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State panel to vote today on gas pipeline

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TRENTON — The State House Commission will vote today on a natural gas pipeline to be built through 16 miles of Highlands-protected land in Wantage and Vernon.

The commission tabled any action on the proposed Tennessee Gas Pipeline two weeks ago when questions arose over how much the state will charge the pipeline's owner, El Paso Corp.

For a 24-year lease, in a section of land where much of New Jersey gets its water supply, the state is asking for \$45,000.

The state Department of Environmental Protection set the price, stating it had to use the figure decided on from a state-designated appraisal. The reason the amount was so low was because the appraiser had to take into account that the land was undevelopable under the Highlands Act, according to DEP spokesman Lawrence Ragonese.

But environmental groups are concerned because they say El Paso Corp. is, actually, developing the land.

“We have some concerns about the appraisal,” said Kate Millsaps of the Highlands Coalition, an environmental group. She said the coalition is upset at what it sees as an unfair bending of the rules.

“They are developing,” Millsaps said.

The El Paso Corp. will be digging up state-owned land for the pipeline, as well as creating access roads and constructing staging platforms.

Until the State House Commission meetings this month, there had been no public hearing on the pipeline. A public comment period took place during summer and fall last year, during which written remarks could be mailed or e-mailed to the DEP.

The Tennessee Gas Pipeline already has approval from the Highlands Council and federal authorities. The State House Commission, which controls the sale and leasing of state-owned properties, will be the final barrier before El Paso Corp. can begin applying for the necessary permits.