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ON THE WEB



Local news, sports and more, only a click away.

Wednesday



Park service hears power line concerns

By BRUCE A. SCRUTON
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BUSHKILL, Pa. — The public comment period for the 1980s land management plan for the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area drew 75 personal statements and fewer than 30 written comments.

In the most recent set of hearings conducted by the National Park Service on a request to expand a power transmission line through the park, several thousand people made comments.

However, Stillwater resident Lisa Chamings was more focused Tuesday night

on one of the findings of that management plan — no additional public utilities should be built through the park.

Tuesday's hearing at the Fernwood Resort and Hotel was the start of a second set of public hearings and comment periods over the Susquehanna-Roseland project, a proposal by Public Service Electric & Gas and PPL to build a 500-kilovolt transmission line along a corridor that already contains a 230-kilovolt line.

But that corridor, as proposed by the two utilities, travels over more than four miles of the recreation area,



Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald

Paul Capell, a consultant with David Evans and Associates, center, discusses alternative power line routes with Annette Seeley, left, and Alberta Murphy, both of Bushkill, Pa., during a National Park Service open house on the PSE&G power line project Tuesday at Fernwood Resort and Hotel in Bushkill.

a part of the National Park System. It also crosses two other units of the system, the Middle Delaware National Scenic River and the Appalachian National Scenic

Trail.

Federal law requires the park service make a full environmental impact statement. Earlier in the year, there were public hearings on what

is known as the scoping document. Out of that process, which included several thousand comments from the

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Little-known panel holds purse strings

State House Commission's deals draw criticism

By PHILLIP MOLNAR
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In July, the state accepted money from a Texas-based Fortune 500 natural gas company to lay a pipeline across 16 miles of the most environmentally sensitive and restricted lands in northern Sussex County.

Environmentalists fought it, pro-development officials supported it, but everyone seemed to agree the \$45,000 asking price was too cheap to lease the land.

The state body with its hand on the public purse strings quickly quadrupled the price of the lease to \$180,000.

For a 24-year-lease on land that traverses the Highlands, where most of New Jersey receives its drinking water, the El Paso Corp. paid \$15,500 less than the 2009 median cost of a home in Vernon.

The group that sells and leases public land is one that is rarely scrutinized by the public. It is called the State House Commission, and it has controlled what happens to public lands for more than half a century, quietly setting the prices for use of government property.

The last decade of the commission's meetings has been a whirlwind of leases, sales, easements and "disposals" of publicly owned lands. At some meetings, the commission has voted verbally on a bracketed list of requests and sealed as much as a dozen deals with a single vote. Most often, no financial terms are mentioned in public, and the votes are taken within moments of their introduction.

Several times, legislators who are on the commission have left the meeting early, but instructed their neighbors at the table to cast affirmative votes across the board.

Although public attendance at commission meetings is typically less than at local council or Board of Education meetings, the



Photo by Phillip Molnar/New Jersey Herald

A marker shows the location of the Tennessee Gas Pipeline compressor station on county Route 650 in Wantage.

decisions reached by the eight-person body have far-reaching consequences for Sussex County and New Jersey as a whole.

"It's really hard to find their agenda," said Kate Millsaps, a coordinator for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. "The public really doesn't know what they do."

MY LAND IS YOUR LAND

The State House Commission was created in 1953 by the New Jersey Legislature to control the sale and leasing of state-owned properties.

The governor is the presiding officer — although he does not partake in day-to-day operations or voting — and decisions are made by the state treasurer, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, the lieutenant governor, the deputy state treasurer, two appointed members of the state Senate and two appointed members of the General Assembly.

The freewheeling commission's tasks range from setting rental prices for Department of Environmental Protection-

owned properties in Swartswood State Park to demolishing Camden's Riverfront State Prison.

The State House Commission is also the clearinghouse for the judicial retirement system, deciding upon pensions and benefits for judges across the state.

Richard Webster, a Rutgers Environmental Law Clinic staff attorney, said the commission's political motivations sometimes give "short shrift" to conservation of public lands.

"It's a political body. Very often there's a political aspect (to its decisions)," Webster said recently. "It takes a narrow view of the issues and a broad view of the politics."

Although lengthy dialogues sometimes do take place, like heated discussions about the building of a psychiatric hospital in Marlboro Township that lasted off and on, from 2007 to 2009, actions are still approved despite objections to prices and environmental concerns.

There are also the moments of self-recognition at the sometimes-haphazard functions.

"And if it's appropriate, I'll move the motion to approve this very sloppily performed transaction forward," commission member and state Sen. Bob Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, said at a June meeting before voting to increase the size of a student housing building at Montclair State University.

Smith told the New Jersey Herald in a phone interview this week that the commission's role is "to do the right thing by the taxpayers." He admitted the recent Tennessee Gas Pipeline deal did just the opposite.

"That pipeline will generate tens of millions of dollars for the company," he said of El Paso Corp. Smith was the only member of the commission to vote against the pipeline.

But no decision in recent commission history garnered as much attention — on the commission or in Sussex County — as the purchase of 1,300 acres on Hamburg Mountain by local developer Eugene Mulvihill.

A MOUNTAIN OF CONTROVERSY
The Hamburg Mountain deal reached in 1986 remains

critics' biggest contention with the way the body is run.

Hamburg Mountain, according to testimony from the State House Commission meetings, was a land deal made when the state unloaded 1,300 acres for \$880,000, or some \$675 an acre, to Mulvihill. The conditions of the sale included that the land would be preserved for recreation purposes.

A giant on the commission was state Sen. Walter Kavanaugh, who ran the meetings for many years, using a sense of humor and brusque efficiency to get through agendas, and even controversies, quickly.

But Kavanaugh railed against the Hamburg Mountain deal. He assailed the agreement again and again and again in public, and had especially sharp words for Mulvihill, the developer of the mountain.

"(The deal) stated not building houses," Kavanaugh said at a 2001 commission meeting. "But it was sold to a great American, which was a fellow by the name of Gene Mulvihill. After we sold it, we

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Study: 1 in 5 teens has slight hearing loss

By CARLA K. JOHNSON
AP Medical Writer

CHICAGO — A stunning one in five teens has lost a little bit of hearing, and the problem has increased substantially in recent years, a new national study has found.

Some experts are urging teenagers to turn down the volume on their digital music players, suggesting loud music through earbuds may be to blame — although hard evidence is lacking. They warn that slight hearing loss can cause problems in school and set the stage for hearing aids in later life.

"Our hope is we can encourage people to be careful," said the study's senior author, Dr. Gary Curhan of Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

The researchers analyzed data on 12- to 19-year-olds from a nationwide health survey. They compared hearing loss in nearly 3,000 kids tested from 1988-94 to nearly 1,800 kids tested over 2005-06.

The prevalence of hearing loss increased from about 15 percent to 19.5 percent.

Most of the hearing loss was "slight," defined as inability to hear at 16 to 24 decibels — or sounds such as

a whisper or rustling leaves. A teenager with slight hearing loss might not be able to hear water dripping or his mother whispering "good night."

Extrapolating to the nation's teens, that would mean about 6.5 million with at least slight hearing loss.

Those with slight hearing loss "will hear all of the vowel sounds clearly, but might miss some of the consonant sounds" such as t, k and s, Curhan said.

"Although speech will be detectable, it might not be fully intelligible," he said.

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Matthew Brady, 17, of Foxborough, Mass., who has some mild hearing loss, used to listen to music on earphones with the volume turned up while running on a treadmill.