

Plan to put gas pipeline in Pinelands spurs ire



May gave a presentation at the Pemberton meeting on the proposed natural-gas pipeline. (AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer)



GALLERY: Pinelands Commissioner Candace Ashmun questions Jerome...

By David O'Reilly, Inquirer Staff Writer

POSTED: JULY 28, 2013

A proposal to build a natural gas pipeline across 14 miles of the New Jersey Pinelands drew an angry crowd Friday to the Pinelands Commission's offices in Pemberton, where dozens of speakers urged commissioners to veto the plan.

"Put a stake through the heart of this monster," Victor Maene of the environmental group 350.ORG told the commission's policy and implementation committee.

South Jersey Gas Corp., based in Atlantic County, seeks to run a 22-mile natural gas pipeline from Maurice River Township, Cumberland County, to a proposed electrical-generation plant in Upper Township, Cape May County. Most of the line would run along the right-of-way of Route 49, buried under the road or grass shoulder.

Eight miles would be outside the Pinelands, a 1.1 million expanse of protected pine and oak forest and sandy soil that is home to an 17-trillion-gallon aquifer.

The 24-inch-diameter pipe would serve a proposed gas-fired power plant at Beesleys Point on the Great Egg Harbor River to be operated by B.L. England Corp. (BLE).

Committee chairman Mark Lohbauer, who several times had to tap his gavel to quiet shouting and clapping, reminded the crowd packed into the commission's rustic offices that this was only his committee's regular monthly meeting.

"This is not a hearing, and this is not testimony," Lohbauer said. "We're simply hearing information about an application before us."

The committee will make a recommendation to the full commission, which has authority to halt the project. Lohbauer assured the audience that his committee would have additional meetings and that the commission would hold a formal hearing before making a decision.

Several speakers expressed anxiety, however, that the pipeline appeared to be fast-tracked for approval, and complained that some state and federal agencies had given their approval amid little awareness that such a pipeline was being contemplated.

"This commission is the last line of protection," said Georgina Shanley of Ocean City, N.J.

Officials of South Jersey Gas, which made a formal application for the line in June 2012, denied that the line was being fast-tracked, but said they hoped to start construction this year.

The new plant would replace BLE's 49-year-old, 450-megawatt coal-fired plant, which for decades has been cited by state and federal agencies for air-pollution violations.

About a dozen representatives of BLE and South Jersey Gas were present but did not speak at the meeting, which began with a lengthy presentation by Jerome May, energy director at the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities.

For nearly two hours, May answered commissioners' questions, explaining that the utility board had approved the pipeline last month because it would generate electricity for the interstate grid that supplies power to South Jersey and also would serve as a needed backup line to 63,000 customers in Cape May County and parts of Atlantic County in the event the sole gas line serving that area was disrupted.

Opponents say one of the most controversial features of the proposed line is that it would violate the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan, which stipulates that public-service infrastructure is permitted in the forest area only when it is "intended to primarily serve the needs of the Pinelands."

Commission approval, they said, could set a precedent for high-tension power lines, additional pipelines, cell towers, and other incursions on the Pinelands' fragile and scenic ecosystem and aquifer.

In response to questions from the commissioners, May described BLE as a "merchant power company" that would sell electricity to a 14-state power grid, and said there was no evidence it would serve primarily the Pinelands.

He defended the plan on grounds that New Jersey was "a little short" when it came to generating its own electricity, and said he thought the homegrown supply was more beneficial than power from out of state, which can be costlier at times of peak demand.

He noted that the state Department of Environmental Protection had approved the pipeline route to Beesleys Point as having the least impact of three alternatives. The Army Corps of Engineers also has approved the route.

May left after he finished speaking, angering some of the project opponents who wished to challenge him.

Only a few presented data to buttress their positions. Most spoke of their love for the Pine Barrens and their fears that the pipeline could damage the aquifer, cause devastating fires, or disturb the scenery.

"Your job is to protect the Pinelands," Ron Hutchinson, a biologist at Richard Stockton College, told the commissioners, "not get the best rates for utilities in New Jersey."

Contact David O'Reilly at 856-779-3841 or doreilly@phillynews.com, or follow on Twitter @doreillyinq.