

Editorial: Say 'no' to pipeline in the Pinelands

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There is no compelling reason for the Pinelands Commission to allow South Jersey Gas Co. to build a 22-mile, 24-inch natural gas pipeline through the Pinelands. There are plenty of good reasons to block it.

The public this week is expected to get a look at a proposed agreement on the commission's website that would allow the company to run a gas line from Vineland to the BL England power plant in Upper Township on the banks of the Egg Harbor River. The company wants the gas line to facilitate the power plant's conversion from coal to natural gas.

The Pinelands Commission should live up to its mandate, and follow its own comprehensive management plan, which forbids gas lines in forest area zones of the 1.1-million-acre National Preserve. Its 15 members should reject the idea when it comes up for a vote next month. And citizens should make their opposition to this injudicious scheme clear in advance of the vote.

The commission, which oversees land use and environmental matters in the Pinelands, has heard presentations from the gas company and the state Board of Public Utilities, which strongly backs the plan as a way to re-power and restore B.L. England as a long-term power generator for the region.

The fact the management plan forbids such a gas line should be enough to end the discussion. But there are several other reasons for the commission to reject the request by South Jersey Gas to grant it an exception:

- The pipeline poses unacceptable environmental risks to the Pinelands.
- There are at least two other feasible, albeit more expensive, alternative routes.
- Approving one pipeline project could invite other companies to make the case for similar exceptions in the future.
- The high-pressure pipeline poses a safety threat to nearby communities. As one homeowner put it at a recent hearing, "If it ignites, it will be a holocaust."

South Jersey Gas argues that the project would actually benefit the environment because it would facilitate the retrofit to natural gas of the BL plant coal-fired plant. While natural gas is cleaner than coal or oil, the benefits should not come at the expense of the Pinelands. There are power plants directly to the north in Atlantic County, so it should be possible to run a supply line where it will not touch the interior forests of the Pinelands.

The Pinelands, which occupies 22 percent of the state's land area, covering portions of seven counties and all or parts of 56 municipalities, sits atop aquifers containing 17 trillion gallons of some of the purest water in the U.S. It must be protected.

The commission should not be doing the bidding of a gas company. If the commission doesn't stand by its own rules, no one else will. It has a responsibility to abide by its own management

plan to protect this unique natural treasure. It should reject the proposal, quickly and unequivocally.