Pinelands Commission approves agreement to widen parkway

The state Pinelands Commission cleared the way for widening the Garden State Parkway, with the approval today of an agreement that allows the Turnpike Authority to use almost 143 acres of woodlands along 50 miles south of Toms River.

Under Pinelands regulations, the widening from four to six lanes would not be allowed because it would affect habitat for threatened and endangered species - primarily northern pine snakes, a threatened species in New Jersey but widely found in Ocean County's pine woods.

While the memorandum of agreement grants an exception from those rules, it is "accompanied by measures that will, at a minimum, afford an equivalent level of protection of Pinelands resources" as would fully enforced regulations, commission officials said.

Pinelands officials have said they don't believe construction activity will directly harm threatened and endangered animals and plants. But the widening project will intrude into terrain that's typical habitat for the snakes, Pine Barrens tree frog, red-headed woodpecker and other protected species.

To mitigate that loss, the Turnpike Authority has agreed to buy 259 acres on Turtle Creek, a tributary of the Wading River in Washington Township, Burlington County. Forty-four acres there that are home to tree frogs, snakes and various birds will be used as an offset for the widened parkway, and the authority will buy at least another 99 acres in the Pinelands for protection, according to the agreement.

Commission OKs widening of Parkway, with a catch

TRENTON — The state Pinelands Commission cleared the way for the Garden State Parkway to be widened with the approval Friday of an agreement that allows the New Jersey Turnpike Authority to use almost 143 acres of woodlands along 50 miles of roadway south of Toms River.

To offset the loss of wildlife habitats, the authority will preserve hundreds of acres elsewhere in the Pine Barrens.

Under Pinelands regulations, the widening from four to six lanes and additional shoulder area could not be allowed because it would affect habitats for threatened and endangered species — primarily northern pine snakes, which are threatened in New Jersey but widely found in Ocean County's pine woods.

While the memorandum of agreement grants an exception from those rules, it is "accompanied by measures that will, at a minimum, afford an equivalent level of protection of Pinelands resources" as would fully enforced regulations, commission officials said.

Environmental activists who argued against the widening said it will encourage still more development around the Pinelands and at the Shore, and divert resources that should go into mass transit.
"When you widen the highway, you're promoting growth from outside the Pinelands," said Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club. "The Pinelands Commission capitulated to the governor and the highway lobby. . . . It goes against the goals and mission of the Pinelands."

Pinelands officials have said they don't believe the construction will directly harm threatened and endangered animals and plants. But the widening project will intrude into terrain that's typical habitat for the snakes, Pine Barrens tree frog, red-headed woodpecker and other protected species.

To mitigate that loss, the Turnpike Authority, which runs the Parkway, has agreed to buy and preserve 259 acres on Turtle Creek, a tributary of the Wading River in Washington Township, Burlington County. Forty-four acres there are home to tree frogs, snakes and various birds. The authority will buy at least another 99 acres elsewhere in the Pinelands for protection, according to the agreement.

"I don't see how it offsets protection because they're buying land in a non-growth area that's not even threatened," Tittel said. "If they really wanted to do something, they'd take land from a growth area."

Commission spokesman Paul Leakan said Pinelands officials think the Parkway plan will have no "irreversible impacts" on the Pinelands but required the set-aside of wildlife lands as a prudent step.

"There was language added at the end (of the memorandum of agreement) to have the executive director report biennially to the commission," beginning in December 2010, on the status of the Parkway widening, Leakan said.

"That's a way for the commission to go back and take a look at the MOA and how it's working," said Theresa Lettman of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. Like other environmental groups, the alliance has said America's suburban history shows that highway widenings ease congestion for a time but ultimately attract even more population growth to rural edges.

The Turnpike Authority and Pinelands Commission are still working on a separate agreement to have the authority buy land around interchanges 69 in Waretown and 58 in Little Egg Harbor to prevent future development that conflicts with the Pinelands management plan. Those details are being kept confidential for now by the agencies because they involve potential real estate deals with local landowners, Leakan said.