

EDITORIAL: Keep fighting Pinelands pipeline scam

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(Photo: File photo)

A new and completely unnecessary pipeline may soon be plowing through the Pinelands thanks to the apparent successful completion of a treacherous scam pulled off by Gov. Chris Christie, his administration and his cronies who care not at all about the environment.

The story of the project's approval has ramifications for all New Jerseyans given the proliferation of pipeline proposals dotting the state.

Last week, the state Board of Public Utilities approved the 22-mile natural gas line, explaining that the project fits the state's energy master plan to expand its distribution infrastructure — which pretty much means more pipelines. The BPU essentially ignored any environmental concerns, while supporters offer the usual assurances of how much better this will be for everyone. For example, the project will provide gas to the B.L. England plant in Cape May County that will replace an old — and shuttered — coal-powered operation, providing cleaner energy.

Oh, and don't forget — every pipeline project means *cheaper* energy(!) too. That's always part of the pitch, that a pipeline through *your* land will be bring *your* energy costs down. Not a bad deal, right?

As usual, however, the Big Fossil Fuel agenda is thoroughly self-serving and in this case required an end-around by the Christie crew of which they should be ashamed.

The Pinelands Commission shot this project down in 2014 because of the threat to the region. The pipeline is set to run through a forest zone of the Pinelands, endangering wetlands, open spaces and water supplies. But in Christie's view, such tree-hugging obstructionism needs to be overcome at all costs in the service of powerful corporate interests. The gimmick this time was to retool the South Jersey Gas proposal as a "private development," a maneuver pulled off by the commission's executive director, Nancy Wittenberg, who from all appearances is little more than a Christie plant doing the bidding of the governor and South Jersey Gas.

Wittenberg is a former lobbyist for the New Jersey Builders Association, not exactly the ideal background to head up a commission empowered to protect the Pinelands. But she was the perfect choice for Christie, who wanted to circumvent the 15-member panel.

The effect of the "private development" scheme was to take the project out of the purview of the commission that had rejected it, and instead leave it to the BPU, which had approved the earlier version of the project and certainly wasn't going to pay much heed to any sort of land conservation worries.

As for the always ballyhooed prospects for cheaper energy, don't be fooled. South Jersey Gas will be sending off that energy to wherever it can find the most profits. Environmentalists say the supplies will be directed into a national grid for anyone's use, a reasonable expectation despite any claims to the contrary by the company.

The supposed use of energy provided by new pipelines and its effect touches on the overriding problem with this and other pipeline proposals; they are all addressed individually in a vacuum, with no sense of where each might fit in a broader network of pipelines. We understand that an abundance of freshly tapped natural gas supplies needs a means of reaching consumers, unless you hold to the notion that any advance in fossil fuels should be resisted in favor of renewable energy.

But while certain specific pipelines may be warranted, that doesn't mean *every* one is needed, as if each would somehow incrementally lower prices even more. It's not that simple, and among the many pipelines that clearly should be rejected is one that would end up slashing through preserved lands, as in the Pinelands.

An appeal of the project approval seems likely, and we can only express our full support for such an appeal. Even if the Pinelands pipeline did have merit, South Jersey Gas and the Christie administration do not deserve satisfaction on this, not after the stunt they've used to pull it off.

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