

New Jersey Highlands Council **Letter 100**

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Attributes

Response Type:	1 - Letter
Delivery Type:	W - Web-based submission
IP Address:	██████████
Form Letter:	

Web Response

To whom this may concern: Today I am once again writing as a private citizen and resident of the Highlands for 20+ years. Back in 2004, prior to the legislation known as the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act became law, I attended as many of the public hearings as I was able. My testimony at that time focused on the protection of not only the surface water supply (quality and quantity) but also groundwater availability for those of us who reside here and are stewards of the land and water. First and foremost, this Act (and the subsequent Regional Master Plan) is about one thing: water. Our health, welfare and economy in NJ depend upon clean drinking water, not only for residents but also for the businesses that rely on it for their various industries. While many have misunderstood the purpose of the legislation and cried foul, without water life itself is impossible. My next statement is probably something you have all heard before: Water is the 21st century's issue as oil was to the 20th century. There is privatization happening around the globe, which could jeopardize supplies for those living there. Some major cities have decided to privatize their water supplies, only to see prices soar for the recipients. Water is something that we are all reliant upon and what should be available in abundance, just as our Creator provided for us. When I have attended meetings at the Highlands Council over the years, it appears to me that there have been two distinct scenarios presented: those who are diligent about protecting the water and natural resources, and those who feel harmed in terms of losing the development potential of their land. I sympathize with those latter individuals but caution that nothing in this life is guaranteed except death and taxes (quoting Benjamin Franklin). While I support landowner equity, there must be a balance between the sweet nothings developers have whispered into the ears of large land owners and what is actually possible. On that same point, many communities have been doing the "ratables chase" believing that development will bring much needed taxes into the local coffers. But there is a cost to that development as you know. In terms of the current Regional Master Plan, I would like to reiterate my support for the Act and the implementation of the Plan. As someone who has followed this issue both before and after the drafting of the RMP, I am confident that it is a legitimate science-based plan; however, it is disturbing that some municipalities and counties in the Preservation Area have not conformed as required. This is important, as so many issues know no boundaries. If conformance is not achieved it only serves to weaken the protections afforded by the Act and RMP. Further, there seems to be confusion about the natural resources and their relationship to cultural resources. One cannot truly exist without the other and it is the charge of the Council to "maintain and update" these resources. Investigating both is critical when considering Consistency Determinations. As one who lives in the "heart of the Highlands" (West Milford Township) I can vouch for the importance of the scenic beauty of the Highlands, which has the proven potential to be a huge draw in terms of tourism: agrotourism, ecotourism and heritage (or historic) tourism. Additionally, active and passive recreational opportunities abound for both residents and visitors. Bringing this to the front burner is essential in providing equity to communities who must carry on within the confines of the RMP. In terms of natural resources (which also abound here), these too can bring economic development in a non-traditional way. At a time in our history when people have been feeling the effects of the downturn in the economy, many are unable to afford vacations that take them elsewhere. Many are spending their money in local areas, day-tripping or weekend getaways. Providing services in terms of attractions, activities and lodging - where appropriate - can significantly drive the economy. Redevelopment where appropriate is encouraged, as long as it does not harm the natural resources and only in areas where there is infrastructure to support it, and ensure it is done with consideration to water-deficit areas (a major issue here in West Milford). As a childhood visitor to upper Passaic County (from Bergen), I say let us return to our recreational roots, while at the same time, protect those resources which require protections. Both surface and groundwater must be considered, for without them, the area could dry up and wither like an uncared-for plant. Forests and the creatures who call them home must continue to be protected. Each relies upon the other for survival, and forest management must take a myriad of factors into consideration. As many of you may know, birding is a huge draw to the area, from the first Watchungs in lower Passaic to the Ramapo range further north. Protection of the forest from fragmentation is critical, and for that reason I suggest that all projects proposed meet the certification standards of the Forest Stewardship Council. These forested areas not only prevent erosion and runoff, which affects those in low-lying areas, it has been determined that old growth forests capture carbon, critical to alleviating climate change. Ideas for sustainable energy would also be appropriate to include in the RMP. Steams, wetlands and especially vernal pools, from which reptiles, amphibians and some plants originate, must also be protected beyond those currently existing standards. Rare flora and fauna must be identified and inventoried prior to any disturbance and in the case of extremely rare resources, must be fully protected. In terms of disturbance, it is important to first do no harm, but if determined to be unavoidable, it must be minimal. Following the rules of NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) is recommended for inclusion in the updated RMP. As a lifelong resident of New Jersey, I was so proud of what our legislature and administration did those 10+ years ago. Once again, NJ is leading the way. As members of the Council charged with this important responsibility, what will your legacy be? Thank you for the opportunity to present my comments. Very truly yours, Kathleen M. Caren

Respondent

Organization Type	Individual
Organization	
Email Address	██████████
Title	
Name	Kathleen Caren
Address 1	██████████
Address 2	
City	West Milford
State	NEW JERSEY
Zip	07480
Country	UNITED STATES
Created On	4/30/2015 5:39:00 PM