

Pinelands Commission puts off vote on killing SJ Gas pipeline

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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — A last-minute letter from an attorney for South Jersey Gas prevented the Pinelands Commission from voting on a resolution to withdraw approval of the company's planned pipeline Friday.

The letter objected to the commission voting on the matter, saying there is still a court case pending by environmentalists challenging the Feb. 27, 2017, approval. It also said the commission cannot take action without giving proper notice and holding a hearing.

South Jersey Gas did not respond to a request for comment.

Executive Director Nancy Wittenberg sent a letter to South Jersey Gas last month, saying the commission's approval of the pipeline from Maurice River Township to the B.L. England plant in Beesleys Point, Upper Township, was no longer valid because the owners of the plant had announced they were closing the plant rather than repowering with natural gas.

The approval was given because the pipeline would benefit a plant based in the Pinelands, she said. Since that is no longer the case, the reason for approval has vanished.

The South Jersey Gas letter was received Friday morning, said Wittenberg, who said she had not yet had a chance to fully read and digest it.

"We are a little disappointed that the Pinelands Commission did not rescind their approval today for the SJ Gas pipeline," said Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel, whose organization is one of those that sued to block the pipeline approval. He said the next court date in the case is in June.

"We are also concerned that there are still Christie appointees in the commission that supported the pipeline in the first place and still do," said Tittel. "But we will prevail, and we believe the commission will take up the vote soon and rescind this terrible project."

The letter was discussed in executive session at the commission meeting, after which the commissioners voted to table the resolution until the commission can get legal advice from the Attorney General's Office.

After the meeting, Carleton Montgomery, executive director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, which also sued to stop the pipeline, said South Jersey Gas' position is unusual.

"They don't deny that the approval can't be valid but seem to be saying the appeals court has to deal with a case that is moot," said Montgomery.

The development keeps alive a five-year quest to build the pipeline by South Jersey Gas, even though the pipeline's main customer no longer needs the gas.

The company has said it still wants to build a new pipeline for resiliency, to provide a second way to get natural gas to the Cape May peninsula and parts of Atlantic County now served by only one transmission line. But its spokesperson has acknowledged it is likely to run along a different route.

In the event of an accident, natural disaster or terrorist attack affecting the single transmission line, more than 100,000 people could go without needed gas for heat and other uses, the company has argued.