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Pipeline sparks debate at committee meeting

Written by Columb Higgins Tuesday, February 24, 2015 06:30 pm

TUCKAHOE — Debate over a proposed natural gas pipeline to the B.L. England power plant in Beesleys Point turned into a wide-ranging discussion on government surveillance, armed drones, and the first two amendments to the U.S. Constitution at the Upper Township Committee meeting Monday, Feb. 23.

The meetings usually draw little attendance or controversy. Debate at Township Committee is normally so staid that Mayor Richard Palombo has not gavelled a meeting to order in his more than 15 years in the position.

The gavel wasn't used Monday either, but committee members strongly defended their support for the pipeline, which they said would assure the continued operation of the B.L. England power plant and provide reliable gas service to homes in Cape May County.

All of Cape May County is currently served by one gas pipeline that passes under the Tuckahoe River, Committeeman Hobie Young said.

"If that goes down, it's going to affect all of Cape May County," he said. "Why not upgrade it with one with new standards?"

Georgina Shanley of Ocean City, an environmentalist who has organized local opposition to the pipeline, said during public comment that Upper Township officials did not express concern about the existing pipeline until South Jersey Gas proposed the 24-inch, high-pressure pipeline to B.L. England. The pipeline is needed for the power plant to convert from coal to natural gas as part of an Administrative Consent Order from the state Department of Environmental Protection.

"You're trying to keep this killer alive," she said, claiming the coal-burning plant has detrimentally affected the health of Upper Township and Ocean City residents.

Young asked Shanley if she had gas in her home, and what she would do if service was interrupted. Shanley refused to answer the question.

"How many businesses would be out of business, how many people out of work if the pipeline goes down," asked Committeeman Jeffrey Pierson.

"Why all this concern all of a sudden?" Shanley said.

She said if Township Committee was truly concerned with the well-being of its residents, it would not have passed a resolution supporting the pipeline planned by South Jersey Gas, which it did prior to public comment Monday.

The pipeline, which would run along Route 49 through the Pinelands to Tuckahoe and then Beesleys Point, was rejected by the New Jersey Pinelands Commission on a 7-7 vote in January 2014.

Mayor Richard Palombo said the vast majority of Upper Township residents he has talked to support the proposed pipeline. He said closure of the B.L. England power plant could affect property taxes here.

"It won't affect property taxes," Shanley said.

"You don't know that," Palombo said. "Already the formula has been decreased substantially. All it took was a budget vote."

Ted Kingston, of Strathmere, said he thought residents would be shocked to learn how much their tax bill could increase if the money paid to the township by the state for hosting the power plant was cut.

"Off the top of my head, that would be a 30-cent increase," he said. "A lot of people opposed to the pipeline would find they can't afford to live here."

Upper Township receives \$6.4 million in Energy Receipts Taxes for hosting the BL England plant. That is about half of Upper Township's budget every year.

Steve Fenichel of Ocean City said the conversion of B.L. England to natural gas would be more harmful to residents than coal. The plant would operate 24 hours a day and create ultra-fine particles that can more easily penetrate the lungs, he said.

He then urged Township Committee to pass a resolution making its air space "a no-spy zone" with "no over flights by weaponized drones."

"We're wasting our time here," Palombo said.

Fenichel said "Citizenfour," a documentary about National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, won an Oscar for best documentary on Sunday and showed the dangers of government surveillance. He said a resolution would show support for Americans' First Amendment rights.

"If you lose your freedom of speech, I lose mine," he said to Palombo.

Committeeman John Coggins asked Fenichel how he felt about the Second Amendment. Fenichel said he supports the right of citizens to protect themselves from a tyrannical government.

"You're getting your guns for what, to shoot critics like me?" he said.

Bob Young of Upper Township asked Fenichel what he thought the difference was between natural gas and Fenichel's favored term – "fracked natural gas." Fenichel said there was no difference but "natural gas sounds like Breyers Ice Cream."

The battle over the pipeline has only intensified since the Pinelands Commission denied the memorandum of agreement proposed by the state Board of Public Utilities, which would have allowed for its construction. Environmental groups have opposed the pipeline, saying it could threaten endangered species and claiming it violates the Pinelands Commission's Comprehensive Management Plan. The plan only allows public service infrastructure in the Pinelands if it is intended to primarily serve the needs of the Pinelands.

Opponents of the pipeline also say recent changes to the Pinelands Commission membership are an attempt to reverse the January 2014 vote.

Gov. Chris Christie is seeking to replace D'Arcy Rohan Green of Bay Head and Robert Jackson of Middle Township on the Pinelands Commission. Green and Jackson both voted against the pipeline proposal.

Robert Barr of Ocean City has been nominated to fill one of those seats. A hearing on his nomination was scheduled for noon Tuesday (see related story).

Freeholders in Cumberland County recently replaced their Pinelands Commission representative, Leslie Ficcaglia, with Jane Jannarone. Ficcaglia voted against the pipeline proposal. Burlington County has reappointed its representative, Sean Erlen, who voted in favor of the pipeline.

South Jersey Gas has filed a lawsuit in Superior Court, seeking to have the Pinelands Commission rehear the proposal.