

Highlands Council Update

November/December 2024

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Great Blue Heron, Harding Township

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Highlands Council Update

Summary of Activities | November 1- December 31, 2024

From the Executive Director

Welcome to 2025. As the air starts to buzz with “new beginnings” and “fresh starts,” it’s critical not to forget about maintaining momentum from the prior year. Sure, the belly still may be full of cookies and other treats but think of it as fuel for the year ahead.

Here at the Highlands Council our priorities are pretty clear. In the near term we will be focused especially on helping our municipal partners navigate the complexities of the new affordable housing legislation, which has deadlines fast approaching. Towns working with us are already benefiting from the resources we have made available, including an online build-out update tool that factors in Highlands resources when conducting an analysis of buildable parcels. The Council also released guidance and has in-house expertise and grant funding available for our constituent municipalities.

Climate change is another area where we know our municipalities need additional support. Between the wildfires over the past two years and the drought that began late last summer and continues to impact the region, climate change hazards are clear and present. The Highlands region is a key element of the state's overall climate resiliency. From reliability of drinking water supplies to protection from extreme precipitation events and food security, the resources of the region are vital to the future of the state. The Council will begin work in 2025 on a dedicated Climate Change section of the Regional Master Plan that highlights these factors.

Another priority that carries over from 2024, and will for the next few years, is helping our municipalities with their MS4 permit compliance. Here again we have made numerous resources and grant funding available because stormwater management is such a critical issue for water quality in the region.

Amid all these other important items, it is also a core component of the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan to ensure protection of our local economies. Following the release of the Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan in 2022, the Council kicked off a regional branding and marketing initiative in 2024 that continues to advance with input from across the region. Look for more exciting and interesting developments as these initiatives are implemented.

Finally, as of the writing of this report, there are 15 municipalities in the region actively seeking full conformance with the RMP. This is significant. Many of these towns are located entirely within the planning area of the region, where conformance is voluntary. Others were previously conforming for the preservation area portion only and are now adding the remainder of the municipality. Implementation of the Highlands Act and RMP relies on action at the local level, and our goal is to eventually have the entirety of the region in conformance. 2025 will be a big step towards that end.

This is in no way a complete list of all we will be working on this year. Otherwise, I'd have nothing to share in future reports. But these are a few at the top of the list. We're looking forward to continued work with our municipal and county partners to protect the Highlands region.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

Completed Projects

The following municipalities/counties have submitted project deliverables that were reviewed by Highlands Council staff and found to be consistent with the approved scopes of work and eligible for reimbursement.

- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Stormwater management/MS4 Permit compliance.
- **Hunterdon County.** Tourism, Digital Marketing and Advertising Campaign.
- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County.** Initial Assessment Report.
- **Ringwood Borough, Passaic County.** Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (Sustainable Economic Development Plan component)
- **Washington Borough, Warren County.** Sustainable Economic Development Plan; Municipal Ordinance Revisions.
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County.** Stormwater management/MS4 Permit compliance.

Deliverables Received

The following municipalities have submitted project deliverables that are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff for consistency with the approved scopes of work.

- **Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County.** Municipal Build-Out Analysis

Approved Scopes

Highlands Council staff have approved scopes of work for the following projects in the specified municipalities/counties. With approved scopes, project work may begin.

- **Far Hills Borough, Somerset County.** Conformance Assessment
- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Municipal Build-Out Analysis
- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** Municipal Build-Out Analysis
- **Hunterdon County.** Tourism and marketing plans.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment, planning area.
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Municipal Build-Out Analysis
- **Morris Township, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment.
- **Town of Boonton, Morris County.** Highlands Center Designation Plan
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Zoning Map Updates and Land Use Master Plan Element.

- Highlands Council staff have reviewed and approved funding requests/scopes of work to complete stormwater management tasks related to MS4 Permit compliance for the municipalities below.

Bergen County

- Oakland Borough

Hunterdon County

- Bloomsbury Borough
- Clinton Township
- Holland Township
- Tewksbury Township

Morris County

- Chester Borough
- Chester Township
- Jefferson Township

- Mount Olive Township

- Rockaway Township

- Washington Township

Passaic County

- Ringwood Borough

Sussex County

- Vernon Township

Warren County

- Allamuchy Township
- Hackettstown
- Lopatcong Township

Scopes/Funding Requests

The following municipalities/counties submitted scopes of work for the specified projects. The scopes are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff.

- **Hunterdon County.** MS4 Map Preparation and Outfall Inspection.
- **Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** Lake management planning (Budd Lake).

Other Notable RMP Implementation Activities

- **RMP Update: Washington Township, Morris County, Block 19, Lot 8.** Following staff review of a request from Washington Township to review the Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) designation of a specific parcel, it was determined that the LUCZ could be changed for the specified parcel. The RMP allows for changes to the LUCZ based on the receipt of new, corrected or updated information. The subject parcel currently has two designations: Existing Community Zone (ECZ) at the front portion of the property, and Protection Zone (PZ) at the rear of the property. The request to reclassify the entire property as ECZ was approved with conditions.

