

# Freeholders to vote on Pinelands appointment

By **DAVID LEVINSKY**  
STAFF WRITER

**MOUNT HOLLY** — Environmental groups are upset with the Burlington County Board of Freeholders for scheduling a vote on Thanksgiving Eve to appoint the county's representative to the New Jersey Pinelands Commission.

The freeholders are scheduled to meet at 11 a.m. Wednesday. The proposed vote on the Pinelands Commission appointment is on their agenda.

The agenda does not specify a nominee, but sources familiar with the situation expect one of the three Republican freeholders will tap the county's current commission representative, Sean Earlen, of Lumberton, for a new three-year term.

The board is split, with Republicans Bruce Garganio, Joe Donnelly and Joseph Howarth in the majority and Democrats Aimee Belgard and Joanne Schwartz in the minority.

See **PINELANDS**, Page A2



Earlen

## Pinelands

Continued from Page A1

Earlen, who is also a Lumberton committeeman, could not immediately be reached for comment.

The 15-member Pinelands Commission is charged with regulating land use in the 1-million-acre Pinelands Reserve, which is home to rare plants and animals and a pure water supply.

Seven of the commissioners are gubernatorial appointments and must be approved by the state Senate. Seven others are appointees from each of the seven counties that encompass the Pinelands. One is appointed by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior.

Earlen's term expired July 27, but he has been serving in a holdover capacity pending a vote by the freeholders to either reappoint him or replace him.

Appointments have drawn intense scrutiny in the wake of the commission's decision in January to reject a proposal by South Jersey Gas to allow a natural gas pipeline to cross through about 10 miles of the protected Pinelands to the old coal-fired BL England plant in Cape May County's Upper Township.

The commission wound up splitting the vote 7-7, with one recusal. At least eight yes votes were required to approve the pipeline, which has been supported by the Christie administration as necessary for maintaining the state's reliable energy supply.

The Cumberland County Board of Freeholders

already has replaced former Commissioner Leslie Ficaglia, who voted against the pipeline. And in May, Christie nominated New Hanover Mayor Dennis Roohr and Ocean City resident Robert Barr to replace Commissioners D'Arcy Rohan Green and Robert Jackson, who also voted against the project.

Earlen was among the seven commissioners who voted in favor of the pipeline. Environmentalists fear the Christie administration is trying to stack the commission with pipeline supporters in anticipation that the body might revisit the project.

"The members of the Pinelands Commission are absolutely critical to the success or failure of the Pinelands protection effort, so it is vital that Pinelands counties only appoint people who are proven champions of the Pinelands," said Carlton Montgomery, executive director of the Southampton-based Pinelands Preservation Alliance. "The evenly split vote of the commission on the pipeline deal proposed for the Pinelands forest area last January shows just how important these county appointments are."

Montgomery and other environmental leaders said they took issue with the timing of the vote (the day before Thanksgiving) and without any notice on the identity of the nominee or nominees.

"Without prior notice, the public cannot give informed comment," Montgomery said.

County spokesman Eric Arpert said names cannot be released because no nominations have officially been

made yet. However, he said the appointment has been discussed by the freeholders at previous meetings dating back to July, when Schwartz announced her intention to nominate J. Garfield DeMarco, a former Burlington County Republican chairman, to replace Earlen.

She ended up pulling DeMarco's name from consideration last month, at his request.

"He backed out for personal reasons. Otherwise, I would have gone ahead and nominated him," Schwartz said Tuesday.

She said she believes all appointments should be advertised well in advance so residents can submit their names and qualifications for consideration.

"That would be more transparent," Schwartz said.

Arpert said that freeholders are free to solicit interest for appointments and that the process for nominating appointments is unchanged.

"We're following the same process we always have," he said. "It's on the agenda to allow the public to comment about it, and it's something the freeholders have been talking about for months."

Schwartz disagreed, and said she would make a motion to table the appointment until next month so more candidates can come forward.

She also said she intended to vote against Earlen's reappointment if he is nominated.

"He voted for the pipeline, and I don't think that was in the best interest of the Pinelands," Schwartz said.

David Levinsky: 609-871-8154; email: dlevinsky@calkins.com; Twitter: @davidlevinsky