

Pinelands Commission dean to leave post after 30 years

By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, December 31, 2009 |

Gov. Jon S. Corzine is asking the state Senate to replace the dean of the Pinelands Commission after 30 years of representing environmentalists.

Candace Ashmun, 85, a Somerset County Republican, joined the commission in 1979, the year after Congress established the Pinelands National Reserve. After her term expired in June, the board's longest-serving member got word from the governor's office that she would not be reappointed.

Instead, Corzine in December nominated Mercer County Democrat Jeffrey Laurenti.

"I think it would be nice after all these years to have an explanation. But I don't expect it," Ashmun said Thursday.

The American Littoral Society and other groups this week lobbied the governor and the Senate to reappoint and confirm Ashmun to another three-year term, noting her experience and reputation in conservation.

The Pinelands Commission manages development and environmental regulations in the 56 municipalities that make up the reserve.

The commission is composed of 15 unpaid members, seven of whom are appointed by the governor. Seven are appointed by freeholders in each of the Pinelands counties and the last by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Republicans and Democrats alike, including Corzine, had reappointed Ashmun. She was former director of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions and consulted for green groups.

"I was on the planning entity that preceded the Pinelands Commission," she said. "Mostly it's a question of institutional memory and helping the rest of the Pinelands Commission and the staff. Sometimes that helps. It's much easier for me to say, 'We've done that, been there.'"

The commission is apolitical. with a mix of Democrats and Republicans.

"Everything the Pinelands Commission does is apt to raise someone's ire. I've never heard anything of particular concern from the governor's office," she said.

Corzine's office did not return calls seeking comment Thursday.

Laurenti is senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a public-policy group, and worked as director of the New Jersey Senate from 1978 to 1984. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and has degrees from Harvard and Princeton.

Lately, Laurenti said, he has been researching issues related to global warming.

He said he sometimes brought foreign dignitaries visiting the United Nations to New Jersey to see the vast Pinelands.

"It's a part of the state I felt very strongly about for many years. I would be happy to take the appointment," he said.

Laurenti praised Ashmun's service to the commission and noted that his confirmation is not guaranteed. Gov-elect Chris Christie has been feuding with Corzine over his more than 200 lame-duck appointments. And senators have the discretion to block nominees from their own districts.

"I assume I would not be appointed by the incoming administration," Laurenti said.

Meanwhile, the Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday will decide whether to confirm Larry Niles to the commission to fill a vacancy. Niles, a former employee with the state Department of Environmental Protection, is perhaps best known for his work with imperiled shorebirds such as the red knot.

Pinelands Commission member Robert Jackson of Middle Township said he would like to see Ashmun win reappointment because of her willingness to compromise.

"Her knowledge is invaluable. She's probably one of the greatest advocates for balance," he said.

Buena Vista Township Mayor Chuck Chiarello said Ashmun was fair and thoughtful when he appeared before the commission over projects such as the redevelopment of the railroad town Richland Village.

"She understood how towns like Buena Vista are so controlled by Pinelands rules. She understood the environmental impacts, too. She was open to working with finding some solutions," he said.

Ashmun said 1970s plans to run pipelines from offshore oil platforms across the state helped spur interest in protecting the Pinelands. The commission will have an increasingly difficult job conserving sensitive lands over the next 30 years, she said. But she is happy to have taken part in this preservation.

"Hey, we still have a Pinelands and it's still protected," she said.

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