



New Jersey Pinelands Commission **PRESS RELEASE**

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Executive Director Orders Review of Sanctuary Approvals *Action taken to protect pine snake population*

NEW LISBON, NJ - Pinelands Commission Executive Director Annette M. Barbaccia late yesterday initiated a formal review of the local subdivision approval for sections 6, 7 and 8 of the Sanctuary residential development in Evesham Township. The action was taken to ensure that the northern pine snake (*Pituophis m. melanoleucus*) population and pine snake critical habitat is protected. These three sections represent the majority of the area still to be developed at the Sanctuary site.

The Sanctuary was scaled back from 300 to 247 homes as the result of a 2000 settlement agreement regarding timber rattlesnakes. To date, 134 homes (54%) are completed or under construction. Additionally, about 1,200 acres of important ecological habitat in, adjacent to and near the development have been preserved as a result of the earlier settlement.

Ms. Barbaccia has also forwarded a letter to the developers, informing them that future local approvals for other individual lots in other sections of the Sanctuary may be reviewed by the Commission to ensure protection of the pine snake.

Executive Director Barbaccia said, "We have been working closely with our scientists, and representatives from the Department of Environmental Protection and the Attorney General's Office over the past few months to better understand the ramifications of future development of the site to the pine snake population and critical habitat. In the best interests of the environment, residents of the Sanctuary and citizens of the state, it had been our hope that we could reach an agreement with the developers of the site. Unable to reach an acceptable agreement, we are now proceeding with the Commission's formal review process to address this matter."

A review is a formal action established under the Pinelands Protection Act whereby the Pinelands Commission may, upon review of a local approval, decide whether to approve or deny it. About seven percent of all local approvals are called up for a formal review. Under the review process, a public hearing will be conducted, after which the Executive Director will issue a report with recommendations to the full Pinelands Commission for a determination.

Barbaccia added, "During this review, we will hear testimony from all parties involved, including experts on this issue. This review will be conducted over the next 45 days."

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In addition, the Executive Director yesterday released ten other lots in sections 3 and 5 that have received construction approvals from the Township. These lots are in or near substantially developed areas, areas under construction, and/or are distant from the discovered pine snake nest.

“We have an obligation to enforce the provisions of the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan in a responsible manner,” said Barbaccia. “We did not want to create undue hardships for a handful of prospective homeowners, whose lots are not at issue.”

Pine snakes pose unique challenges to experts who survey for their presence at or near proposed development sites. Unlike a survey for endangered plants, these snakes are highly reclusive and difficult to find.

The pine snake issue at the Sanctuary began in October 2001, when a State wildlife biologist discovered a dead juvenile Pine Snake at the site, apparently killed by a motor vehicle. Because it was late in the pine snake active season, the Pinelands Commission was unable at that time to accurately determine the extent of the issue. With the cooperation of the developer, the Commission conducted a survey of the area throughout the spring and summer of 2002.

On June 26, 2002, Pinelands Commission scientists discovered an underground nest in section 3 of the Sanctuary. A follow-up inspection that same day showed that the burrow had been extensively damaged by a motor vehicle. An excavation of the nest by Pinelands Commission scientists revealed an adult female Pine Snake that had been pinned in the collapsed burrow and a clutch of ten eggs. To ensure their safety, the adult snake was released in an adjacent wooded area and the eggs were removed for incubation. Additionally, during excavation of the nest, two sets of hatched eggs from a previous year or years were also found.

At this time, the public hearing is scheduled for November 6, 2002. Details will be released as they are finalized.

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