

EDITORIAL: Pinelands pipeline remains inadvisable idea

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The facts haven't changed.

It was a bad idea when South Jersey Gas Co. proposed building a 22-mile, 24-inch natural gas pipeline through a forest zone of the Pinelands to the BL England power generating station in Cape May County, and it remains a bad idea — for environmental and public safety reasons.

Nonetheless, even though the Pinelands Commission in January deadlocked, 7-7, on a vote to give its approval, thereby rejecting the plan, South Jersey Gas is now suing the commission in state Superior Court to build it anyway.

“We remain committed to the construction of a 22-mile natural gas pipeline to the BL England generating facility in Upper Township, Cape May County,” said the chairman of the parent company, Edward J. Graham, last week. “Bolstered by the bipartisan support of elected officials and by feedback from many local residents, we are incredibly optimistic about the outcome.”

There are other reasons for Graham's optimism. The Christie administration and the state Board of Public Utilities supports the pipeline. If the court buys the company's claim that the commission's previous vote was, as the suit claims, “arbitrary, capricious, and lack(ing) fair support in the evidence,” it could send the case back to the Pinelands Commission for another vote. And if that happens, all bets are off.

The 15-member regional land-use board has seven representatives from Pinelands counties. At a meeting last month, Cumberland County officials replaced their representative of 18 years, Leslie Ficaglia, who had voted against the pipeline. The freeholders appointed Jane Jannarone, a former Democratic freeholder and Vineland real estate agent. While Jannarone has said she plans to keep an open mind on the subject, it is hard to resist the thought that the fix might be in.

This plant is not, despite what its supporters claim, essential to meeting the state's energy needs. It is, at bottom, an effort to promote economic growth in Cape May County. That may or may not be a worthy goal, but the Pinelands pipeline is not the way to achieve it.

The pipeline poses significant environmental risks to the Pinelands, as a letter sent to the commission in December by four former New Jersey governors opposing the pipeline stated. There are at least two other feasible, alternative pipeline routes available, although they would cost more than the Pinelands proposal.

Approving this pipeline could set a dangerous precedent for future requests for exemptions in the future. The high-pressure pipeline could pose a real safety threat to nearby communities. As one homeowner put it a few months back, "If it ignites, it will be a holocaust."

The Pinelands, which occupies 22 percent of the state's land area, sits atop aquifers containing 17 trillion gallons of some of the purest water in the U.S. It must be protected.

Whatever the next chapter in this saga turns out to be, the facts have not changed. The Pinelands pipeline is still a terrible precedent to set and a fundamentally bad idea.