

# New Jersey

## MONTHLY

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## Pinelands Predicament

A proposed natural gas pipeline through just 10 miles of protected land has ignited protest and political intrigue in South Jersey.

By Nick DiUlio | November 19, 2015 | Appears in the November 2015 issue

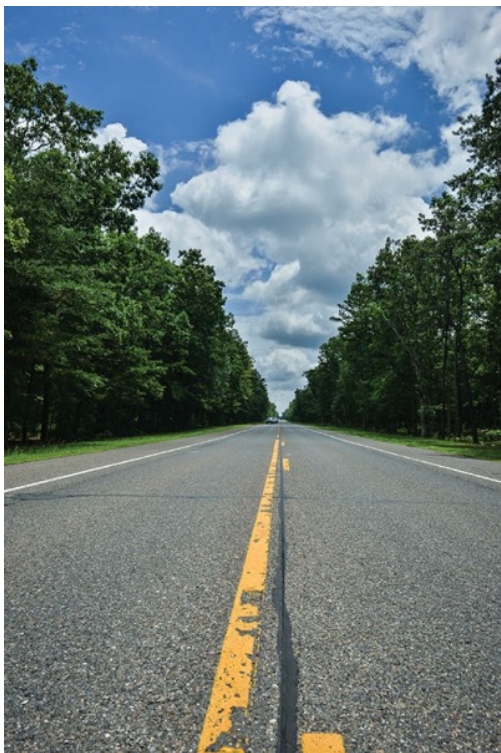
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**The proposed South Jersey Gas pipeline would run beneath the shoulder of a short stretch of Route 50 in the southeastern corner of the Pinelands. South Jersey Gas says it's, "the most environmentally responsible route" for the 22-mile pipeline. Opponents fear the project would set a dangerous precedent.**

Photo by Matthew Wright

It's a hot August afternoon, and Joseph Koch sweats in the sun as he files the edges on a piece of sheet metal outside his garage off Route 49. Koch is an artist. Hot rods are his canvas. Custom lettering, pinstripes and decals are his art. He lives in Somers Point, but has been working alone in Tuckahoe for more than 20 years. It's a serene and peaceful place at the southeastern edge of the Pinelands. Koch enjoys the solitude and the work.

But when a reporter comes along and asks Koch about a certain pipeline, his disposition turns sour.

"Don't remind me," he huffs

launching into a screed he's clearly recited to all who will listen. "Theoretically, I probably wouldn't have as big a problem with it if there was a benefit to the community. But there's no benefit to the community. It's dangerous and it's all about money. Big money."

The cause of Koch's discontent—and that of scores of conservationists and environmental activists—is a proposed 22-mile underground pipeline that would carry natural gas eastward from Maurice Township beneath the shoulder of Route 49, through 10 miles of protected forest area, then along Route 50 to Tuckahoe Road before arriving at the B.L. England Generating Station at Beesley's Point in Cape May County. The 53-year-old generating plant, which currently burns coal, towers over an otherwise scenic bayside beach.

"I'm out here because nobody bothers you. We're left alone. And then this comes along? Are you kidding me?" says the tall, lean Koch, his brilliant white hair gleaming in the sun. "I just can't help but think they're going to sneak by with this and screw everybody."

The pipeline project can be traced to 2011, when state regulators declared that B.L. England had to fully convert from coal to cleaner-burning natural gas or shut down.

B.L. England opted for the former course. But the gas had to come from somewhere. The plant's owner, RC Cape May Holdings, an affiliate of private equity firm Rockland Capital Energy Investments, reached out to Folsom-based South Jersey Gas to supply its fuel. South Jersey Gas decided the best way to transport the gas to the plant was through a new \$120 million pipeline. There was one major problem: 10 miles of it would have to run through the cherished Pinelands.

"We looked at eight different routes, and every option had us going through the Pinelands forest area," says Robert Fatzinger, senior vice president of engineering services and systems integrity for South Jersey Gas. "So we picked what we thought was the most environmentally responsible route. We're not cutting trees down or impacting threatened or endangered species. From an environmental point of view, we're not doing damage to anything."

