



## Highlands Council member defends retiring director's boost in pension

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A Sussex County resident on the New Jersey Highlands Council is forcefully defending retiring Executive Director Gene Feyl amid a growing controversy over Feyl's skyrocketing pension.

"I look at it a little bit differently. I don't criticize somebody for doing something they're perfectly entitled to do," Michael Francis, of Hopatcong, said on Wednesday.

Feyl's 23-month stint in the \$116,000 director's job, after 18 years as a Republican county and municipal elected official, boosted his annual pension from an estimated \$13,625 to \$63,222, the state Treasury Department said.

He is retiring April 1.

Feyl's pension details were first reported by the New Jersey Herald on Monday night.

His pension boost, while exorbitant, is legal. His 1994 enrollment in the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) while a Denville councilman predated by 13 years the state law barring future elected officials from doing so.

"Criticize the rules. Don't criticize the person," said Francis, a Hopatcong councilman.

"He didn't make the rules. I understand and respect his decision to retire," Francis said.

Francis and a second county resident on the Highlands Council, Freeholder Director Richard Vohden, voted to hire Feyl, 68, in April 2012.

Their support was crucial, as Feyl gained approval in an 8-7 vote amid accusations of cronyism and pension-padding.

Francis and Vohden, in separate interviews Wednesday, praised Feyl's work as executive director, in which he oversaw about two dozen employees.

"I think he did a great job. He administered. He implemented," Vohden said.

Yet both acknowledged having expected him to remain on the job longer.

“I thought he would come in, and possibly turn things around, and then maybe be gone,” Vohden said.

Feyl is leaving just as the council begins an update of a regional master plan. The master plan update, the first in six years, is the biggest task facing the council, with potentially significant ramifications for future development.

“His retirement is surprising to me,” Francis said, adding, “It is what it is.”

“I thought he’d be around a little longer. I was hoping he would. He’s doing such a great job,” Francis said.

Feyl was hired one month after Gov. Chris Christie’s allies on the council ousted Executive Director Eileen Swan, who was preferred by environmentalists.

Christie’s press office has not responded to a request for comment on Feyl.

Vohden acknowledged that criticism of Feyl’s lucrative exit may affect choosing his replacement.

“We may have to be cautious with the next applicant,” Vohden said.

Deputy Director Margaret Nordstrom of Washington Township, also a former Morris County freeholder, will replace Feyl on an acting basis as the personnel committee discusses how to handle the vacancy.

Nordstrom was hired in May 2012, one month after Feyl, at his recommendation.

She has not said publicly if she is interested in permanently succeeding Feyl.

**Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, said, “We are going to suggest that they make a diligent effort to find a skilled, capable person, to not fill it as a political patronage position.”**

**“We may even offer some qualified candidates,” said Ruga, who did not rule out supporting Nordstrom.**

Had Feyl stayed as a Morris County freeholder — he resigned and dropped his bid for a third term after getting hired — his pension would have been based on his \$25,000 freeholder salary.

As a U.S. Navy veteran over age 60, he was eligible to receive 54.5 percent of his final year’s salary.

Feyl had 21 years in the pension system as of Dec. 31, including his \$820 purchase in 2001 of 13 months’ service credit from his time in the Navy, the state Treasury Department said.

The Highlands Council enforces the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, which places mandatory limits on development in a 414,936-acre preservation zone in parts of seven counties, including Sussex.