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# Pinelands pipeline backers mobilize for another try

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By Edward Colimore, Inquirer Staff Writer

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**PINELANDS** The long, heated debate ended, the votes were cast, and a proposed natural gas pipeline through the environmentally sensitive Pinelands appeared dead.

Nearly three months ago, a divided New Jersey Pinelands Commission blocked the variance that would have allowed work to proceed on a project supported by the Christie administration.

But pipeline advocates weren't ready to give up - and are now preparing a bipartisan counterattack in what some see as the Jersey equivalent of the national debate over the Keystone XL pipeline.

A growing number of elected officials from Gov. Christie to lawmakers including Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester) have joined county freeholders and township officials in support of the project.

They are considering ways of returning the issue to the Pinelands Commission, possibly as a "compelling public need" for energy security and scores of jobs.

"So many elected officials are rallying around this project," said Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D., Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic), who has helped lead the charge and met with Christie and Sweeney this month to discuss the pipeline effort.

"From the state to the county level, there is a true commitment to protecting the economy of the region and ensuring a strong energy future for South Jersey," he said.

The pipeline "just makes sense," said Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo (D., Atlantic).

It's a "winning combination for all stakeholders," added Assemblyman Sam Fiocchi (R., Cumberland, Cape May, Atlantic).

Opponents, such as the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) and New Jersey Sierra Club, are getting ready, too. In phone calls and e-mails, they have alerted followers to the new push.

"On January 10th, the Pinelands Commission made a courageous, landmark decision in refusing to waive basic protections for the New Jersey Pinelands and authorize a natural gas pipeline," said one PPA e-mail. ". . . Efforts are afoot to override or negate" that decision.

The project is unneeded, environmentally unsound, and unsafe because it passes through areas susceptible to fires, opponents said.

Proposed by South Jersey Gas, the pipeline would run nearly 22 miles from Maurice River Township in Cumberland County to a proposed gas-powered electrical generating plant in Upper Township in Cape May County.

About 15 miles of it would go through the Pinelands: 10.2 miles in the forest area along with two miles in the Pinelands rural development areas and 2.7 miles in the Pinelands Village management area.

As far as the Pinelands Commission goes, though, there is no project. "People are upset and frustrated and want to talk about it," said Nancy Wittenberg, the commission's executive director.

But the issue isn't before the commission, which has continued to receive numerous letters and resolutions from townships and counties supporting the pipeline.

"In terms of definitive plans forward, I don't have anything new to report at this time," said South Jersey Gas spokesman Dan Lockwood. "We're, of course, happy to see supporters continue to speak out in favor of this project.

"While we continue to study our options for moving forward, this shows how vital this project is to the needs of our region," he

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said. "It will add jobs, lead to significant emissions reductions from the plant, and allow us to provide enhanced service reliability to our customers in Atlantic and Cape May Counties."

Other support has come from Assemblyman Bob Andrzejczak (D., Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic); the Cape May County Freeholders, who passed a resolution advocating the pipeline; Atlantic County Freeholder Frank Formica; Cumberland County Freeholder Director Joe Derella; and communities including Estell Manor, Buena Vista, and Mullica.

"The fact is that the Pinelands Commission rejected a specific proposal that was before them under very difficult circumstances," said Van Drew. "The vote occurred at the height of an emotionally charged debate during which misinformation was being disseminated."

The pipeline was supposed to run to the proposed Upper Township plant, which was to replace the coal-fired plant operated by B.L. England at Beesley Point. That plant has for decades violated state air-pollution standards. On that ground, the state Department of Environmental Protection has endorsed the project.

"I will not sit by and watch the generating station close, our energy reliability deteriorate, and our region's economy falter due to this wrongheaded decision," said Van Drew, adding that a "compelling public need waiver" may be sought.

The Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan largely bans development such as a pipeline. "It protects against the immediate harm such construction does to forests and wetlands," said Carleton Montgomery, PPA's executive director. "Even more important, it protects against further infrastructure and sprawling development of all kinds that the pipeline would bring in its wake."

An exception to the comprehensive plan can be allowed by the commission if South Jersey Gas demonstrates a need for the project and shows that no feasible alternatives exist.

"But this particular power plant is not actually necessary, and the route through the forest is not even the only way to bring gas to it," Montgomery said.

Originally, the advocates tried to get past the management plan through a variance - a memorandum of agreement - which would allow the Pinelands Commission to lift restrictions if the developer offsets the project's impact.

"Now because they [pipeline advocates] don't like the outcome, they will put undue political pressure" on the commission, said New Jersey Sierra Club director Jeff Tittel. "They are willing to bully the commission that did its job."

But pipeline advocates say the project is especially important because of the coming retirement of the Oyster Creek Nuclear Generating Station in Ocean County. The closing of the B.L. England plant would result in higher utility rates, and also the loss of a major rateable in Upper Township, leading to higher property taxes, lawmakers and local officials said.

Opponents dispute that, saying all municipalities receive energy receipts-property tax relief dollars - and the amount won't be changed.

That kind of debate may be heard before the Pinelands Commission if it's asked to revisit the issue. For now, though, Wittenberg said, "we're not evaluating anything."

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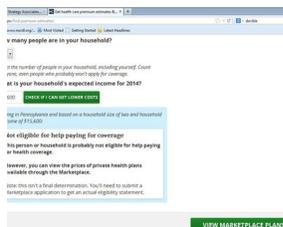
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