

Van Drew blocks Cumberland scientist's appointment to Pinelands Commission

By EDWARD VAN EMBDEN Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, January 26, 2010 |

Larry Niles was the choice of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, environmental groups throughout the region and even former Gov. Jon S. Corzine to fill a vacancy on the Pinelands Commission.

The state Senate thought otherwise.

In what was reportedly a last-minute decision, Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, voted to block Niles' appointment to the commission earlier this month with the support of Sen. President Stephen Sweeney, Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland.

The appointment of Niles, which progressed through the Senate Judiciary Committee before arriving on the senate floor, was expected by some to go through without interference.

Carleton Montgomery, executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, said he believes the move was prompted by a piece of legislation limiting the harvest of horseshoe crabs and the resentment from fishermen that followed.

Niles, who worked for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection for 30 years as a wildlife biologist, conducted research that led to the legislation.

"There are no scientists on the Pinelands Commission, and we thought it made a lot of sense to have one there. He has incomparable experience," Montgomery said. "Blocking occasionally happens, but it was definitely one of those back-room, slight-of-hand actions that the public resents."

Although the intention to block Niles did not come up publicly prior to it happening, Van Drew said the decision, supported by the Senate, was his and was made for good reason.

Niles would have been the only scientist on the 15-person apolitical commission, Van Drew conceded, although the Pinelands Commission has near-immediate access to numerous scientists working in a number of capacities in the state and in the state's various colleges, he added.

He also intimated that Niles, an ardent environmentalist, was not the "new set of eyes" the state was looking for to add to the commission.

"I feel very strongly with the Pinelands (Commission) that we need to insure that we maintain the initial goal, which is to preserve the Pinelands, while also ensuring that people who live and work within the Pinelands can survive," he said.

Van Drew said the decision was not a personal one.

Niles, of Greenwich Township in Cumberland County, declined extensive comment, saying he did not know too much about the decision. He said he was informed, however, that the decision was made because of his work limiting fishing.

But Van Drew disputed that assertion.

Van Drew said he encountered a number of people who were concerned with Niles' position as an insider, considering his 30 years of work with the state.

Montgomery said the decision was a bad one.

"You've got a scientist who has dedicated his life to science and is not involved in partisan politics in any sort of way, and he's willing to serve the public for free, volunteer time," Montgomery said. "It makes no sense from a public point of view."

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