

# Pinelands chief backs gas pipeline plan

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Written by [Kirk Moore](#) @KirkMooreAPP

The executive director of the state Pinelands Commission issued a report Monday calling on the deeply divided commissioners to approve a plan for a major natural gas pipeline through a forest area, lifting a 30-year ban on new transmission lines in forest zones.

The report from executive director Nancy Wittenberg includes a lengthy defense of the legality of the proposed agreement, called a memorandum of agreement or MOA, and insists there have been precedents in the commission's history. Opponents of the plan to re-power the aged BL England power station with the gas pipeline have charged it's a special political deal to benefit South Jersey Gas and the plant owners, Texas-based Rockland Capital.

"The commenters view this MOA more akin to a waiver of the regulations and argue that it is intended to provide an end run around the regulations. This understanding, however, is not consistent with the plain language of the regulation," the report says. It cites among other cases the commission's agreement several years ago so a 230-volt power line could be built in southern Ocean County, just inside the Pinelands boundary - a move that spared Atlantic City Electric (then known as Conectiv) a big fight with suburban homeowners east of the Garden State Parkway.

## Friday meeting

The report is included, along with the proposed MOA document, in a package for the commissioners' monthly meeting Friday morning at the commission offices on Springfield Road in Pemberton Township - a modest public meeting room that has been mobbed by supporters of the pipeline - including business and labor groups - and opponents ranging from homeowners scared about the pipeline's safety and environmental groups who say it opens the door to more development in the region.

As in the Conectiv power line case, the commission's proposed agreement will be with the state Board of Public Utilities, which regulates power companies like South Jersey Gas. The BPU and the Christie administration support the proposal, which would allow rebuilding the 50-year-old coal burning plant as a modern gas-fueled generating station.

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"BPU has also found that there is a need for the repowering of the BLE plant to ensure an adequate supply of electricity in the Southern New Jersey Region, and specifically in the Pinelands," the report says.

Critics have questioned that point too. Just a couple of years ago, the BPU rejected the BL England plant as a candidate for a subsidy

## **High drama**

The commission has heard months of public comment on the proposal.

Monday's commission meeting showed how high tensions are running over the issue.

The commission's chairman, Mark Lohbauer, told the audience that the public record on the proposal was closed and that the commission would accept no further comment on it. When a member of the public persisted in talking about the pipeline, Wittenberg and the commissioners got up and walked out of the room, with a staff member grabbing the microphone off the speaker's podium on the way out.

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