

New Jersey Highlands Council **Letter 47**

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1/13/2015 To the Highlands Commission, my name is Sean Eve, and I live in the Highlands Preservation area, at [REDACTED], Ogdensburg NJ. I am a strong supporter of the restrictions imposed by the Highlands Act, and in fact moved to the area in 2011 in large part because of the limited development the act promised for much of the region. I commute to NYC for work, so I suffer the inconvenience of a long commute every week. I choose to accept the trade off because of the quality of life open space and abundant natural resources at my doorstep afford me. There is a false dichotomy at work in many of the discussions surrounding the Highlands Act. On the one hand is the public good afforded by preserving water and natural resources, on the other is the economic cost to regions affected by the act with regard to limitations on future development. In the case of Sussex County, the majority of slow down in development is not a result of the Act, but due to changes in consumer tastes. Exurban areas are simply less desirable to millennials and don't offer the types of housing or the pedestrian lifestyle preferred by many retirees. As a result of this, Sussex County has seen less suburban development, a reduction in population, and a slow down in economic activity. The Highlands Commission has done a fine job in cataloging and prioritizing the natural resources that need to be preserved in the region. The Commission does not need to revisit these issues. Instead, the Commission needs to broaden its purview, and like comparable organizations working in the New York City watershed areas, to focus more attention and resources on how targeted economic development can help Sussex County retain and enhance its prosperity. Both through its own resources and through working with other state organizations, the Highlands Commission needs over the next few years to help Sussex County realize the vital objectives of town center regeneration, the production of market rate rental housing that is attractive to millennials and retirees, and assist in the longer-term goals related to transportation, including an expansion of mass-transit along existing tracks through Sparta, Ogdensburg, and Franklin, and the development of additional road capacity on the Route 15 corridor beyond Sparta. These are complimentary objectives, in that town redevelopment, increased housing density in those areas, and the focusing of transportation enhancements on existing areas of development in the county will allow the county to prosper while directing development away from those areas in the county most in need of conservation. A focus on the costs to private individuals of zoning changes implemented a decade ago is self-defeating, in that it draws resources away from town center investment, where development needs to take place and where public expenditure is a vital part of the equation, and at the same time promotes development beyond the cores that is less attractive in the current market. It also makes land acquisition in preservation areas more costly. While I respect that certain individuals may have seen their assets decline in value, that has been true for every property owner in the county, and is a result of large scale economic factors and the relative decline in the desirability of exurban locations such as Sussex County. Farming is the most subsidized industry in the country. So the claim that market forces should predominate is spurious coming from the very people whose livelihoods are supported by public subsidies. Likewise, suburban development imposes a heavy cost on the community, via road enhancements and school expansions, that are not paid by the developers themselves. These implicit 'subsidies', and their impact on state and local finances in New Jersey is part of what the Highlands Act helps to redress. I pay very high property taxes. In fact, Ogdensburg has one of the highest marginal rates in the county. The best way for this problem to be mitigated, other than a revenue sharing process the State would doubtless be loathe to support, is for increased retail business in the town center. Ogdensburg has very old buildings in the center of town, which could be a historic resource, but which require more investment than the private sector can justify. Efforts have been made to enhance the streetscape on main street just this year, but without a coordinated effort on the part of local, county, and state organizations, it is unlikely Ogdensburg will achieve the kind of main street redevelopment it badly needs. Retail is particularly important in this regard, as sales taxes are the most stable source of revenue available to both the state and municipalities. Such redevelopment would also increase housing values, and promote the renovation of the substandard housing units in town. Improving the social conditions, the schools system, the stresses on fire and police services, and allowing for an eventual reduction in marginal rates over time. Ogdensburg is a small town. Much wider effects and much greater economic and social improvements would be achieved by target investment in the larger communities, particularly Newton, Sussex and Sparta. Sparta is affluent, but lacks the commercial streetscapes needed. Newton and Sussex are economically deprived in some areas, and are thus unable to attract sufficient private capital investment to achieve their potential. In terms of Sussex County, assistance provided by the Highlands Council in these priority areas would have the greatest net benefits to the county, both in terms of enhanced desirability for the county and increased revenue from sales tax and property taxes linked to new, denser development in and near the town centers. Sussex County can be attractive to a new generation of individuals looking for places to call home. And the Highlands Commission can be an even more active part of that process going forward. Already, as a result of the Highland Act and other state initiatives such as Green Acres, the area has an increasing inventory of natural resources and entertainment options that appeal to the young and educated. From rail trails to kayaking and boating opportunities, from farmer's markets to hunting and fishing options, the county has many of the outdoors activities available to its residents that the market currently demands. These should be further enhanced, through more land acquisition, and also by better maintenance. The State has not done as good a job as it should in maintaining the hiking trails on much of the state land here. What we lack are the active town centers that millennials, retirees, and many others view as essential when selecting a place to live. The Highlands Commission needs to do more to help foster this kind of development throughout the county, both through technical and planning assistance, and through direct investment in main streets and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. It is there that the money and energy needs to be spent. Everyone will benefit as a result; homeowners, farmers, even developers, who will see additional opportunities in the county in those sectors of the market where they are increasingly focusing their efforts. The municipalities cannot achieve this regeneration on their own. And if we look regionally, particularly in New York where such efforts have been made, in the Hudson Valley, Catskills, and Adirondaks, we see that successful economic development has been achieved in the midst of areas where large amounts of land have also been conserved. Just beyond our own borders, we have Milford PA. and Warwick NY., towns that are no less distant from urban centers and interstates, but where targeted investment has had economically and socially transformative results. Across the West and in parts of New England, areas have boomed specifically because of the large amounts of public land that make them desirable. There is no reason and no excuse for New Jersey failing to achieve similar results to its neighbors. Instead of continually debating the past, we need to harness our resources, by increasing them and by focusing investment on the creation of lively town centers which are the necessary complement to those natural spaces and preserved viewsheds. Without both, the region cannot hope to achieve its full potential. Yours Sincerely, Sean Eve

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