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AMY GOLDSMITH GUEST COLUMNIST

Sweeney's meddling compromised Pinelands Commission's independence

Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney took bullying to new heights in the State House over the March 16 confirmation of Robert Barr to the Pinelands Commission.

It would never have been allowed if Sweeney (D-Gloucester) was still in school. Unfortunately, New Jersey's anti-bullying laws do not apply in the State House.

If Sweeney had been sent to the principal's office, no scolding would have occurred given that Gov. Chris Christie models that behavior and was pleased with the results — the replacement of a long-standing, highly credentialed and experienced Pinelands commissioner, Robert Jackson, with someone whose résumé was long on partisan politics and short on environmental interest.

Only last year, the governor's office engaged the commission repeatedly in hopes of winning approval for the South Jersey Gas pipeline. Thankfully, the administration failed to sway enough voters.

Since they couldn't manipulate the commission, Sweeney and Christie took another tack — replace its members, as they did with the Highlands Council. It took Sweeney three tries in the Senate Judiciary Committee and two tries on the Senate floor. The end result is the potentially permanent politicization of the once-independent, -thoughtful and -effective Pinelands Commission.

While it may be within the government's right to make new appointments, it does not make it the right thing to do. The Pinelands Commission is charged with protecting an internationally recognized and unique biosphere that incorporates 22 percent of New Jersey's land mass and the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer — the sole source of drinking

water for most of South Jersey's residents, businesses and tourist industry. The commission is only able to do its job if it is left to function independent of partisan politics.

But instead, Sweeney strong-armed — with an assist from Sen. Jeffrey Van Drew (D-Cape May) — enough colleagues to ignore the facts, manipulate the process and take unusual measures to squelch public opposition to get his way.

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Barr's nomination eked its way out of committee by a vote only when Sweeney scheduled this vote over a weekend, giving only a couple days' advance notice, waiving public notice requirements and replacing a leading "no" vote — Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D-Union) was part of a committee vote against Barr's appointment twice, but was out of town for the third vote — with Van Drew, a leading advocate for Barr. Lesniak rushed back to Trenton in time for the vote, but Sweeney refused to let him, while permitting three "yes" votes from senators who missed much of the hearing.

Even then, Sweeney didn't have the votes — the full Senate initially rejected Barr's nomination by a vote this past Monday. So Sweeney used his bully pulpit and leadership in the Senate to quickly call for a re-vote. In the end, the Pinelands and integrity lost, 21-19, with Sweeney casting the decisive 21st vote.

We thank the strong bipartisan

opposition to this nomination by four former governors, led by Gov. Tom Kean the 14 Democrats and five Republicans, especially the bipartisan cadre of Sens. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex), Nia H. Gill (D-Essex), Lesniak, Christopher Bateman (R-Somerset) and Jennifer Beck (R-Monmouth), who spoke so eloquently on the Senate floor and who voted in the public interest over private and self-interest.

Shame on Sweeney and others who did not do what was right for the state, the Pinelands and, most importantly, the democratic process. We are particularly disappointed in Sens. Christopher J. Connors (R-Ocean), Nilsa Cruz-Perez (D-Gloucester), Joseph M. Kyrillos (R-Monmouth), Nellie Pou (D-Passaic), Paul A. Sarlo (D-Passaic), Robert W. Singer (R-Ocean) and Jim Whelan (D-Atlantic), all of whom in the past have displayed more political courage.

While the Senate is not up for re-election this year, there are gubernatorial hopefuls amongst them and Assembly races to be won. In the interim, they will be making important decisions. Clean Water Action will be there working with and grading these legislators, as well as informing and mobilizing our members and the electorate.

In the meantime, we, our children and generations to come can only hope that Barr takes the independent decision-making process of the Pinelands Commission seriously and distances himself from the bullies who got him there.

Our water, our health and our future depend on it.

Amy Goldsmith is the state director of Clean Water Action with more than 150,000 New Jersey members and 1.3 million nationwide.