

Two Burlington County residents nominated to Pinelands Commission



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by David Levinsky

Longtime Burlington County berry grower Stephen V. Lee III has been nominated to return to the New Jersey Pinelands Commission, a development that was cheered by agriculture advocates but criticized by the leaders of two environmental groups.

Lee, of Woodland, was one of six nominees, all Republicans, put forward by Gov. Chris Christie late Thursday. The others were Pemberton Township Councilman Rick Prickett; Candace Ashmun, the commission's chairwoman and its only original member; D'Arcy Green, chairwoman of the Bay Head Environmental Commission; Mark Lohbauer, a Pennsauken resident and former Camden County freeholder; and Lacey Township Mayor Gary Quinn.

The 15-member commission is charged with regulating land use in the 1-million-acre Pinelands reserve that is home to rare plants and animals and a pure water supply.

Seven members are gubernatorial appointments and must be approved by the full state Senate. The others include appointees of the seven counties that encompass the Pinelands and one appointee by the U.S. secretary of the Interior.

If confirmed, the nominees will fill three vacancies and replace two members, conservationist Ed Lloyd and Judith Link, who are serving as holdovers with expired terms. Ashmun, also a holdover, was nominated for reappointment. Her term expired in June 2009.

Lee, who owns and operates Lee Brothers Inc. cranberry farms, previously served on the commission from 1982 until he was replaced in early 2010 during the last weeks of former Gov.

Jon S. Corzine's administration. Corzine's move angered Lee's fellow farmers, who complained that the commission was losing one of its strongest advocates.

Peter Furey, executive director of the New Jersey Farm Bureau, said bringing Lee back was a good move.

"Stephen Lee not only has unparalleled institutional knowledge of the commission, but he also has a stakeholders' knowledge of the region and the interests of farmers, businesses and residents," Furey said. "He's a strong choice as far as we're concerned."

Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, was less welcoming of Lee — whom he called "our biggest nemesis" — particularly if the cranberry grower seizes control of the commission chairman's post from Ashmun.

"I respect Steve, but he's very good at what he does, which is denigrating Pinelands protections," Tittel said. "Bringing him back is a sign the governor's more concerned with Republican politics than protecting the Pinelands."

Tittel said he also was concerned with the nomination of Quinn, whom he described as pro-development. He said the other nominees ranged from "very good" to moderate.

Carleton Montgomery, director of the nonprofit advocacy group Pinelands Preservation Alliance, said most of the appointments appeared to be "good and appropriate people" but he was also critical of Lee and Quinn as well as Christie's decision to nominate only Republicans.

"I've always questioned (Lee's) commitment to the mission of the Pinelands," Montgomery said. "Historically, his approach has been directed toward protecting the interests of some businesses."

He also was concerned about the loss of Lloyd and about Christie's decision to nominate only Republicans.

"The message it sends is that the governor does not see (protecting the Pinelands) as a bipartisan effort. Traditionally, the commission has been one of the few places where Democrats and Republicans have put aside party," Montgomery said.

Prickett was formerly a Democrat who switched parties last year.

Christie's press office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Lee could not be reached for comment.

Paul Leakan, spokesman for the Pinelands Commission, declined to comment on the nominees but said filling the vacancies was important.

"The commission has been functioning with multiple vacancies, so we're thrilled the governor has taken action to make it whole," Leakan said. "Having a full complement of commissioners is critical."

David Levinsky can be reached at 609-871-8154 or dlevinsky@phillyBurbs.com