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Pinelands Advocates Call for Halt of Pipeline Construction

Say Pending Lawsuits Should Be Resolved First

Despite numerous unresolved legal challenges to the Pinelands Commission and Board of Public Utilities approvals, New Jersey Natural Gas (NJNG) recently announced that it intends to start building a new natural gas pipeline across Burlington County, including protected areas of the Pinelands National Reserve.

Community and environmental advocates are calling on the Governor, Pinelands Commission and BPU to halt construction, at least until the pending challenges are resolved. Ironically titled the Southern Reliability Link, the pipeline serves no public need, but New Jersey's state utilities law would allow NJNG to seek payments from its customers for both costs and profits on the pipeline construction and maintenance.

"It is foolhardy to risk ratepayers' money, residents' safety and the Pinelands by starting construction of a pipeline that is both completely unnecessary and is likely to be stopped by the courts once they decide any of several pending appeals," said Carleton Montgomery, executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

"The Pinelands Commission approved the pipeline in 2017 under political pressure, despite the fact that it clearly violates the Pinelands protection laws, required the votes of at least two Commissioners who had blatant conflicts of interest on this issue, and was approved without an evidentiary hearing where we could present evidence of its risks and lack of public need to a neutral arbiter before going to the Commission for a truly informed vote," Montgomery stated.

PPA submitted independent expert reports demonstrating that the pipeline was unnecessary to ensure reliable gas supplies to NJNG's customers, was vastly overpriced at the expense of ratepayers, and posed major risks to water supplies, the safety of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, and the people who live along its route. (Bizarrely, this high-pressure gas pipeline is to run directly along a fighter jet taxiway on the Joint Base.) The Pinelands Commission, having been packed by Governor Christie with pro-pipeline votes, simply ignored these analyses, and the Christie era BPU refused to consider these facts in its review.

PPA, the towns of Chesterfield and Bordentown, and the Sierra Club filed appeals with the New Jersey Superior Court raising substantial legal issues. The court has not issued any decisions, and some of these appeals have not even been briefed to the court. Yet New Jersey Natural Gas wants to start construction, presumably in an effort to make the pipeline a done deal before the merits of these challenges can be decided.

“The Governor, Pinelands Commission and BPU have it in their power to reconsider the approvals given under the Christie Administration to this harmful development in light of the new Energy Master Plan under development, the State’s new energy policy to promote renewable energy instead of fossil-fuels, the federal government’s latest reports demonstrating the great urgency of reducing fossil fuel emissions, the points raised in the pending appeals, and the expert analyses PPA has submitted. All these factors form a solid basis for reconsidering prior, unwise decisions. At a minimum, the Pinelands Commission and BPU can halt construction until the legal challenges have been decided,” explained Mr. Montgomery.

New Jersey Natural Gas (NJNG) has obtained road opening permits from Ocean County to install a portion of the Southern Reliability Link pipeline starting December 3, 2018. Plumsted Township indicated via a Facebook post dated November 26th that the following county roads would be impacted: Fisher Road, West Colliers Mills Road to Rt. 539 and Lakewood Road from 539/528 to Fisher.

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The Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA) was established as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization in 1989 by environmental leaders and Pinelands residents, with the goal of preserving and protecting the more than 1 million acres of the New Jersey Pinelands. PPA remains the only private organization dedicated solely to environmental protection throughout the Pinelands.

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