Because no government funding is involved in the project, it was not necessary to perform an environmental-impact study to back up such claims. Still, the plan ran into opposition from conservationists and activists concerned about the pipeline's potential effect on the state Forest Management Areas of Cumberland, Atlantic and Cape May counties. They cited the disruptive digging, the construction of interconnection and regulator stations, and most importantly, the potential threat to the Pinelands' precious groundwater.

The Pinelands sit atop one of the largest aquifers on the East Coast—a shallow but massive

store of trillions of gallons of pristine freshwater that serves millions of residents throughout the Garden State. What's more, the proposed pipeline would run under Mill Creek, the Tuckahoe River, Cumberland Pond and the Manumuskin River, which is part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. If something were to go wrong, these natural water sources—and their flora and fauna—could be compromised. For one thing, environmentalists maintain that methane gas could potentially leak into the soil and become trapped, eventually mixing with underground and surface water. While methane is not believed to be harmful to drink, it can cause asphyxia in enclosed spaces or cause explosions.

The ecological issues are just the backdrop for a larger story of intense political wrangling. Many believe granting South Jersey Gas the right to build the pipeline could be a slippery first step toward jeopardizing the future of New Jersey's 1.1 million-acre Pinelands National Reserve.

“When you add it all up, you're not only looking at an environmental disaster but an ecological compromise, a serious safety concern and a dangerous precedent for future development in the Pinelands,” says Jeff Tittel, the outspoken director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. Citing the state's Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) for the Pinelands, Tittel claims the pipeline project “opens a Pandora's box. Once you do it for one entity, how do you say no to someone else? Before you know it, you've unraveled the whole management plan, and the Pinelands might never be the same.”

Koch doesn't mince words when it comes to the pipeline. Pausing from his work, he sifts through a pile of metal and pulls out a large green lawn sign that reads: “Stop the Pipeline. Protect the Pinelands.” The nonprofit Pinelands Preservation Alliance distributed the signs in late 2013, he says. Koch took three and posted two in front of his shop, clearly visible to every vehicle that whizzed by on Route 49. Within a matter of days, they disappeared.

“Make up your own mind about what happened to them, but I think it's all part of this entire mess,” says Koch. “They say this is progress? This is not progress.”

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Despite such concerns, local attention to the pipeline appears to have waned. When the project was first proposed, the controversy made front-page news around these parts. Public hearings and town hall meetings were packed with opposing voices. But check these days with the businesses and residents along the secluded stretch of Route 49, and you'll find ample confusion and apathy.

“To be honest, I never really thought that much about it,” says Becky Richter, who, along with her husband, Joe, owns Blue Zat Gems, a Native American art and gift shop in Woodbine that

...  
sits a few dozen feet from the pipeline's proposed path under the shoulder of Route 49. "As long as nobody's trying to move close to me, I don't really get involved."

Further up the road, where Route 49 dead-ends at Route 50 in Tuckahoe, another longtime resident (who asked to remain anonymous) sits outside her family home. Asked about the pipeline, she needs a moment to recall the issue.

"I have mixed feelings, I guess. I hear mixed things," she says. "But it doesn't really matter to me personally because I have propane and a wood stove."

Many Pine Barrens residents have the misconception that the pipeline will provide an opportunity to convert home heating from oil to natural gas. But that is neither the purpose of the pipeline nor a possibility should it get built. South Jersey Gas guarantees that individual homes will not be able to tie into the line and that the gas will be used exclusively to fuel the B.L. England plant.

On further reflection, the woman recalls the appearance of the "Stop the Pipeline" signs. "For a while there, everyone had them out in front of their houses," she says. "But now that I think about it, you don't see them anymore....One day they were everywhere you looked, and now they're gone. Strange."

This vexed but fading concern is understandable. After all, the pipeline project was defeated once already—almost two years ago—and unless you are paying close attention, it probably seems the debate is over.

In reality, the project is very much an ongoing saga.

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