

Environmentalists Unhappy With Highlands Council New Members

Newcomers and pending nominees could undermine efforts to protect the region, conservationists argue

By Tom Johnson, May 24 in Energy & Environment

The Highlands Water and Protection Council is getting a lot of new faces on the panel, but not many that the state's environmental community would like to see.

In a series of contested votes, the Senate yesterday approved three new members to the council, two of whom were vigorously opposed by environmentalists who said they, and other pending nominees proposed by Gov. Chris Christie, could undermine the seven-year-old law passed to protect the region, which supplies drinking water to more than 5 million residents.

Christie has proposed 10 new nominees to the council, six of whom the environmental community has unsuccessfully argued would dramatically change the council from one that supports the 2004 law protecting the Highlands to one that is expected to undermine its comprehensive management plan.

Protecting the Highlands

After years of lobbying, New Jersey moved to protect the Highlands, a 1,343-square-mile region in the northwest part of the state that runs through 88 of the state's municipalities. It divided the Highlands into two sections: roughly 415,000 acres for preservation and 444,000 for a planning area that must conform to the region's master development plan.

"What we have seen today is the beginning of the dismantling of the Highlands Act," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, one of six of the state's biggest environmental organizations that opposed the confirmation of Roxbury Mayor James Rilee and Robert Walton of Hampton. A third, less controversial nominee, James Meguicci of Phillipsburg, also was approved easily by the Senate.

In essence, the environmental groups argued the administration should not put nominees on the council who have repeatedly criticized the law creating the Highlands Act. Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex) agreed.

Walton, on the day after he was released from the Senate Judiciary Committee, posted on his Facebook page that the act should be scrapped. Rilee has persistently criticized the law. He told the Judiciary Committee he could not answer whether he would have voted for the act if he had the opportunity.

Julia Somers of the New Jersey Highland Coalition said the proposed nominees could alter the makeup of the Highlands Council.

"If the Governor appoints someone like Rilee, we will have appointed someone with no understanding of the Highlands Act, which was demonstrated by his appearance before the Judiciary Committee," she said. "It will make it very difficult to move forward."

But Rilee had his supporters in the Senate. "I think he's highly qualified," said Sen. Anthony Bucco (R-Morris), who argued Rilee was upset that people were not compensated for the property that was taken from them. "I think he'll make an excellent councilor."

The environmentalists and Smith argued that not supporting the Highlands Act should be an automatic disqualifier for serving on the council, a stance that was not supported by the rest of the Senate, which easily approved each of the nominees by at least 25 votes and up to 31.

Smith, however, said the Senate sent a strong message to the administration that it would fight to protect the Highlands law. He predicted two other nominees, Richard Vohden, a Sussex County freeholder, and Samuel Race, a Belvidere farmer would not be approved by the Senate. "They're not even in the field," Smith said.

Tittel was less optimistic. "We've lost a few battles, but the war is far from over," he said.