

N.J. environmental groups condemn Gov. Christie's nominations for Highlands Council

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Brian T. Murray/The Star-Ledger



Matt Rainey/The Star-LedgerA man works on

his watercolor painting at Spruce Run Reservoir in Clinton Twp. in this file photo of the Highlands region.

TRENTON — Gov. Chris Christie nominated seven people to the New Jersey Highlands Council today, igniting opposition from environmental groups who say some of the candidates have been vocal critics of the law that created the council, which oversees development restrictions in the water-rich Highlands region of North Jersey.

The nominees, who need approval by the Senate Judiciary Committee, would fill vacancies on the 15-member board. The council's work has been hampered by both vacancies and members who have been serving as hold-overs in expired terms. The council was first convened in 2005 to begin

reviewing development within the 850,000-acres protected by the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning of 2004.

Environmental groups were united in criticizing all but one of the nominees. Citing public records, the group said some of the nominees have publicly criticized land-use provisions included in the law.

"It's very frustrating. I think their goal will be to dismantle the Highlands Act and prevent the Highlands Council from achieving the resource protection goals established under the Highlands Act," stated Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

The New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, Environment New Jersey and the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions joined in opposing the nominees along with Dave Pringle of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, a group that endorsed Christie's election bid last year.

The groups said they favored the nomination of Michael J. Sebetich of Hawthorne, an aquatic biologist and professor at William Paterson University.

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Christie spokesman Kevin Roberts defended the nominees, saying the governor had vowed to address the concerns of property owners in the Highlands, including many farmers who feel the the act devalued their land.

"It's not in any way meant to undercut the mission of the Highlands Council. But the governor has indicated he believes reforms are needed," he said.

Pringle of the Environmental Federation said he hoped the nominations would not move forward.

"It's the governor's job to nominate candidates and it's the senate's job to advise and consent. Given that these candidates do not believe in the law the council is obligated to uphold, anti-Highlands Act candidates should not be confirmed by the Senate," Pringle said.

Tittel said former Gov. Jon Corzine effectively handed Christie the opportunity to reshape the council and its direction by failing to fill many of the vacancies and expired seats on the board before his defeat last year.

Tittel and Pringle singled out four of the nominees who concerned them — White Township Deputy Mayor Sam Race, Roxbury Mayor James Rilee, Sussex County Freeholder-elect Richard Vohden and former West Milford planning board chairman Michael Tfrank.

Race, who has publicly called for property owners to be reimbursed for land devalued by development restrictions, said today knew about of the nomination and was aware of the criticism. But he said all nominees had been asked by the governor's office not to respond to press inquiries.

Other nominees include Morristown Mayor Timothy P. Dougherty and Robert G. Walton of Hampton. None of the other nominees could be reached for comment.