

The Star-Ledger

Gov. Chris Christie undermining Highlands Act with unqualified director

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By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

It's official now: Gov. Chris Christie has completed his makeover of the Highlands Council and can proceed with his plans to undo the law from within.

He's replaced the previous executive director, a highly qualified environmental planner, with a politically connected career Republican who has minimal qualifications to lead an environmental agency.

Christie is on the record opposing the Highlands Act — a landmark environmental law restricting development across North Jersey to protect drinking water — in part because he doesn't think it pays landowners enough for lost ability to develop their property.

But instead of fixing that problem, as he should, by imposing a small fee on the clean water the rest of the state enjoys as a result of act, he is going after the law's core purpose. And because Democrats won't let him repeal it, he is ensuring that those charged with enforcing it simply will not do so.

That began with appointments of council members who, like Christie, explicitly oppose the law. It continued four weeks ago when these new appointees led a drive to fire the longtime executive director, Eileen Swan.

On Thursday, Morris County Freeholder Gene Feyl was hired for the \$116,000 job. Feyl was the only candidate.

If you need a good team player, Feyl's your guy. He spent decades as a school board member, councilman and mayor in Denville, climbing the government ladder to county freeholder. He's a veteran, a businessman — but with minimal environmental background. Swan brought a résumé in land preservation, planning and management. She was the Highlands' strongest defender.

Feyl's appointment is the latest step toward the Highlands Act's deconstruction. The Highlands Regional Master Plan, well on its way to full implementation under Swan, is up for re-adoption in 2013 and could be the new council's target.

Feyl is a stagehand in this play, not the director. He's a GOP-insider-for-life, ready to reap his reward — not rock the boat.

"I operate at the pleasure of the council," Feyl said. "They call the shots. I drive the bus."

This is unmistakably Christie's show. And for the state's environment, and for the 4.5 million people who rely on clean water from the Highlands, that is bad news indeed.

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