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**For Immediate Release:
November 30, 2010**

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Pinelands Preservation Alliance Welcomes New Executive Director of the Pinelands Commission

The Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) congratulates Nancy Wittenberg as the new Executive Director of the Pinelands Commission. Today at a special meeting of the Commission, Ms. Wittenberg was hired to replace John Stokes, who will be retiring at the end of 2010.

Ms. Wittenberg will take over the day-to-day management of the Pinelands Commission with the knowledge that during the past 30 years the residents of the New Jersey have been able to witness first-hand this great experiment in land-use planning and growth management called the Pinelands. It is a daunting task to plan land use in 56 municipalities to protect the natural resources of more than one million acres, nearly one-quarter of New Jersey.

Like any innovative and far-reaching endeavor, its strengths and weaknesses only become apparent with time. The Pinelands program has been remarkably successful at preserving a large area of ecologically sensitive lands within the heart of the Pine Barrens. But the Pinelands Plan also has serious deficiencies, and natural resources are declining in several parts of the Pinelands.

“Ms. Wittenberg will have a huge opportunity to shape the future of the Pinelands, for better or for worse...we hope that it will be for the better. PPA looks forward to working with the new Executive Director to keep the Pinelands a special place for generations to come,” says Carleton Montgomery, Executive Director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

One of the first priorities that PPA will press with the new Executive Director is to have the Commission lift the recent “gag order” that it has placed on public comment at Commission meetings. In a stunning reversal of 30 years of practice, this year the Commission suddenly re-interpreted its rules to bar public comment regarding private development applications and public development projects (that is, development by government agencies).

“Public comment is the bedrock principle of any legitimate government process. Taking away the opportunity for the public to address the Commissioners about developments that shape the landscape is a serious blow to the Pinelands process. We are anxious to work with Ms. Wittenberg to fix this inequity,” says Montgomery.

Another priority that PPA sees is with regards to how the Commission views its own rules. During the past several years, PPA has witnessed a slow shift in philosophy from viewing the Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) as rules with regulatory teeth to viewing the CMP as guidelines, to be treated as the basis for negotiation leading to waiving basic environmental protection standards in order to foster developments backed by powerful interests. This change of philosophy is reflected in the growing use of “memorandums of agreements” or “MOA’s” to modify environmental standards, on a discretionary basis, in order to allow developments otherwise barred by the CMP.

The Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) was founded in 1989 as a 501(c) (3) charitable organization to advocate for preservation of the Pinelands and to educate the public about the extraordinary natural and cultural resources of this unique region.

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