

Pinelands Commission considers waiving rule on forest pipelines

Pinelands Commission takes step toward waiving rule

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PEMBERTON — Facing a packed house of opponents, the state Pinelands Commission on Friday took a first step that could lead to permitting a new natural gas pipeline through the Pinelands despite a longstanding commission rule against transmission lines in forest areas.

The proposed 22-mile long, 24-inch diameter line could give a new lease on life to an aging Cape May County power station. The line would be much bigger than the company's existing 16-inch transmission lines — needed to deliver the volume of gas the B.L. England plant would burn, equivalent to the usage of 267,000 homes, gas company officials said.

But in a new twist, the company asserts its primary goal is to improve reliability of its network. Critics pounced on that Friday, saying the state Board of Public Utilities, in endorsing the project, wants it for system reliability and the power plant, and would not approve it without both uses.

“A board order is like a permit. They're not holding a gun to their heads, saying ‘Build this or else’,” said Bill Wolfe of the group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. “Now they (company officials) are building this resiliency argument.”

The power plant — one of the last coal-fired generators in New Jersey — has been operating intermittently and is under an order from the state Department of Environmental Protection to either reduce emissions, close or convert to gas.

“They're pushing this because if this power plant can't get gas...it's dead,” said Jeff Tittel of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

Other business interests are supporting the South Jersey Gas application. The Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey contends the lengthy gas outages wrought by superstorm Sandy are an argument for building up the system, and that extending the lifetime of the B.L. England facility will help replace power when the Oyster Creek nuclear reactor in Lacey goes dark as planned by the end of 2019.

The pipeline would be installed in the highway right-of-way for Routes 49 and 50. But 14 miles of that route goes through land zoned as forest area under the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan. Transmission pipelines have been banned there for 30 years, except to service local communities in the pines.

That's where the company's resiliency argument comes into play. Commission chairman Mark Lohbauer asked Pinelands staffers to begin drafting a memorandum of agreement that would outline conditions for permitting the pipeline.

Lohbauer also mentioned "offsets," shorthand for contributions to environmental work in the Pinelands, a kind of compensation for the development permit. That would harken back to 2005, when the Pinelands Commission came under fire for allowing Atlantic City Electric to build a new southern Ocean County power line on the west side of the Garden State Parkway to avoid conflicts in suburban neighborhoods. The power company agreed to pay \$13 million into a conservation fund that was used to put several thousand acres into preservation.

"It's a done deal," exclaimed Georgina Shanley of Citizens United for Clean Energy, an Ocean City-based group that has been fighting the \$200 million gas conversion project. She told commissioners Friday that they need to have independent assessments of the pipeline and its environmental impact.

"It's very disheartening," she said. "We've had a decimation of the commission staff. The science staff is almost decimated."

Built in 1963, the twin-boiler generator, which is owned by R.C. Cape May, a subsidiary of Texas-based Rockland Corp., had been one of the worst emitters in New Jersey. Conversion to gas will make it one of the cleanest, supporters said.

But it's apparent from correspondence among government agencies that the Pinelands pipeline route was fast-tracked ahead of other options "because it fit in with their time line," said Theresa Lettman of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. "I don't think there's been a true look at what the environmental impacts should be."