

Inquirer Editorial: Pipeline could spoil Pinelands

POSTED: THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 2014, 2:01 AM

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When New Jersey and the federal government decided to protect the 1.1 million acres known as the Pinelands, they were thinking about the future of the irreplaceable forest, its endangered species, and aquifers filled with drinking water below its sandy soil.

They also didn't want oil pipes running through the forest, which was a concern four decades ago, when offshore oil drilling appeared imminent.

In 1981, they enacted a model plan to protect one of the few forested areas between Washington and New York. The plan was reasonable, allowing some development, but not so much that it would disturb sensitive ecosystems.

Turn the pages to now, however, and South Jersey Gas Co. wants to violate the well-conceived Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan by putting a 22-mile-long natural gas pipeline through the forest.

The management plan prohibits pipelines unless they are "intended to primarily serve the needs of the Pinelands." And while Pinelands residents could benefit from the pipeline, it would primarily deliver gas to customers outside of the Pines and to the BL England power plant, a coal and oil facility that runs a month or two during peak-demand season and is slated to be closed to reduce air pollution.

The gas company, though, has friends in the environmentally challenged Christie administration who seem to be helping it. In fact, the state Board of Public Utilities, which is supposed to regulate the gas company, has teamed up with it to pressure another regulator, the Pinelands Commission, to break its pipeline rule.

Meanwhile, the attorney general has advised Pinelands Commission member Edward Lloyd, who opposes the pipeline, to recuse himself from the case, which has another hearing set for Jan. 10.

Lloyd's alleged conflict stems from his being president of an environmental law foundation that questioned whether the Pinelands Commission gave proper notice for a meeting. It's hard to understand how that would make Lloyd guilty of breaking conflict rules since they usually involve someone receiving personal gain. Acting Attorney General John Jay Hoffman should clear up the issue.

In any case, the conflict allegation is a distraction from the main issue, which is that the sensitive forest must be protected from rampant development. If South Jersey Gas is allowed its pipeline, it will set a precedent for future intrusions. The utility has offered to pay the Pinelands Commission \$8 million. It should instead invest that money in finding a route outside the forest.

Four Democratic and Republican former governors have asked that the pipeline request be denied. Their joint statement said: "The Pinelands program will only work over the long term if the plan is implemented consistently. Only then will utility companies, developers, and others in government and industry form their own long-range plans to comply with the Pinelands vision."

The commission can grant the pipeline request, or it can protect the Pines and its own integrity. That should be an easy choice.

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