RMP Conformance Petitions

A petition to the Highlands Council for conformance with the Highlands RMP involves the submission of local planning and regulatory documents for review by Highlands Council staff for alignment with the provisions of the Highlands Act and the RMP. Once a petition is approved by the full Highlands Council, a municipality or county becomes eligible for Highlands Council grant funding to help implement the RMP at the local level.

- **Petition Approvals.** At the December Highlands Council meeting, petitions were approved for Mountain Lakes Borough in Morris County and Bernardsville Borough in Somerset County

- **Upcoming RMP Conformance Reviews.** Petitions from Mendham Township and Netcong Borough, both in Morris County, have been reviewed by staff and the resulting review reports are expected to be released for public comment shortly.

Project Reviews

The Highlands Council does not issue permits but is statutorily required to review certain proposed projects in the region for consistency with the Highlands RMP. In some cases, the Highlands Council shares jurisdiction with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

- **Conditions Compliance – The Woodland Apartments**

Hackettstown, Warren County

Additional information related to a consistency determination issued in May 2022 was provided by the applicant. The project involves redeveloping three lots to create a two-story apartment building.

Highlands Council staff determination: Conditions met, pending final copy of the site plan set and any other related revised plans.

- **Conditions Compliance – 2 Hilton Court**

Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County

Additional information related to a consistency determination issued in December 2021 was provided by the applicant in November 2024. The project involves the construction of a warehouse on a previously developed site.

Highlands Council staff determination: Conditions met, pending receipt of approving resolution and post-construction photos.

- **Highlands Preservation Area Approval (HPAA) w/NJDEP. Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Pilot Project.**

Montville Township, Morris County

Montville Township is seeking a Highlands General Permit 1 from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to implement a groundwater recharge project as part of a larger Stream Corridor Protection and Restoration Plan addressing Beaver Brook and adjacent wetlands.

Highlands Council staff provided notification to the NJDEP in support of the project.

- **Planning Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #11. Sussex County Municipal Utilities Authority (SCUMA), Upper Wallkill Valley Water Control Facility Nitrate Removal Upgrade Project**

Hardyston Township, Sussex County

This project involves the upgrade of an existing wastewater facility to ensure compliance with NJDEP nitrate standards. The upgrade involves the disturbance of both grass and paved areas. The majority of the grass disturbance will be restored to grass with a small area converted to new pavement to accommodate the upgrade. Highlands Act [Exemption 11](#) allows for the routine maintenance of public utilities.

Highlands Council staff determination: Exempt – Consistent with the goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act

- Planning Area Consistency Review. Iglesia Pentecostal Unida.**
Hackettstown, Warren County
 Project involves conversion of an existing commercial building (warehouse) to a church with parking area.
Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent subject to conditions.
- Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review. Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, Policastro Residential Development**
Roxbury Township, Morris County
 Applicant is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP Area to accommodate the development of six multi-family buildings and one recreational building. Project will produce a total of 251 residential units, including 20% affordable.
Highlands Council staff review pending.
- Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review. Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, Hercules Residential Development**
Roxbury Township, Morris County
 Applicant is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP Area to accommodate development of 12 multi-family buildings totaling 192 residential units, including 20% affordable.
Highlands Council staff review pending.
- Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review. Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, ‘Southwinds’ Multi-family Residential project**
Roxbury Township, Morris County
 Roxbury Township is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Sussex County WQMP to accommodate a new residential development. The two parcels included in the proposed project combined equal 15.73 acres and are currently undeveloped, forested land. The proposed project site is located in the Protection Zone of the Planning Area of Roxbury Township; therefore, the proposed project is inconsistent with the RMP, which prohibits the extension of wastewater service into the Protection Zone of the Planning Area.
Highlands Council staff finding: Inconsistent with the Highlands Act and RMP
- Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review. Site-Specific WQMP Amendment, Liberty Corner Proposed Mixed-Use project**
Bernards Township, Somerset County
 Applicant is seeking a site-specific amendment to the Somerset County WQMP Area to accommodate a mixed-use development that includes maintaining an existing office building and adding a parking garage, an apartment building, and a mixed-use building with hotel rooms and retail. The existing development is within the adopted WQMP, but development of the vacant portion requires an amendment.
Highlands Council staff finding: Inconsistent with the Highlands Act and RMP

GIS Updates

- **Build-Out Update Review Portal.** Following a training event in early November, municipalities throughout the Highlands region are leveraging the Highlands Build-Out Update Review Portal to support planning for their Round 4 Affordable Housing obligations.

