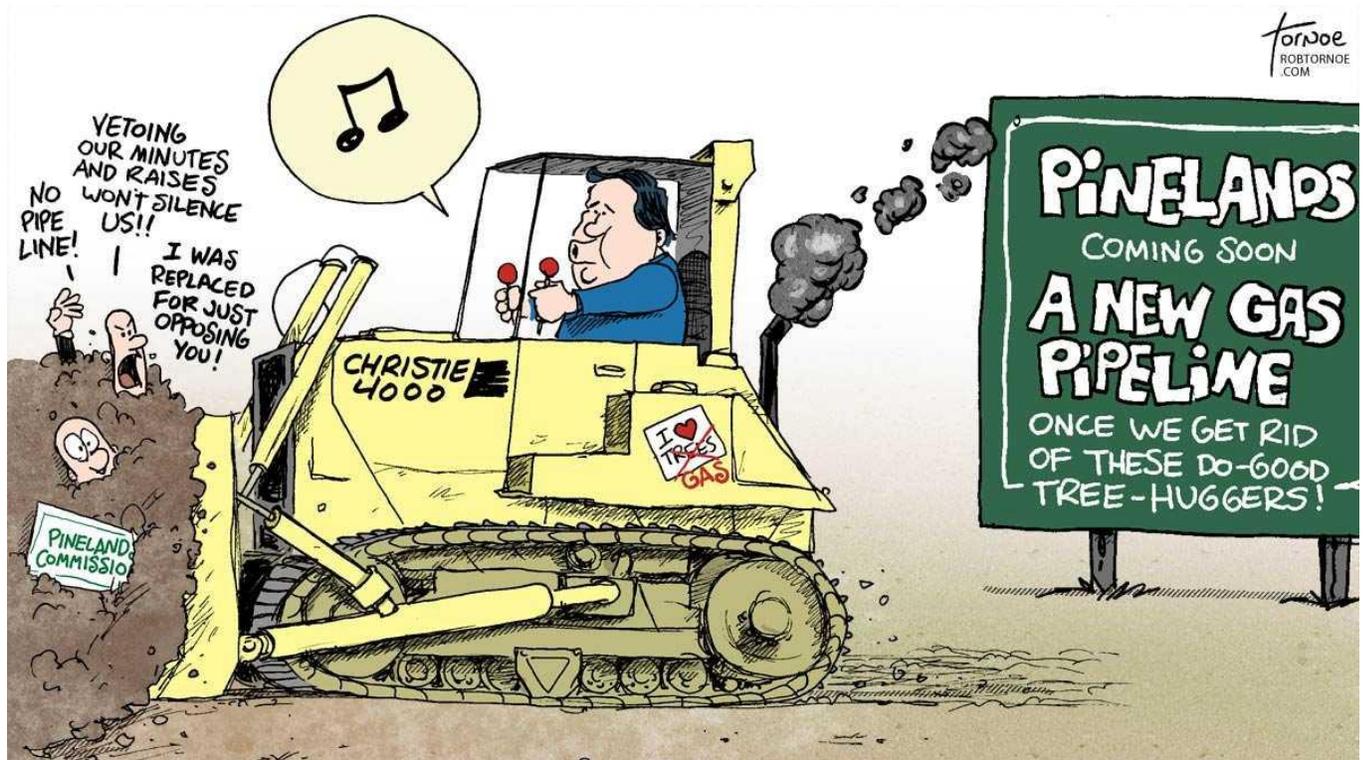


Pinelands still being threatened by Christie and his pipeline



(Cartoon by Rob Tornoe)

So South Jersey, are you ready for your new natural gas pipeline? It's kind of a rhetorical question, because it seems you may get one regardless if you want it or not.

Late last week, Pineland commissioners were briefed on a new court action by South Jersey Gas, which it fully expect to reverse the commission's vote against a dubious 22-mile natural gas pipeline that would cut through the Pinelands forest. In fact, they're so sure of a victory, they've already started to brag to investors about it.

You might be scratching your head at the moment, and I know what your thinking: "Didn't the Pinelands Commission vote down the pipeline, and don't they have a longstanding ban on allowing pipelines in the forest area zone?"

You're not wrong. Protecting the environmentally-sensitive Pinelands (the nation's first biosphere reserve) has been so important to New Jerseyans that back in the late 1970s they created a special commission to govern the area. That commission, despite support by weak-kneed South Jersey Democrats and strong-arm tactics by Chris Christie's administration, voted down the pipeline plan.

Pipeline supporters weren't able to muster the eight votes necessary, despite stacking the commission in their favor. Their handpicked Executive Director of the Commission, Nancy Wittenberg, made alarming public statements urging commissioners to approve the pipeline. The Christie administration pressured one member, an environmental law professor at Columbia University, to recuse himself due to orders by the State Ethics Commission that may or may not have been real.

Unfortunately, the real conflict of interests are in the Christie administration itself. Conflicts like Christina Genovese Renna, a former Christie aide who is married to a top executive at the company looking to build the pipeline. Or conflicts like David Samson, Christie's former chair of the Port Authority, whose law firm represents the Texas company that bought the coal power plant on the Egg Harbor River the pipeline would feed.

Despite the vote, it appears South Jersey Industries Inc. plans to resubmit a modified pipeline proposal to the commission. What's different about the proposal? We don't know - no details have been released.

We do know one commissioner who voted against the pipeline - Leslie Ficcaglia - won't be voting a second time. Ficcaglia, an artist and volunteer conservation worker from Maurice River, who has served on the commission for 18 years, was suddenly replaced last week by a real estate agent by the Cumberland County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

This is a saddening and brazen move, considering the Pinelands Commission vote last time around was a razor-thin 7-7 tie, thanks to Lloyd's forced recusal.

Cumberland County Freeholder Director Joe Derella, who supports the pipeline and admitted to the Star-Ledger he "did not know all the ins-and-outs," assures voters that there were not politics involved in the decision (despite the fact Ficcaglia's replacement is a former Cumberland County freeholder). Nope, according to Derella, it was simply time to give others a chance.

And if stacking the deck doesn't work for Christie and his pipeline supporters, South Jersey Gas is now suing the commission in state Superior Court to bypass their vote and build the pipeline anyway. Laughably, the gas company alleges the commission's decision to reject the pipeline was "illegal rulemaking in violation of basic notions of fairness and due process."

Look, a pipeline to transfer natural gas fracked in Pennsylvania to a power plant in New Jersey remains a terrible idea, especially considering the plant isn't essential to meeting the state's energy needs. Having to cut through a protected and revered environmentally-sensitive area of the state makes it even worse.

The Christie's administration's stomach-turning tactics to get it passed (and the lack of any opposition by Democrats content to feed like chicks on Christie's droppings) reveal how terrible of an idea it truly is. And can we drop the "natural" from natural gas? It makes it sound all cute and safe, when in fact it's comprised of multiple gases which include butane, ethane and propane. It's sort-of like calling it "clean coal."

One thing is clear - supporters will stop at nothing to get this pipeline rammed through. And unfortunately for New Jerseyans, Christie's apparent disdain for our air, water and natural environment will be a legacy future governors will have to deal with for years to come.