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Public Chamber Considers Khimki Forest

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The Public Chamber held hearings Thursday on a disputed plan to build an $8 billion Moscow-St. Petersburg highway through the Khimki forest but kept mum on its own position, which is vital for a resolution to the matter.

The chamber promised to draft a resolution to sum up the opinions expressed by officials, environmentalists and various experts who took part in the two-hour public hearings, the body's secretary Yevgeny Velikhov said, RIA-Novosti reported.

But he did not say when the resolution would be available.

President Dmitry Medvedev, who suspended construction last month, has said he would make a final decision on the route based on the chamber's recommendation.

Vladimir Zakharov, head of the Institute of Sustainable Development, told Thursday's hearings that alternative routes not involving deforestation should be considered.

Zakharov said the enlargement of the existing highway between the two cities was logical but was not considered, which he called "weird."

Architect Leonid Glazychev said the route should only be decided on after state-ordered checks into its ecological and economic viability were completed, which would take two to three months.

Meanwhile, forest defenders said they learned that a high-pressure gas pipe runs along the proposed route under the forest floor, rendering construction impossible, Kommersant reported Thursday.

But the state corporation Russian Roads dismissed those concerns, saying the pipe would be relocated, the report said.

Fifty-nine percent of Muscovites support the current route, the state-run pollster VTsIOM said Thursday.

But 77 percent of Khimki town residents are against it, according to a survey published Wednesday by the Levada Center, an independent polling agency.

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