

Environmental activists protest gas pipeline at Stockton forum

By JOEL LANDAU, Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, October 28, 2013 11:00 pm

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — The protests over a controversial gas pipeline proposal spread to an environmental forum Monday at Richard Stockton College.

State environmental activists complained that an environmental group accepted money from South Jersey Gas — which is proposing building a pipeline through a section of the Pinelands — and was allowed to be a sponsor of a forum to promote energy sustainability among local municipalities. The activists said the group allowed the utility “green cover.”

But the organization, Sustainable Jersey, which does not take a position on these types of advocacy issues, said it accepts money from anyone as long as the funds can be used for its mission.

A group of about a dozen environmental leaders stood on the steps of the college’s Campus Center on Monday afternoon protesting a proposal to build a 22-mile, high-pressure natural gas pipeline from the Cumberland Energy Center in Millville to B.L. England Generating Station in Cape May. The pipe would run through environmentally sensitive areas in the Pinelands.

Jeff Tittel, director of the NJ Sierra Club, came to protest an environmental leadership forum on energy hosted by Sustainable Jersey, a nonprofit organization based in Trenton. South Jersey Gas was one of the event’s corporate sponsors — along with a dozen other organizations — and Tittel said the group should not be partnering with the utility.

“Having a gas company sponsor a conference about sustainability, it’s the opposite. It’s unsustainability,” he said. “They’re looking for green cover to distract from the pipeline. It’s nothing but green scam and green wash.”

He said the Sierra Club would not accept money from a gas company and certainly would not allow one to sponsor a Sierra Club event.

Bill Wolfe, director of NJ PEER, likened the relationship with the American Cancer Society presenting a conference sponsored by tobacco companies.

“People would say, ‘Come on. We can see right through this,’” he said.

South Jersey Gas spokesman Dan Lockwood issued a statement Monday that said the utility is “proud to support Sustainable Jersey and the work that they’re doing to bring like-minded resources throughout the state together for a common good.”

Lockwood also said the company carefully selected the route for the pipeline to run under or directly adjacent to cleared land or under already paved roadways.

“In any project that we perform, it’s in our best interest to work as safely and responsibly as possible for all that we serve, including our environment,” he said.

Donna Drewes, co-director of Sustainable Jersey, said the group does not restrict whom it accepts money from as long as the organization is allowed to spend the money that fits their overall mission.

Sustainable Jersey has an overall operating budget of about \$3.4 million a year and gave away about \$600,000 last year in grants to New Jersey towns. South Jersey Gas donated about \$130,000 in the past year to Sustainable Jersey, and about 27 percent of their budget is from corporate sponsors, Drewes said.

A sign at the event listed more than a dozen sponsors, including PSE&G Foundation, which contributed \$275,000, and Walmart, which donated \$400,000, she said.

The event Monday brought together 20 different organizations to network and discuss their different projects and ideas for new energy projects. The organization began holding these events last year to bring people together so they can share ideas and learn about programs and opportunities available to them, Drewes said. This was the first forum held in South Jersey and they plan to hold four a year in the state, she said.

“We’ve found you can get people to work on things together if you know one another,” she said.

Contact Joel Landau:

609-272-7215

jlandau@pressofac.com

@landaupressofac on Twitter