

Highlands Council nominees draw some criticism

BY COLLEEN O'DEA • STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 23, 2010

Gov. Chris Christie's new slate of nominees to the New Jersey Highlands Council faces opposition from environmentalists, who say most of them oppose protecting the region and that the council's new political and geographic makeup would violate state law.

On Monday, Christie nominated seven people to fill 11 of the seats that are either vacant or held by members whose terms have expired. That would leave one seat still empty and two others held by holdovers.

A complex formula outlines the makeup of the council: Eight members are supposed to be elected officials — three county and five municipal — with no more than four of those from one political party and with each Highlands county getting at least one representative on the council. Morris gets two because it has the largest population in the Highlands.

If all of Christie's nominees are approved, the council's elected officials would swing 5-2 in favor of Republicans, and neither Bergen nor Passaic would have an elected representative. The state's largest county would have no representation at all.

"The governor is trying to placate right wing politics at the expense of New Jersey's water supply," said Jeff Tittel, head of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. If the makeup of the council violates that specified by 2004's New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, that could be grounds for a legal challenge, several environmentalists said.

Christie's office did not return calls for comment.

At a public forum on Monday, Christie, who has said he wants to balance land preservation with the need to compensate landowners, said his nominees would take a "much more common sense approach" to the law. He said opponents should not expect the act to be repealed while Democrats control the Legislature.

Environmental leaders complained the council will try to overturn or ignore the protections that resulted from the Highlands Act, which created a 860,000-acre region that includes most of Morris County and sets strict development rules in half of it because the region supplies more than half the state with drinking water. They contend a majority of those nominated for positions on Monday oppose the law.

"He's just stacking the deck against the Highlands," said Julia Somers, head of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

Among those nominated by Christie on Monday were Roxbury Mayor Jim Rilee, who has publicly criticized the law; Sam Race, a White committee member and farmer who backed the Warren County freeholders' lawsuit to overturn the law; and Richard Vohden, a Sussex freeholder-elect, farmer and former construction contractor who identifies himself as a "charter member of the Highlands Conservation Association," a property owners' group opposing the law.

Race would replace Tracy Carluccio, the strongest environmental voice on the council, whose term expired two years ago.

The governor also nominated two people thought to be more pro-environment: Morristown Mayor Tim Dougherty and Michael Sebetich, a college professor.

The appointments would finally replace Jack Schrier, the acting chairman, and former Parsippany Mayor Mimi Letts, both of whose terms expired two years ago.

All nominations would have to be approved by the Senate, where confirmation of some may prove difficult. Said Tittel: "We've just begun to fight these nominations."

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