

Opinion: Natural gas pipeline through N.J. Pinelands is a conduit for trouble

By Times of Trenton guest opinion column
on August 23, 2013 at 5:55 AM

By Carleton Montgomery

People across the state and the region are becoming engaged and opposing a development project that could seriously damage the New Jersey Pinelands. South Jersey Gas is proposing to put a 22-mile natural-gas pipeline through the Pinelands Forest Management Area in order to enable the B.L. England Generating Station power plant at Beesley's Point, right on the Great Egg Harbor River, to be retrofitted and greatly expanded.

This is a bad place for a power plant in the first place — and it's a bad place to give new life to a generating station that has, for years, barely operated. If operated at full capacity, the plant's cooling system will suck in and kill billions of fish, turtles and other living things every year, of more than 130 different species, then spew hot water into the bay on which it sits.

Just as important, the proposed pipeline violates the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP), which forbids gas lines in the forest area — excepting the limited lines that “primarily serve the needs of the Pinelands.” To the extent it operates at all, the B.L. England plant serves demand outside the Pinelands.

This rule was put in the CMP for good reason. This kind of infrastructure can bring environmental harm and pressure for more development along its route. The Pinelands Commission is charged to defend the Pinelands CMP, yet it is in discussions with the Board of Public Utilities (BPU) and South Jersey Gas to waive its restrictions for the project. That would be a mistake for several reasons.

First, if the Pinelands Commission doesn't stand by own its rules, no one else will — certainly not the BPU or South Jersey Gas. When the commission grants special exceptions for powerful players, it undermines the whole Pinelands protection project and raises the question as to why anyone should respect its decisions. The Pinelands CMP has been in place for more than 30 years, giving utilities more than enough notice to plan their infrastructure projects to comply with the rules. If the rules are waived now, the plan will not work to shape the course of development over the long run and protect irreplaceable open spaces, water and ecosystems.

Second, approving one pipeline project will invite more. The Pinelands was created in part as a response to plans to construct offshore drilling platforms and run transportation pipes across the Pinelands to refineries on the Delaware River. Offshore

drilling did not happen 40 years ago, but the idea was revived in the last presidential election and is sure to arise again. Similarly, proposals for liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals along the shore continue to put forward, raising the possibility that pipes would be proposed across the Pinelands to transport the natural gas.

Third, there is no good public-interest reason to make an exception in this case. Proponents seek “green cover” by arguing that natural gas is cleaner than the coal and oil that have fired the plant in the past. The argument is seductive, but wrong. The plant has, for years, operated only during times of peak demand. Thus, the plant is not needed to operate on a full-time basis at all. If changed to natural gas and full operation, it will cause more air pollution than it does now, to say nothing of the environmental and health risks inherent in the production and transport of the gas to the isolated plant.

Finally, there are alternatives to the proposed pipeline route, even if the B.L. England plant is to be upgraded for full-time production. The Pinelands Plan is not only about conservation; it also includes growth zones where development and infrastructure are supposed to go. There are power plants directly to the north in Atlantic County, so it should be possible to run a supply line where it will not impinge on the interior forests of the Pinelands.

There is a groundswell of public opposition to the proposal. It is vital that citizens who care about the issue make their voices heard. One way is to sign the online petition at tinyurl.com/PinesPetition. Another is to write directly to the Pinelands Commission or, best of all, to attend and speak out at one of the public meetings where the commission is hearing the issue.

Carleton Montgomery is executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. Contact the Pinelands Preservation Alliance for more information at (609) 859-8860 ext. 22 or visit online at pinelandsalliance.org.
