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Highlands Council Unveils LANDS Model

Program is a sophisticated tool in developing the regional land use policy

CHESTER, N.J. – Incorporating an approach to regional planning that makes use of the best available science and technology, the Highlands Council today unveiled a new information system that will allow for more refined analyses on both the regional and municipal levels for the 860,000-acre Highlands Region.

The Land Use Analysis Decision Support model – or LANDS – was developed by the Highlands Council to evaluate the environmental constraints and development opportunities available in the Highlands Region. The Council will use the LANDS model to develop a refined Land Use Capability Map and series of policy maps to provide regional guidance for the implementation of the policies in the Regional Master Plan. The Council anticipates that the information in the LANDS model will also be useful as an important planning tool at the local and site plan levels for Highlands municipalities, counties, and interested residents.

“We have listened to the public comments we received since we introduced the first draft of the Regional Master Plan, and important revisions are reflected in the LANDS model” said John Weingart, Chairman of the Highlands Council. “As a result of these changes, we expect to be able to adopt a plan for the region that is both more specific and predictable, and much easier to understand and use.”

The LANDS model has the ability to represent indicators, capacities and constraints at a scale of 2,500 square feet, or in 50 ft. by 50 ft. cells, which is unprecedented detail for a regional map of this scale. It is anticipated that the tool will become even more detailed as municipalities and counties provide updated information during the Plan Conformance process of updating local master plans.

The LANDS model includes more than 50 data layers that have been refined as a direct response to suggestions raised during the public comment period. The Highlands Council created additional

indicators to address transportation, transit, lake community issues, redevelopment and farmland preservation prioritization, as well as refined the use of the indicators used in the development of the Land Use Capability Map.

As a result, the Highlands Council is using LANDS to define overlay zones that will be a guide to land use and conservation efforts in the Highlands. The three primary zones identified by the Council are:

- **Protection Zone.** This zone consists of land critical to maintaining the water quality, quantity and sensitive ecological resources and processes. Land acquisition in this zone is a priority and development will be extremely limited.
- **Conservation Zone.** This zone features agricultural lands interspersed with associated woodlands and environmental features that should be preserved when possible. Non-agricultural development will be limited in area and intensity.
- **Existing Community Zone.** This zone contains regionally significant concentrated development signifying existing communities. Infrastructure is likely to already exist in this zone which may support compatible development and redevelopment. *(This zone most closely resembles the former Planned Community Zone).*

In addition to the three primary zones, the Council has identified three sub-zones within the Conservation Zone and Existing Community Zone. These additional landscapes recognize regionally significant sensitive environmental features where development is subject to standards concerning resource protection, water use, and degradation of water quality. These sub-zones are:

- **Conservation Zone - Environmental Constrained Sub-Zone.** This sub-zone consists of significant environmental features within the Conservation Zone that should be preserved and protected from non-agricultural development.
- **Existing Community Zone - Environmental Constrained Sub-Zone.** This sub-zone consists of significant contiguous critical habitat, steep slopes and forested lands within the Existing Community Zone that should be protected from further fragmentation.
- **Lake Community Zone.** This sub-zone consists of patterns of community development around lakes to prevent water degradation and promote natural aesthetic values within the Existing Community Zone.

Using the new modeling approach, the Highlands Council was able to identify additional environmentally sensitive lands within the Conservation Zone and Existing Community Zones and additional patterns of community development in the Existing Community Zone. The refined delineation will be released later this month along with the Regional Master Plan. In addition, the delineation will be available to specifically identify the zones on the nearly 350,000 parcels in the Highlands Region. The Highlands Council's property search tool, found on the Council's Web site, www.highlands.state.nj.us, will be updated soon after the release of the Plan for use on a lot by lot basis.

“The development of the LANDS model shows significant progress in meeting the goals of the Highlands Act,” said Eileen Swan, Executive Director of the Highlands Council. “The Highlands Council now has this invaluable tool for regional planning that will be scientifically-based and legally defensible. Moreover, this information will continue to be crucial and necessary for the detailed planning that will occur at the municipal level.”

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