

POLITICOPRO

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES & 6 OTHERS

Bill to save New Jersey School of Conservation advances

BY: **RY RIVARD** | 03/14/2022 01:49 PM EDT

The Senate Environment and Energy Committee advanced a bill on Monday to save the New Jersey School of Conservation by supplying it with funding from the Department of Education and by stripping Montclair State University of legal authority to run the facility.

In 2020, Montclair State closed the 240-acre, state-owned environmental education center in Stokes State Forest and returned management of the buildings and land to the Department of Environmental Protection. The 70-year-old school has helped generations of students and teachers learn about the environment, including some of the major players in New Jersey environmental policy.

**Winning candidates
had 118% more
household
impressions than
losing candidates.**

A group, the Friends of the New Jersey School of Conservation, rushed in to save the school and has partially reopened it using \$1 million in state money, which allowed the group to provide day programs for hundreds of school children and teachers.

“I think that has inspired people to see that we’re the real deal,” Kerry Kirk Pflugh, one of the leaders of the group and the daughter of a former director of the school, said in an interview.

The friends group now has a plan to fully reopen the school. But there is still language in state code that puts Montclair State in charge.

The bill that advanced Monday, [NJ S438 \(22R\)](#), removes Montclair State and assigns the friends as the legal manager of the school, though the state would continue to own it. The Senate committee voted unanimously to advance the bill over the objections of university officials.

Background: Recently, the DEP formally asked for ideas about how to fully reopen and run the school. The friends group submitted a 19-page plan. Montclair State has also submitted a plan of its own to run the school.

The university opposes the bill until the DEP finishes weighing those plans.

“We believe wholeheartedly that that process should be allowed to play out,” Maria Rodriguez-Gregg, the university’s government affairs director, told the Senate committee. She said the university closed the school instead of forcing its students — more than 40 percent of whom [are Black and Hispanic or Latino](#) — to pick up the tab for running it during the pandemic. Now, she said, the university has plans to make the school self-sustaining.

The friends group believes Montclair had its shot and blew it when it closed the school, laid off people, eliminated research programs, canceled programs that thousands of school children would have attended and took maintenance equipment from the school’s grounds.

“They should not be the primary trustee because they’ve had that role and failed,” Ed Potosnak, the executive director of the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters, which supports the bill, said in an interview.

What’s next: The committee plans to send a letter to ask DEP’s position on the management of the school.

Representatives from Montclair State and the Friends of the New Jersey School of Conservation both told senators that they are working to build coalitions to back up their side on the bill. That could create a showdown later in the session between different groups over the school’s fate.

AROUND THE WEB

New Jersey Q & A: Dr. John J. Kirk; Linking the Clergy and the ...

New York Times

Outdoor School in Survival Test

New York Times

Summer, a Time to Study the Arts - The New York Times

New York Times

New Jersey Q & A: Midge Guerrera; Telling Youth About Careers in ...

New York Times

THE LIVELY ARTS; NEW MUSIC FESTIVAL IN WAYNE - The New ...

New York Times



YOUR ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Katie Schneider

Account Manager, Pro Sales

kschneider@politico.com