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Highlands Approvals Reach Halfway Mark

Sparta, Hardyston join 28 other towns; Highlands Council updates its maps

CHESTER, N.J.--With approvals for the Sussex County townships of Sparta and Hardyston, the New Jersey Highlands Council has reached a midpoint in its review of plan conformance for the region's municipalities.

At the Highland Council's meeting on September 15th, the approval of Sparta's petition for Plan Conformance added 11,488 acres and the approval of Hardyston's petition brought an additional 12,603 acres under the purview of the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

Both Sparta and Hardyston petitioned the Highlands Council for Plan Conformance for their Preservation Area lands. For the past two years they have worked with the Highlands Council on a build-out analysis for their entire communities to examine conformance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan and examine the capacity for growth considering available infrastructure and protection of natural resources. They have also worked on Environmental Resource Inventories using information from the Highlands Council to augment municipal work, examined provision of affordable housing and worked on Master Plan Elements and Land Use Ordinances. As a result of the approvals of their petitions today the townships are now eligible for planning grants, technical assistance and legal protections under the state Highlands Act.

"We will continue to work with these towns to plan for agricultural retention, natural resource protection and sustainable economic development" said Jim Rilee, Chairman of the Highlands Council. "We will partner with Sparta and Hardyston to assist them in meeting their goals consistent with the Highlands Act."

The Highlands Region covers 859,267 acres across seven counties, and is divided into the Planning Area and the Preservation Area, with each carrying varied restrictions for landowners and developers. Water from the Highlands is used by 5.4 million residents and forms the main supply for major cities such as Newark and Jersey City. The cities of Hoboken, Bayonne, Paterson, Elizabeth, Edison and Woodbridge all rely on the Highlands for their water.

To date, 60 towns have submitted a petition to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan, resulting in a 97-percent conformance in the Preservation Area (401,903 acres) and 35-percent conformance in the Planning Area (157,460 acres). Of 60 towns to apply for review, 30 towns—amounting to over 320,000 acres—have received approval for their conformance plans since 2010.

The Highlands Council recently completed updates of all data used for mapping farmlands, water supply, preserved lands, steep slopes and other critical information. In the most extensive review since adoption of the Highlands Regional Master Plan in 2008, the Council's staff updated the data and mapping for Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI) for each of the 88 municipalities.

Each town's ERI update includes information about historic properties, known contaminated sites and wastewater treatment. The new maps and up-to-date information will help towns in preparing effective master plans and local ordinances, to better deal with future demands and development. Updates will be posted on the Council's website in coming weeks.

“We committed to gathering and analyzing the best information available for planning in the Highlands and we have done that” said Eileen Swan, the Highlands Council's Executive Director. “However, it is critical that we maintain that information and make it readily accessible to Highlands municipalities and the public. We continue to live up to our commitment.”

From 1972 to 2007, the Highlands saw major changes in its forests, farmlands, wetlands and urban lands. According to the updated state land use and land cover data, the Highlands Region's forest cover declined by 15 percent (over 70,000 acres); its farmlands declined by 33 percent (over 50,000 acres); and its wetlands declined by 21 percent (over 20,000 acres).

In a counter trend, developed lands in the Highlands Region grew by 136 percent (nearly 134,000 acres), reflecting three decades of pressure from residential and commercial projects. The recently available data is now being included in all Highlands Council maps, and will be available on the Council's website with the metadata accessible for planners and municipal officials.