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Freeholder scolds environmentalist

TOMS RIVER — Ocean County Freeholder John C. Bartlett Jr. on Wednesday publicly rebuked one of the leaders in the Pinelands preservation movement over the future of Robert J. Miller Airport in Berkeley.

The freeholder board wants to use revenue from its Natural Lands Trust fund — the open-space program funded by a dedicated county property tax — to buy some 485 acres elsewhere in the Pine Barrens to compensate for paving a new runway and thus disturbing an existing wildlife habitat.

Pilots and public safety officials have long cited the need for a crosswind runway at the county-owned airport. A crosswind runway is needed when aircraft are attempting to land when the wind is gusting perpendicular to the primary runway.

Theresa Lettman, 58, of Manchester was one of the original Ocean County trustees when the fund was set up in 1998, and now works for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. Lettman is opposed to accessing the trust fund for the purchase and she said so during public comment time at a regular session of the Board of Freeholders.

“This may be a little wrinkle as seen by some, and mostly it will be the

environmental community that got the movement started and got that trust fund in place,” Lettman said. “It will definitely look like you’re offsetting development with the Ocean County Natural Lands Trust fund and I don’t know how to get around that image. It will be disappointing to see that if that’s what happens in the end.”

Bartlett responded: “Ms. Lettman, thank you for your comments even though they are incorrect.”

“It was not put into place, as you say, by environmental groups in Ocean County. It was put into place by the people of Ocean County, who voted to tax themselves 1.2 cents per \$100 of equalized assessed value to support this program. It is a program of the Board of Chosen Freeholders for the purpose of preserving land,” Bartlett explained.

The freeholder said he was outraged with the Pinelands Preservation Alliance over its opposition.

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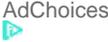
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“I think it was entirely inappropriate for you to wear two hats at a time,” Bartlett scolded Lettman. “I think when you appeared before the Pinelands Commission in your capacity as an employee of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and then at the same time represented yourself as a leader of the Natural Lands Trust program, you did a disservice to the Natural Lands Trust program. You may not see it that way, I do. We are not going to spend one extra dime in taxpayer money to accomplish what we are going to accomplish, one way or the other.”

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