

EDITORIAL: Preserve integrity of the Pinelands

8 p.m. EST - February 26, 2015

The back-channel political dealing that has characterized efforts by the Christie administration to ram a natural gas pipeline through the Pinelands over the objections of the independent Pinelands Commission hit another new low in sleaziness Tuesday.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, in a hastily called third vote on the nomination of Robert Barr, a candidate lacking any environmental credentials, to replace a veteran commissioner with impeccable credentials, approved the nomination by a single vote. Barr's presence on the commission could tip the balance if a new vote on the South Jersey Gas Co. pipeline were to occur.

That could happen if South Jersey Gas Co.'s lawsuit to overturn the commission's vote results in a court-ordered revote, or if South Jersey Gas Co. submits an amended application.

Barr's nomination will now go to the full Senate for a vote. Anyone who cares about the ecological health of the Pinelands and the importance of preserving the autonomy of independent commissions should let senators know in no uncertain terms that they want Barr's nomination blocked.

STORY: [Pick for Pinelands panel approved over environmentalists' objections](#)

STORY: [Senate foregoes vote on Pinelands panel nominees](#)

EDITORIAL: [Pinelands pipeline remains inadvisable idea](#)

STORY: [Environmentalists fear return of pipeline plan](#)

The pipeline, as we have argued many times before, would run through the Pinelands Forest Area in violation of Pinelands regulations. It poses unacceptable environmental, health and public safety risks. The commission voted to block the pipeline only after thoughtful deliberation. The majority of commissioners opposed the pipeline despite unethical attempts by the Christie administration to push the project through and to later subvert the process by replacing qualified commission members who opposed the pipeline with those willing to do the administration's bidding.

Four former New Jersey governors have come out against the pipeline. And the chair and co-chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Senate Majority Leader all opposed Barr's nomination, largely on questions of principle — maintaining the integrity of independent agencies and commissions, which Barr's nomination clearly threatens.

Perhaps even sleazier than Tuesday's hastily called vote, which violated the Senate's own public notification requirements, was the decision by Senate President Steve Sweeney to name the pipeline's most vocal Senate proponent, Jeff Van Drew, to replace the vacationing Ray Lesniak, a vocal opponent of the pipeline, on the judiciary committee for Tuesday's vote. Worse, Lesniak had called Sweeney on Tuesday to tell him he could return in time for the vote, but was told Van Drew already had been named to replace him. It was Van Drew's "aye" that gave the nomination the seventh vote needed to advance the nomination for full Senate consideration.

Our hope is that there are enough senators in the Legislature, in both parties, who refuse to be party to the political strong-arming demonstrated by the two most powerful politicians in Trenton. At Tuesday's hearing, it was clear there are some who will refuse to genuflect to the leadership — Democrats Nia Gill and Loretta Weinberg and Republican Kip Bateman, among them.

But citizens must serve notice on their Senate representatives that they expect them to preserve the environmental integrity of a unique ecological treasure —and to act to restore a modicum of political integrity in Trenton.