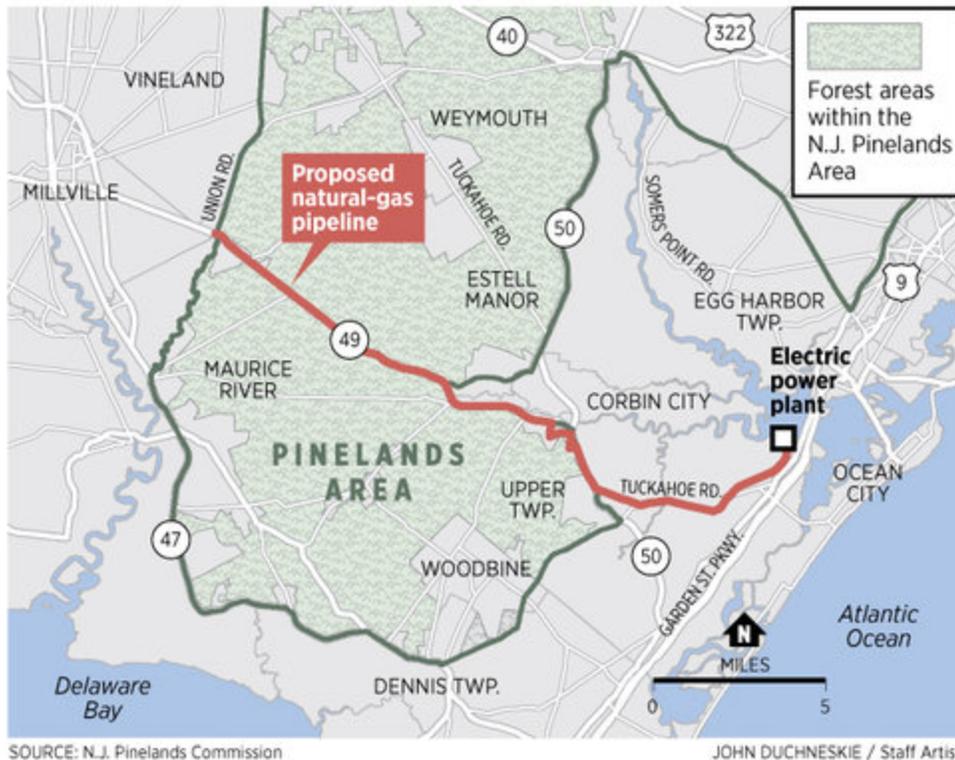


# State rules pose hurdle for proposed Pines pipeline



Map: Proposed natural-gas pipeline in the Pinelands

DAVID O'REILLY, *INQUIRER* STAFF WRITER

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South Jersey Gas Co.'s proposed pipeline across 21 miles of South Jersey would be permitted through some sections of the Pinelands but not its forest area under state rules, an environmental specialist for the Pinelands Commission told members Wednesday.

"They have not demonstrated it [the route through forest] would serve the needs of the Pinelands," Branwen Ellis told the commission's policy and implementation committee. State regulations severely restrict utilities from building in Pinelands forest.

But several speakers at the committee's monthly meeting urged members to endorse the entire route from Maurice Township in Salem County to a new power plant in Upper Township in Cape May County, saying it would bring or keep jobs.

South Jersey Gas' proposal has provoked much public protest because 15 miles of the line would run through the Pinelands, 10 miles of which would pass through its forested area.

Development within the 1.1 million-acre Pinelands is governed by a state management plan that bars utilities from putting new pipes, power lines, and towers in forest areas unless they directly serve that area.

Although the state Board of Public Utilities, the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Army Corps of Engineers have approved the route, the eight-member policy and implementation committee could veto it.

It could also leave a decision to the full, 15-member commission, which could reject the route or grant a waiver, known as a memorandum of understanding.

Although South Jersey Gas has said it wants to start construction in October, commission spokesman Paul Leaken said there was no deadline for it to make a decision.

The proposed 24-inch pipeline is part of a plan to convert the decades-old, 450-megawatt coal-fired electrical-generation plant at Beesley Point on the Great Egg Harbor River to a plant fired by natural gas. Electricity from the plant would be sold at a profit to the energy grid that serves much of the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic United States.

Ellis told the committee that South Jersey Gas had studied three routes from Maurice Township to Beesley Point and told her it had selected the proposed route because it posed the least environmental risk.

Punctuating her presentation with frequent reminders that "I'm not an engineer" and "I'm not an archaeologist," Ellis told the committee that South Jersey Gas had assured her its preferred route would not harm endangered-species habitats or wetlands.

Ellis said the firm told her its preferred route would not require a 7,000-foot length of pipe under Great Egg Harbor River, as would an alternative route. Such a long run underwater posed a risk of drilling fluids leaking into the river, she said.

To spare damage to four ponds and creeks along the proposed route, she said, South Jersey Gas proposes to lay the pipe about 60 feet underneath them for a total of 1.6 miles.

Ellis said she began "pre-application" conversations with representatives of South Jersey Gas in April 2012 and had met with them regularly since.

The present coal-fired plant, operated by the B.E. England Corp., lies outside the New Jersey Pinelands boundaries. It has been cited numerous times for violating state and federal air-pollution regulations for particulates. According to the DEP, its cooling system also pumps millions of gallons of heated water into the river daily, lowering oxygen levels and killing off large numbers of aquatic species.

"We have a chance to clean up this powerhouse and keep it on line," William Pauls, president of the South Jersey Building and Construction Trades Council of the AFL-CIO, told the commission. He urged members to approve the route.

Dan Young, Upper Township's solicitor, told the committee the proposed pipeline, which would run for most of its length under or directly alongside Route 49, would "not cut into treasured and pristine areas of our state," and would "provide local energy and contribute to the local economy." He, too, urged its approval.

The expressions of support were in marked contrast to last month's meeting, where nearly all speakers condemned the Pinelands route.

One who repeated his opposition Wednesday was Leon Rosenson, a trustee of the advocacy group Pinelands Preservation Alliance. "It's not your job to help them [South Jersey Gas] find an illegal route," he told commission members.

The Pinelands Commission was "starting to give the appearance of being a regulator agency captured by the interests it's supposed to regulate," Rosenson said. "If you turn them [South Jersey Gas] down . . . they'll find another route, and you won't have violated your rules."

Margo Pellegrino of Medford Lakes urged "a lot of deliberation" before the commission makes a decision. "We have a climate in Trenton where everything is fast-tracked," she said. "We can't be fast-tracked."

One speaker told the committee that she feared the pipeline was secretly intended to serve a plan to build Liquefied Natural Gas storage facilities at Beesley Point for shipment overseas. "This is a Trojan horse, a fig leaf," she said.

But a man who described himself as "just a concerned resident" and said he belonged to Local 322 of the plumbers and steamfitters union, called the project a "win-win for everybody in South Jersey."