

# The New Jersey Herald

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## Natural gas pipeline due for vote in Trenton

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Ella Filippone is still in awe of the view from the 1900s farmhouse her environmental group purchased a decade ago.

From her rocking chair on the property's porch, she stares out at the oak, maple and beech trees swaying in the wind.

Just beyond the trees' horizon is the crystal blue water of the Monksville Reservoir, a popular fishing spot in the Long Pond Ironworks State Park in Passaic County.

"There is always a breeze," said Filippone, executive director of the Passaic River Coalition. "It is the life."

But a decision by the State House Commission in the next week or two may change the view drastically, and Filippone and her coalition -- as well as a host of other environmental groups -- are not happy about it.

The commission will vote sometime late next week on the construction of the Tennessee Gas Pipeline across state-owned land, after tabling any action two weeks earlier.

The proposed natural gas pipeline -- through 16 miles of Highlands-protected areas in Wantage and Vernon, as well as parts of Passaic and Bergen counties -- has been opposed by critics as a disaster for the environment and a pillaging of taxpayer money.

Although a gas pipeline already exists in the Highlands, environmentalists are worried about the extra acres they say will be destroyed during the digging of the new pipeline and the creation of access roads for heavy equipment.

Advocates for the project, such as the state Department of Environmental Protection, say they are doing their best to protect the environment while still providing utilities to New Jerseyans.

### The cost

For now, a major issue for people who oppose the line is the fee that the pipeline owners will pay the state for crossing public land. The state is charging the company that owns the line, the El Paso Corp., \$45,000 for a 24-year lease.

"It is a gigantic rip-off of the public," said Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. "It's a dirty deal done dirt cheap."

Tittel said the deal did not make sense because it would save El Paso Corp. an exorbitant amount of money to build the line through the Highlands, instead of having to go around.

"(The state) is not looking at the long-term value," Tittel said.

The price tag is what evidently stalled the project's approval by the State House Commission, which controls the sale and leasing of state-owned properties. Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Cryan, D-Union, a commission member, said the deal was a rip-off at the July 2 hearing, according to The Star-Ledger.

The price was actually set by the state Department of Environmental Preservation. Spokesman Larry Ragonese said the department used a state-certified appraisal for the property and legally had to use the fair market value decided by the appraiser.

"We have to strike a balance here between the number one concern, the environment, and the need for some development of utilities," Ragonese said.

The main reason the property value is so low, according to Ragonese, is that most of the land is undevelopable.

"The land will still be ours," Ragonese said of the alleged improvements to the land, which will eventually revert back to taxpayers.

El Paso Corp. said it will replace four trees for every tree lost, engage in environmental conservation projects in the affected area, and follow the existing pipeline the company has operated in northern New Jersey since 1955.

"All I can tell you is we will follow the existing pipeline as much as possible," El Paso Corp. spokesman Robert Newberry said.

The Highlands Council

Activists also are upset because they believe the pipeline could have been stopped before going to the State House Commission by the Highlands Council. The council, a 15-member state agency tasked with "enhanc(ing) the significant values of the abundant and critical resources of the Highlands Region," approved the pipeline September 2009 by one vote.

Both the Sierra Club and the watchdog group Highlands Coalition contend the council could have stopped construction.

**"They could have not given the exemption," Highlands Coalition coordinator Kate Millsaps said.**

The council had originally rejected the project in May 2009 as inconsistent with the Highlands Act, but later approved it once El Paso Corp. resubmitted its plans four months later, this time with a mitigation strategy that included the purchase and preservation of about 75 acres in sensitive water areas.

Eileen Swan, executive director of the Highlands Council, said people unfairly point the finger at the council.

"The council does not have the authority to stop the construction," she said.

Swan contends that even if the council did not grant the exemption, El Paso Corp. still probably could have constructed the pipeline after going through other federal and state agencies.

At least now, as Swan sees it, the council has "an opportunity to better protect the environment and region" by controlling more land purchased by the El Paso Corp. for them in exchange for the pipeline.

The El Paso Corp.

The Tennessee Gas Pipeline extends from Louisiana, the Gulf of Mexico and south Texas to the northeast section of the United States, according to the El Paso Corp.

The 82-year-old publicly traded company already has reported earnings of \$577,000,000 for the first three months of this year, according to a report posted on the Securities and Exchange Commission website. The earnings do not include income taxes, equity investees or fixed charges.

El Paso Corp. owns about 42,000 miles of natural gas pipelines in North America, according to a 2009 report for the SEC.

But for Filippone, the public land she has helped save cannot be replaced by "a tree for a tree" bargain. The Passaic River Coalition plans to mark some of the oldest trees so that, if the pipeline is approved, the builders will at least preserve more of the land's history.

"(El Paso Corp.) should recognize they will be destroying very valuable land," she said.