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Pinelands Commission moves meeting, pipeline vote to Sept. 14 in Trenton

By David Levinsky, staff writer 19 hrs ago



Allen Crawford, of Mount Holly, arranges his sign against the proposed New Jersey Natural Gas' Southern Reliability link during the Pinelands Commission's special meeting on Wednesday, July 26, 2017.

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The New Jersey Pinelands Commission is moving the date and location of its upcoming meeting, at which it is expected to vote on a controversial natural gas pipeline proposed through a small portion of the protected Pinelands.

The meeting will be held Sept. 14 at 9:30 a.m. at the Trenton War Memorial rather than this Friday at an arena in Toms River.

The date and location change is the latest twist in the commission's closely-watched and controversial review of New Jersey Natural Gas' proposed Southern Reliability Link pipeline, a 30-mile gas transmission line planned to run from a compressor station in Chesterfield west through North Hanover, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, and several towns in Monmouth and Ocean counties.



The commission's approval is required because a portion of the route crosses through the Pinelands.

The date and location were moved after the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and New Jersey Sierra Club complained that Friday's date did not comply with the commission's resolution establishing guidelines and timelines for the pipeline's review.

The June 9 resolution specified that no vote could occur until at least 10 days after the commission's executive director and staff issued a recommendation on the project. But it also specified that so-called "interested parties" with property interests in the Pinelands impacted by the project would be given 15 days to request a special hearing before the full commission.

Executive Director Nancy Wittenberg issued a report recommending the project's approval on Aug. 29, the same day the commission released its agenda for the Friday meeting with the proposed pipeline vote listed.

While the meeting date complied with the 10-day condition established in the June resolution, it did not leave enough time for the required 15 days for impacted landowners to request a special hearing.

Wittenberg described the inconsistency as an oversight in responses to the Sierra Club and Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

"In scheduling the above matter for consideration at the Sept. 8, 2017, commission meeting, commission staff adhered to the requirements of paragraph 5. It was never staff's intent to limit the ability of a party with requisite standing to file an appeal request in the New Jersey Natural Gas matter," Wittenberg wrote in one of the letters notifying the groups of the date and location change.

"In light of the inconsistency, and being cognizant of the time commitment of the commissioners who volunteer their time to serve on the commission, the commission has decided to reschedule its September meeting to Sept. 14, 2017."

To date, no landowner within the impacted area of the Pinelands has requested a hearing, according to a commission spokesman.

Most of the route through the Pinelands is on the joint base, where utility infrastructure is conditionally permitted under Pinelands development rules if it is associated with the function of the military installation.

The base's current and two previous commanders have endorsed the pipeline.

In a letter to the commission, Todd M. Parisi, an attorney representing the Pinelands Preservation Alliance in the pipeline matter, said the initial meeting date was "yet another in a long line of flaws in its handling of New Jersey Natural Gas' application."

"The commission should at least adhere to its own rules affording rights of appeal from the executive director's recommendation, and not simply ignore them when it sees fit," Parisi wrote.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, was also critical.

"Once again, Nancy Wittenberg overstepped her bounds and exceeded her authority. There were conflicts between the resolution and Pinelands rules, and her release of the report. This time, the Pinelands Commission listened to our outcry over this. They have rescheduled their meeting a week later and to a better location for the public," Tittel said.

"The commission did this because we forced them to do the right thing. They consistently try to hide information from the public and interfere with the public's right to be involved in the process. We hope that the extra time and more convenient location will allow more people to come out and tell the commission to do their job and reject this pipeline."

On Sept. 14, the commission is also scheduled to consider a resolution to designate appropriate roads and trails through Wharton State Forest. That issue has also generated debate, as both the commission and New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection have discussed ways to reduce damage caused by Jeeps, SUVs and other vehicles intentionally or unintentionally driving through streams, ponds, wetlands and fields, or on trails that aren't considered appropriate for motor vehicles.

As part of those efforts, the commission has assembled a map designating appropriate roads and trails through the 125,000-acre forest, with the intention that the DEP would use it as part of its educational and enforcement efforts.

The map was assembled from several topographical maps prepared by the U.S. Geological Survey in 1972, 1981, 1995 and 1997.

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