

## **Feyl to retire from Highlands post**

### **Former freeholder, Denville mayor appointed in 2012**

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Former Morris County Freeholder and Denville Mayor Gene Feyl is stepping down after two years as executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Council.

Feyl announced his intention to retire this week and will make a formal announcement next week, according to a Highlands Council spokesperson. There is no timetable for when he will step down from the position, for which he drew an annual salary of \$116,000, according to New Jersey public employee records.

According to the council's bylaws, Feyl likely will be replaced on an interim basis by Margaret Nordstrom, another former Morris County freeholder who joined the council in June 2012. No timetable has been set to replace Feyl on a permanent basis, the spokesperson said.

"I will be 69 in August and the timing is good," Feyl said Friday. "My health is good but I've gotten to the point where I want to spend less time working and more with my family."

Prior to joining the Highlands Council, Feyl was a freeholder from 2007 to 2012, serving as director from 2009 to 2010. In Denville, he served as mayor from 2000 to 2007, after previous terms on the council and planning board. He also was a member of the New Jersey Clean Air Council from 2000 to 2007.

The Highlands Council is a 15-member appointed body tasked with implementation of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004, which includes guidelines for planning and development in 1,343 square mile Highlands area in the northwest part of the state.

The executive director is the chief administrative officer and is assisted by and oversees the operations of a professional staff of planners, science experts, geographic information specialists and administrative personnel, based in Chester.

Feyl's appointment to directorship of the Highlands Council, approved by an 8-7 vote by the council, drew controversy in the wake of the equally controversial ouster of his predecessor, Eileen Swan.

Swan was voted out, 9-5, in March 2012 as her supporters charged that Gov. Chris Christie pressured council members to remove her as part of a politically motivated effort to weaken enforcement of a law designed to protect the region's water supply, a charge the administration has dismissed.

They also said that Christie's ultimate aim was to replace Swan with Feyl. Then-Deputy Director Thomas Borden resigned in support of Swan shortly after being named interim director.

"It is arguably one of the most volatile positions in the state," Feyl said. "There was a point where I was told the position was opening up and I was asked if I was interested in filling it. At the time I had no idea whether Eileen was leaving on her own. I had nothing to do with (Swan leaving). You can't blame me for that. You can only blame me for taking the job. I thought I had the background and skill set to be fair."

"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. The firing of Eileen Swan was one of the most shameful acts of the Christie administration and an attack on the environment and drinking water for the state," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, on Friday. "The governor will appoint another one of friends to this job and continue his attempts to roll back protections in the Highlands and on clean water."

**"Gene Feyl was put in the position to do the governor's bidding, and that's exactly what happened," said Julia Somers, executive director of the nonprofit Highlands Coalition, who called Swan "A very high-caliber director who helped write the regional master plan."**

Feyl said he believes the council made positive advances during his tenure, particularly in improving communication with the towns in the Highlands region and debunking the "myth" of planned compliance.

"The myth that we were going to come in and take over the planning of a municipality," Feyl said. "We are a regional planning agency, with no permitting or regulative authority."

Feyl said several more towns have enacted planned compliance following his efforts to communicate better with the towns, saying Jefferson is coming on board next month.

"But compliance alone is not enough," he said. "The important thing now is implementation."

A former member of the Washington Township committee, Nordstrom served as a freeholder for 12 years and was director from 2008 to 2009.

Nordstrom was unavailable for comment Friday.

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