

David O'Reilly Inquirer Staff Writer Last updated: Wednesday, February 25, 2015, 1:07 AM Posted: Tuesday, February 24, 2015, 3:43 PM

## The Inquirer

The Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday narrowly approved Gov. Christie's nomination of Robert Barr to serve on the Pinelands Commission.

Barr, secretary of the Cape May County Democratic Committee, has been opposed by most state conservation and environmental organizations, which see him as a likely yes vote if South Jersey Gas seeks another waiver to build a controversial pipeline through the protected Pinelands.

Jaclyn Rhoades, assistant director of the advocacy group Pinelands Preservation Alliance, said it appeared the vote on Barr's nomination was scheduled for Tuesday because Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D., Union), who opposed Barr's nomination, was on vacation in Florida.

In Lesniak's absence, Senate President Stephen Sweeney appointed Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D., Cape May) to sit in his stead. Van Drew, a staunch advocate of the pipeline, had proposed Barr for the appointment last year and voted in his favor. Sweeney was in the committee room for the vote.

In remarks before his vote, Van Drew praised Barr as a conservationist, noting that he served on a utilities advisory committee.

But Sens. Kip Bateman (R. Somerset), Nia Gill (D., Essex), and Loretta Weinberg (D., Bergen), all of whom voted against Barr, said they did not feel he was qualified to serve and that it appeared he was being appointed in the expectation that he would vote for a pipeline waiver.

The Judiciary Committee had twice put off votes on Barr's nomination, in October and January.

In testimony before the committee in October, Barr told senators he had not followed the long debate over the pipeline and said Christie's aides had never queried him about his interest in, or knowledge of, the Pinelands or the work of the commission.

Approved by the panel on a 7-5 vote, with one abstention, Barr's nomination now goes to the full Senate for a vote.

If approved, he would succeed Robert Jackson, who voted against the pipeline last year. Jackson, not reappointed by Christie, was the only African American on the commission.

In an interview last year, Van Drew said he had not discussed Barr's views on the pipeline with him, but said he expected Barr would be "very objective and have an honest dialogue" if the matter came up again.

Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, denounced the committee's action.

"Christie and the Democrats are selling out New Jersey to the developers and polluters," he said in a statement, and warned that Barr's appointment would "dismantle 40 years of Pinelands protections and a successful growth management plan."

Doug O'Malley, executive director of Environment New Jersey, called the vote "Bridgegate in the Pines," and said Jackson had "paid with his job" for voting against Christie's wishes on the pipeline.

In January 2014, the Pinelands Commission voted, 7-7, on an application for a special waiver brought on behalf of South Jersey Gas by the Board of Public Utilities. Without a majority vote, the waiver request was denied.

South Jersey Gas officials have not said if they plan to seek another waiver for the 22-inch pipeline, or if they would seek an alternate route.

The original proposal called for about 10 miles of the proposed 22-mile-long pipeline to run through protected forest in southern Atlantic County, where such utilities are normally barred.

If approved, the line would transport natural gas extracted from the Marcellus Shale in Pennsylvania to the B.L. England electricity generation plant in Beesleys Point in Upper Township.

Rockland Capital, the Texas-based owner of the plant since 2007, wants to convert an existing coal-fired plant on the site to gas, at a cost of about \$400 million.

Commission Chairman Mark Lohbauer recently voiced concern that the guidelines for granting such waivers, known as intergovernmental memorandums of agreement, were too vague.

On Jan. 31 the commission's policy and implementation committee agreed informally to consider reviewing the waiver process, but did not agree on how a review committee should be composed. Lohbauer said a major revision of the procedure could take up to two years.

[doreilly@phillynews.com](mailto:doreilly@phillynews.com)