



NJ Highlands Council director to step down after less than 2 years

By Ben Horowitz/The Star-Ledger

on March 20, 2014 at 6:24 PM, updated March 20, 2014 at 10:50 PM

CHESTER TOWNSHIP — Gene Feyl, whose appointment as executive director of the Highlands Council two years ago came under fire from environmentalists who argued he wasn't qualified for the job, said today he is stepping down.

Noting that he will turn 69 in August, Feyl said, "I have decided to retire from full-time employment. Two years is a pretty good run. I've been in public service most of my life."

Feyl, a former Morris County freeholder and Denville councilman, said he will formally announce his retirement from the state agency next week and will talk more about his record on the council at that time.

He said he intends to step down sometime next month.

The council's 8-7 vote to appoint Feyl in April 2012 came under attack from environmentalists who not only questioned his qualifications but also said his selection was nothing more than a political move by allies of Gov. Chris Christie.

The job had not been advertised and the appointment came just a month after the council voted, 9-5, to oust former executive director Eileen Swan. Swan had served in the position for five years and was popular with environmentalists for efforts that included getting 39 of the 88 towns in the Highlands region to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The council oversees enforcement of the 2004 Highlands Act, which restricts development in an 860,000-acre region in northern New Jersey that provides water to more than half the state's residents.

Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, an environmental advocacy group, said today that Feyl's retirement was "entirely predictable."

She said he took the job to improve his pension and she accused his Republican allies of arranging to get him the job as "a reward for services rendered."

Somers linked Feyl's appointment to the fact that by 2012, a majority of council members had been appointed by Christie.

Feyl "was a loyal soldier," she said. "Everyone knew he was looking for a job."

Somers also said Swan "was qualified and she did a good job."

As executive director, Feyl "slowed down" the process of having towns conform to the master plan and has lately been working to weaken the master plan, Somers charged.

State records show Feyl has been an active member of the pension system for 20 years.

"Gene Feyl's appointment to the Highlands Council was done to weaken protections in the Highlands and give one of Christie's cronies a high-paying government job," said Jeff Tittel, director of the Sierra Club's New Jersey chapter. "The firing of Eileen Swan was one of the most shameful acts of the Christie administration and an attack on the environment."

Feyl declined to comment on his pension or on the environmentalists' charges, saying he will talk more about his record on the council when he makes his formal announcement next week.

Highlands Council member Richard Vohden, a Sussex County freeholder and a Feyl supporter, said he is "disappointed" that Feyl is leaving.

"I think he's doing a great job and I hate to see him go. But he's at that age. It's a decision he had to make," said Vohden, who has criticized the Highlands Act as too restrictive on development and for not providing adequate compensation to landowners whose properties lost value as a result of the restrictions.

Council Chairman Jim Rilee, who nominated Feyl for the post, could not be reached for comment.