for summer June 30. “I’m not going to taint that process.”

Among those who have known Barr the longest are those who taught him in high school. To many of them, Barr is still “Bobby.”

Two of his favorite teachers at Ocean City High School, from which Barr graduated in 1999 as the first disabled student to be educated in mainstream classes, have fond memories of their career-changing interactions with Bobby Barr.

Tony Galante had been a physical education teacher at OCHS for 16 years when Barr came into the gym in his wheelchair. John Bruno had been a history teacher at the school for half that time. Neither man had ever had a disabled student in class before Barr entered the high school as a freshman in 1995.

“He made every effort to overcome his disability,” said Bruno, a 26-year OCHS veteran who teaches Advanced Placement psychology. “He never used it as an excuse or a crutch. He never once complained. He wanted to be treated the same as everyone. That’s what I respect the most.”

Galante, who retired in 2013 after a 34-year career, said he taught Barr his freshman year and shared a lunch period with him each of the next three years. The two sparred on topics from sports to girls, and good-naturedly mocked one another for being vertically challenged.

“What I mainly remember is he was so much fun to tease,” said the 5-foot-2 Galante, whom Barr called “Shorty.” “He could take it as well as he gave it.”

Both men say they glimpsed Barr's future before he went on to the Richard Stockton College, where he earned a degree in communications in 2004.

"He was politically inclined," Galante said, adding that the Bobby he knew in high school was more of a conservative. "I know he wanted to be in politics when he was 14, 15 years old."

"At the time, I definitely felt he was going to be a leader," Bruno said. "He was very opinionated and would argue his point but always stay true to himself. I'm not surprised he has political aspirations."

Kevin Roberts, the governor's spokesman, said at the time of Barr's and Roohr's May 19 nominations, "The governor has nominated, as is his prerogative, two objectively qualified individuals who are hardworking, independent and have deep roots and extensive records of service in their communities."

Roberts did not respond to recent requests to allow Barr to speak to the media.

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