



Highlands Council promotes deputy director to top job

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CHESTER — The New Jersey Highlands Council on Thursday promoted Margaret Nordstrom to executive director, in a move that was widely expected.

Nordstrom, a former Morris County freeholder and the council's deputy director since June 2012, had been serving in an acting capacity since the April retirement of former director Gene Feyl.

The council voted 11-1 to hire Nordstrom, the recommended pick of a three-member personnel committee led by council Chair Jim Rilee.

Rilee said 16 resumes were submitted.

Council member Tracy Carluccio, who criticized the selection process as too limited, cast the lone dissenting vote.

Hopatcong Councilman Michael Francis, one of two Sussex County residents on the Highlands Council, said of Nordstrom, "I think we're blessed to have her."

Two council members, including Vice Chairman Kurt Alstede, did not attend the 4 p.m. meeting at the council's headquarters.

Nordstrom's salary will rise from \$92,000 to \$116,000, which is what Feyl was being paid when he retired after less than 23 months on the job.

After the vote, Nordstrom briefly addressed the council.

"Thank you so much. I love the work here," Nordstrom said, adding, "I plan on being here as

long as you'll have me.”

The 15-member Highlands Council, currently with one seat vacant, enforces the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act placing additional limits on development in ecologically sensitive parts of seven counties, including Sussex.

In large part due to its impact on property owners, the law is controversial, with Gov. Chris Christie its most prominent critic.

The executive director serves as chief administrative officer, advising the council and overseeing a \$2.5 million operating budget and 21 full-time employees.

Nordstrom, asked after the meeting about filling the deputy's job, replied, “Don't know yet.”

She was hired as deputy at Feyl's recommendation. Both are Republicans.

Though two audience members, prior to the vote, took the podium to oppose Nordstrom, her hiring is unlikely to generate the controversy that accompanied both the selection, and exit, of Feyl.

Feyl was hired by a single-vote margin, and his short stint as executive director, which followed nearly two decades as a lower-paid municipal and county elected official, boosted his annual pension from about \$14,000 to \$63,000.

Council member Tim Dougherty, the mayor of Morristown, alluded to the pension-padding debate while endorsing Nordstrom for the job.

“I've know Margaret for quite a while, on the other side of the political aisle,” said Dougherty, a Democrat.

“She's not in this for the same reason the last executive director was, to stay here two years and get a pension,” Dougherty said.

He concluded by urging Nordstrom to “please continue to work as hard as you have been.”

Nordstrom, after the meeting, said she will pick up where she left off as acting director.

“I think you'll probably see a continuation of what I've been doing here the past seven months,” Nordstrom told reporters.

Rilee, in announcing the committee's recommendation, said Nordstrom was “head and shoulders above the rest” of the other 15 applicants.

Unlike in 2012, the council advertised the job.

Carluccio, though, said most, if not all, of the candidates were from New Jersey, and argued that the council should have initiated a national search.

She said that her objections were with the process, rather than Nordstrom.

“Margaret Nordstrom is qualified. There is no question about that,” Carluccio said.

Council member Robert Walton, who serves with Rilee and Alstede on the personnel committee, said, “Margaret is eminently qualified for the position.”

“She cares about the environment. She cares about landowner equity. I'm pleased to support her,” added Walton, a freeholder in Hunterdon County.

Council member Carl Richko said the process leading up to Nordstrom's hiring “was a step in the right direction.”

Richko drew a contrast to what happened before Feyl was hired, stating, “It was announced in the newspaper, two weeks before, who was going to be the executive director.”

He proposed expanding the personnel committee to seven members.

Deborah Post, a property owner in Chester, was one of the two audience members who spoke in opposition.

Post said she would prefer an executive director who would ensure “that property owners be compensated at fair value.”

“Margaret Nordstrom is clearly not that person,” Post said.

Nordstrom, after the meeting, sought to clarify her role.

“The council makes the policy. I'm staff,” Nordstrom said, adding that it was an adjustment for her after so many years as an elected official.

Nordstrom is the council's fifth executive director, and her hiring continued the pattern of

selecting applicants with political backgrounds.

The first two directors, Adam Zellner and Dante DiPirro, worked in the administration of Gov. Jim McGreevey, the Democrat who signed the Highlands Act.

DiPirro was succeeded in 2007 by Eileen Swan, who despite being a Republican mayor of Lebanon was an environmental favorite of Democrats — and worked for then-Gov. Jon S. Corzine.

Swan was ousted in 2012 after council members chosen by Christie shifted the balance of power on the council.

Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, an environmental group, praised Nordstrom from the podium Thursday.

“I’ve known her to be very sincere in her efforts, whether as an administrator or as an elected official,” Ruga said.

“I’ve always felt that her ability to act in the best interest of the people she is elected to represent, or in her role as an administrator, has always been of the highest caliber,” Ruga said.

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