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## **Highlands Master Plan Is Approved**

*Plan sets strict standards to protect Highlands water, land and wildlife*

CHESTER, N.J. – By a 9 to 5 vote, the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council voted yesterday to approve the Regional Master Plan for the Highlands. The vote came after more than six hours of debate and public input over various amendments aimed at even further tightening the Plan's environmental protections.

Today the Council released its new interactive map tool at <http://maps.njhighlands.us/hgis/> which allows Highlands residents to see the resources protected by the Regional Master Plan. "Reviewing this site and the plan will help the public better appreciate the ways in which the Council has met the mandates of the Highlands Act," Highlands Council Chairman John Weingart said.

Users can view satellite map views of the region, and then zoom in to a municipality, street or even parcel. They can then turn on or off various resources, such as wetlands, stream buffers, forests, critical habitat and steep slopes, to see how they are protected by the Plan.

"Seeing is believing," Executive Director Eileen Swan said. "This tool demonstrates just how protective the Plan is for the people, resources, and unique character of the Highlands."

The Plan – which safeguards the water supply for half the state's population, including more than 5 million residents outside of the Highlands Region – is the fruition of 3 ½ years of research, planning and debate.

The Plan provides the most comprehensively and consistently protective mechanisms for surface water bodies in the state if not the nation. The Plan provides stringent standards for nitrate concentrations in ground water to protect rural character and sensitive ecosystems dependent upon clean ground water. Of the Highlands Region's nearly 860,000 acres, more than 522,000 acres provide critical habitat for the State's rare, threatened, and endangered plant and wildlife species, including Regionally-significant ecological communities.

More than half of the Highlands Region – approximately 464,000 acres – consists of upland and wetland forested communities. The Regional Master Plan provides the state’s strictest mechanisms for protection of those forests most critical to protecting water quantity and quality, and supporting ecological communities.

The resolution approving the Plan called for the Legislature to follow through on its pledge in the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act for a “strong and significant commitment by the state” to preserve the most sensitive lands in the Highlands.

A Build-Out Analysis of potential future construction in the Highlands demonstrated that the Plan dramatically reduces the number of new homes that could be built in the region – from nearly 50,000 without the Act under existing residential zoning, to just over 12,000. Even that number is further restricted until demonstration of infrastructure capacity.

Before adopting the Regional Master Plan, the Highlands Council approved numerous amendments to strengthen the Plan’s already strict environmental protections by including the following:

- Water deficits – require that the most severe deficits demonstrate resolution of the deficit prior to any approval of new water uses
- Stream buffers – ensure that existing or former agricultural lands in stream buffer areas are not treated as developed land for purposes of future redevelopment
- Cluster development – reemphasize that drinking water is protected in cluster development
- Septic systems – require that the number of new septic systems allowed not be increased due to past land preservation efforts
- State agency coordination – clarify that numerous state agencies have a statutory responsibility to coordinate their actions with the Highlands Regional Master Plan
- Forest Resources – support incentives to increase forest stewardship
- Water quality – ensure that additional monitoring is conducted for ground water quality to monitor the success of the RMP policies

The Highlands Council will next meet on Thursday, July 24, at 10 a.m. for the sole purpose of approving the minutes from yesterday’s meeting and will have its next substantive meeting on Thursday, August 21, at 10 a.m. Both meetings take place at the Council office at 100 North Road (Route 513) in Chester.