

Observer-Tribune

Christie takes heat for picks

N.J. Highlands Council appointments criticized

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CHESTER TWP. - Gov. Chris Christie's nomination of seven new members to the Highlands Council has raised a storm of anger from environmentalists and a threat to block their approval from a state Senator.

Locally, the nominations have been more favorably received.

Christie submitted seven names on Tuesday, Nov. 23 for consideration by the state Senate, which must confirm the nominees.

Among those nominated are Roxbury Township Mayor Jim Rilee and White Township Committeeman Sam Race, who both drew criticism from environmentalists.

Race has been criticized for having posted an anti-Highlands sign on his Independence Township property in Warren County.

"The governor is trying to repeal the act, not through the Legislature, but by appointing members to the council that undermine the act itself," said Jeff Tittle, the New Jersey director of the Sierra Club. "The governor is putting our water supply at risk by turning the council over to folks with extremist views."

Disappointment Voiced

David Peifer, Highlands project director for the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC), said his organization is "highly disappointed" with the quality of the nominees.

"Given some of their previous positions, it's mystifying how they could take an oath to uphold the laws of the state," Peifer said.

The Highlands Act was approved by the Legislature in 2004. It applies to 860,000 acres in the Highlands region, including municipalities in seven counties.

If all seven of Christie's appointees are approved, interim chairman Jack Shrier of Mendham Township, Chester Township Mayor William Cogger and the council's strongest environmentalist, Tracy Carluccio of Hunterdon County, are among those headed out the door.

Shrier said he doesn't know Michael Tfrank of West Milford in Passaic County, who would take his seat.

"The governor knows what he wants," said Shrier. "His nominees are consistent with his wishes and in that instance, I support the governor. I know a couple of the nominees and they're consistent with what the governor's wishes are."

Rilee said he's honored to be nominated to the council.

"I'm extremely honored the governor has faith in me," said Rilee. "I don't think I can be said to be an opponent of

the Highlands Act. I have had some issues, primarily with the lack of funding for land owners.”

Rilee said he’s not against “the rationale” for the Highlands Act.

“I support the preservation of quality water,” Rilee said.

Rilee has been criticized **by the N.J. Highlands Coalition** for his stand against submitting a notice of intent by Roxbury to conform to the Highlands Council regulations.

Cogger said he doesn’t think Christie is out to scuttle the Highlands Act.

“I don’t know any of the nominees personally, but I don’t have a problem with diversity. I would be surprised if the governor truly intended to subvert the law. I would find it odd if he were to look for people who would do that,” Cogger said.

That is exactly what the New Jersey Highlands Coalition thinks is happening, however.

“These appointments will significantly weaken and may even deliberately prevent the Highlands Council from achieving the resource protection goals established under the Highlands Act,” said Julia Somers of Harding Township, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

State Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen, said she would block the nominations in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Weinberg said the governor hasn’t met the statutory requirements in making his nominations.

In a press release, Weinberg called on Christie to reconsider his appointments “in favor of real preservationists who will serve as responsible stewards of the Highlands region.”

The Highlands Council has 15 member slots, comprised of representatives from each of the seven counties in the region, as well as a mandatory mix of Republican and Democrats, and public and non-public members.

“Morris County representation has been very important,” said Schrier. “We have the most because we have the largest number of municipalities in the region.”

Craig Garretson, a spokesman for the Highlands Council, said none of the staff members, including executive director Eileen Swan, would comment on the council nominees.

Also nominated on Nov. 23 were Timothy P. Dougherty, mayor of Morristown, Robert G. Walton of Hampton Township, Robert Vohden of Andover and Michael Sebetich of Hawthorne.

Sebetich is considered by some environmentalists as a strong voice for protection.

A spokesman for Christie said the nominations were not meant to undercut the mission of the Highlands Council, but would address reforms he believes are needed.

“Everybody is angry about lack of landowner compensation,” said Cogger. “I don’t consider that to be anti-Highlands. You can’t move the lines, they are already set. If you tried some skullduggery, you’d end up in court.”

However, Cogger said Weinberg may be able to block the nominations in committee.

“I serve at the pleasure of the governor. It took me eight months to be confirmed and I’ll serve until someone is there to replace me,” Cogger said.