

BPU June 17 Hearing to Afford Public, South Jersey Gas Time to Explain

By Camille Sailer

FOLSOM – South Jersey Gas has indicated its intent to revive its proposed 22-mile long pipeline from Maurice River Township to Beesley’s Point. The proposed pipeline is intended for delivery of natural gas to the B.L. England generating plant, which would then use the gas instead of coal to generate electricity.

South Jersey Gas, based here, filed an amended application May 23 with the New Jersey Pinelands Commission seeking project approval along the original route of its first application which cuts through part of the protected Pinelands Forest Management Area.

The commission is charged with the oversight of the 1.1-million acre Pinelands preserve. South Jersey Gas’ proposed route follows Route 49 through about 10 miles of Pinelands Forest Management Area, which is under stricter development controls than other parts of its desired path.

South Jersey Gas’ first application met opposition from citizens, environmental groups and other interested parties including four former governors. Their intense criticism maintained that the pipeline will result in severe environmental degradation and pollution.

In January 2014, the commission effectively blocked the project when it deadlocked in a 7-7 vote on the proposal.

Officials Support Plan

Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-1st), Upper Township Mayor Richard Palombo and Gov. Chris Christie have given their strong support to the project. Assemblyman Samuel Fiocchi (R-1st), in a letter, advocated project support. That resulted in a complaint by an Ocean City resident. The complaint was dismissed in January by the Joint Legislative Committee on Ethical Standards.

“They should not be allowed to just reapply for the same pipeline in the same exact location. What’s even worse is that they’re trying to do it by playing games with the rules to prevent public participation,” argued Jeff Tittel, director of the N.J. Sierra Club. “They’re trying to

call it private development to get around the rules so the commission will not even have a vote on this. This is a shameful manipulation of the Pineland rules and an abuse of power.”

New Swing Vote?

Since the deadlock vote in January 2014, Christie replaced a longtime environmental advocate on the commission with a new member, Robert Barr of Ocean City, who was proposed by Van Drew.

Barr is believed to possibly provide the swing vote potentially necessary to get the project approved. Barr has not stated his opinion on the project including during his confirmation hearing.

Oyster Creek Closing

Another change since the deadlock vote and termed a “new detail” in South Jersey Gas’ amended application is that the Oyster Creek Generating Station in Ocean County will be retired in 2019.

PJM Interconnection which operates the regional power grid and the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection now conclude that repowering the plant is necessary to maintain reliability of the system. An additional “new detail” per the amended application is description of the benefit of using gas instead of coal at the B.L. England facility.

Route 49 ‘Least Damaging’

DEP has reaffirmed its original decision that the route of the proposed pipeline is “by far” the least environmentally damaging of eight potential routes that had been discussed. The project also has the support of the Army Corps of Engineers and the state Board of Public Utilities.

New Details

In written input provided to the Herald at its request, Robert Fatzinger, senior vice president, engineering services and system integrity, South Jersey Gas stated, “The new details we have provided clearly confirm that this project meets the requirements of the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan. We remain committed to enhancing the natural gas infrastructure throughout our service area to ensure that our customers in Cape May and Atlantic counties receive safe and reliable natural gas services. This pipeline is vital to system reliability for the thousands of customers who depend on natural gas to heat their

homes and business. It also will provide clean-burning fuel for local electricity generation at the B. L. England plant.”

Seek Police Presence

During Upper Township Committee’s meeting May 26, the governing body approved an agenda item entitled “South Jersey Gas request use of the community center June 17 for a public meeting.”

At that time, Palombo advised committee members he had asked for “law enforcement support” for the meeting from the New Jersey State Police and the Sheriff’s Department for parking and inside the meeting given the large numbers of participants expected as well as the “emotional nature” of what will be discussed.

Hearing, Not a Presentation

When the Herald asked South Jersey Gas for clarification, re: the purpose of the June 17 meeting, Daniel Lockwood, manager, public relations, replied, “This is not a presentation on the project, but a N.J. Board of Public Utilities public hearing. This hearing is not for project approval, but is to address the issues of South Jersey Gas relocating our interconnect station and getting a restriction on adding any customers to the pipeline who are based in the Pinelands Forest Area. There is no South Jersey Gas presentation at the hearing – it’s an opportunity for the public and the company to provide statements relevant to the BPU filing.”

Two Times

The June 17 hearing will be held at both 3:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. Per Lockwood, the content of each meeting will be the same and the two different times are to allow as many to attend as possible.

Upper Township Community Center is located at 1790 Route 50, Tuckahoe.