

NEW JERSEY

Gas company renews push for Pinelands pipeline

South Jersey Gas tries end-around with new application.

By S.P. Sullivan
For The Star-Ledger

After a proposal to run a 22-mile pipeline through the protected Pinelands region was narrowly voted down last year, a regional gas company is now looking to get the project approved through another process that would not be subject to a vote.

South Jersey Gas submitted an amended application Thursday to build the pipeline, which has rankled environmental advocates but has the support of Gov. Chris Christie's administration and state energy regulators.

The proposal was narrowly rejected by the Pinelands Commission last year, leading the company to challenge the decision in court. Then critics accused Christie of trying to stack the commission with supporters

of the project, replacing members who had opposed it in anticipation of a second vote.

But the company says new information shows the pipeline would not violate the region's comprehensive management plan, and their amended application as a private developer would make it subject to review by the commission's staff rather than a vote by commissioners.

The amended plan includes minor changes but would not alter its path through the pines, a company official said.

"We had done a lot of work over the last year looking at eight different alternative routes," said Robert Fatzinger, a senior vice president at South Jersey Gas. "In the end, we felt that from an

environmental point of view, this was the most responsible route."

Opponents of the project said the basic facts that led the commission to reject the plan haven't changed.

"There's a new piece of paper from a new consulting firm," said Carleton Montgomery, director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. "To me, that doesn't mean you get a do-over."

Fatzinger said new information submitted to the commission Thursday proves the pipeline would primarily serve customers in the pines, a key requirement of any infrastructure project in the protected region. He also said the company has made important changes, like moving a planned interconnect station out of forested areas.

The project would still have to be approved by Pinelands Commission staff. Nancy

Wittenberg, the Christie-appointed executive director of the commission, said it was "premature" to comment on the amended application because staff had not reviewed it.

South Jersey Gas is seeking to build a 24-inch high pressure pipeline from just outside Millville in Maurice River Township to the B.L. England power plant in Upper Township. The coal-fired plant has been ordered by the state to switch to natural gas or shut down.

Coupled with the planned 2019 retirement of the Oyster Creek Nuclear Plant in Lacey Township, the looming B.L. England shutdown presents "a pretty clear reliability need" for power in South Jersey, Fatzinger said.

State regulators have expressed support for the company's proposed route, finding it would create needed energy grid

redundancy in the southern portions of the state and have minimal environmental impact because a large part of it runs along existing highways.

The company contends that a repowered B.L. England plant will send 86 percent of its power to the Pinelands once Oyster Creek is shut down, and improve reliability from Atlantic City Electric, which primarily serves customers in the pines.

It also says it is pursuing deed restrictions along the portions that run through the Pinelands Forest Area, a protected stretch of land, to allay fears that the new infrastructure will lead to more development in the pines.

Montgomery said calling a giant power plant at the edge of the pines a Pinelands customer is "nonsense."

South Jersey Gas is

currently in court with the Pinelands Commission over their 2014 vote, in which the regulatory body voted down a memorandum of agreement with the state Board of Public Utilities that would allow the project to go forward.

That matter is still before the courts, but Fatzinger said the company would drop the appeal if the amended application were approved.

In addition to environmental advocates, the project has faced opposition from four former New Jersey governors, who have publicly criticized the plan.

But it has the support of powerful South Jersey lawmakers, including Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester), who say it will create hundreds of needed construction and energy jobs in the region.

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