This robust tool, built by the Highlands GIS staff, allows fully conforming Highlands municipalities to determine the number of developable lots remaining in their town and from that, extrapolate their affordable housing obligation. That information, in conjunction with guidance material released by the Council in October, will aid in the creation of new affordable housing plans. Access to the Portal requires a login and password, which has been provided to conforming municipalities. While non-conforming municipalities may request log-in credentials, per the parameters of the affordable housing legislation, only conforming municipalities are eligible to consider Highlands resources in determining development potential of individual parcels. More information is available by contacting [James Humphres, Director of Planning, Science and GIS](#).

Science Initiatives

- **Forestry Management and Stewardship.** Highlands Council science staff and leadership continued coordination meetings with representatives from Newark's Pequannock Watershed regarding watershed lands in the Highland region owned by the City of Newark.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan.** The steering committee met in November to discuss project progress, specifically focusing on identification of municipal stakeholders and unique access groups for public recreation.
- **Requests for Inclusion in Federal Highlands Boundary.** The Highlands Council has made a request to the US Fish and Wildlife Service for the inclusion of the following municipalities in the federally designated Highlands region. Inclusion in the federal boundary makes these municipalities eligible for funding under the federal [Highlands Conservation Act grant program](#). This does not change the New Jersey Highlands region boundary.
 - Township of Readington, Hunterdon County
 - Bedminster Township, Somerset County
 - Borough of Madison, Morris County
 - Township of Knowlton, Warren County
- **Letter of Support: New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (NY-NJTC) Grant application.** The Highlands Council provided a letter supporting a NY-NJTC application to the Land Trust Alliance for a grant to create a *Highlands Trail - East of Hudson Protection Plan*. The Plan will help identify land parcels needed to connect the remaining section of the Highlands Trail between the Hudson River and Connecticut state line. In New Jersey, the Highlands Trail begins at the Delaware River in Warren County and continues 130 miles through the heart of the Highlands region to the New York State border in West Milford.

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Program Easement Inspections.** Highlands Council staff visited 18 properties in November and December to review compliance with terms of HDC conservation easements. All properties were found to be in compliance.

Legislative Update

Highlands-Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S3466 / A4627	McKeon, John F.	Extends expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres and farmland preservation program; provides aid for watershed lands. Provides for a \$7.5 million annual allocation of constitutionally dedicated Corporation Business Tax (CBT) revenue to the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council for the preservation of land in the Highlands Region	12/12/2024 Reported from Senate Committee with Amendments, 2nd Reading. The committee amendments to the bill would delete sections 3 through 5 of the bill, which would have provided for a \$7.5 million annual allocation of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue to the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council for the preservation of land in the Highlands Region. (Y: 5 N: 0 NV: 0 Abs: 0) [PASS]

Highlands-Related Legislation

Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5064	Sauickie, Alex	Establishes Watershed Council in DEP. The purpose of the council is to analyze flooding and other environmental issues affecting the State's watersheds. The council is directed to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the DEP's programs for planning, permitting, mitigation, and restoration of impacts to New Jersey's watersheds, analyze the programs' effectiveness in preserving plant and animal life, protecting residents from flooding risks, preserving and enhancing water quality, and managing stormwater runoff, and make recommendations.	12/9/2024 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee.
S3962	Bramnick, Jon M. Bucco, Anthony M.	Requires State to annually compensate certain municipalities for costs related to obligations for development of low- and moderate-income housing units.	12/16/2024 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Part-time Communications Specialist Position.** The Highlands Council is accepting applications for [this position](#) through Friday January 17.

Outreach & Education

- **Annual New Jersey League of Municipalities (NJLOM) Conference**
 - **Exhibit Hall.** Highlands Council staff members enjoyed meeting and speaking with many municipal and county officials, representatives from sister agencies throughout the state, and staff members from several of the planning, engineering and GIS firms we work with at the 109th Annual three-day NJLOM Conference in Atlantic City.



- **NJ Interagency Council (IAC) on Climate Resilience Listening Session.** Highlands Council Environmental Scientist Sarah Friend was a panelist at this session designed to provide an update on the statewide Climate Resilience plan and get feedback from participants about critical climate issues. Sarah is the Highlands Council representative on the IAC.

Municipal & County Coordination

Highlands Council staff frequently meet with our constituent municipalities and counties to discuss their priorities and how they intersect with implementation of the Highlands RMP.

- **November and December meetings.** Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan County Coalition (Branding and Marketing project); Hunterdon County (stormwater mapping); Kinnelon Borough, Morris County (Butler Water Treatment Plant, Exemption 11); Morris County Chamber (Agriculture and Resiliency Committee); Morris Township (Plan Conformance); Passaic County (Hazard Mitigation Plan); Sparta Township, (Master Plan); Sussex County (Hazard Mitigation plan); Warren County (Complete Streets planning).

Agency & Organization Collaboration

Highlands Council staff often meet with sister state agencies to ensure effective coordination; professional and non-governmental organizations to learn and collaborate; and other entities that have a stake in protecting the New Jersey Highlands.

- **November and December meetings and events.** USDA (regular quarterly meeting discussing agriculture in the New Jersey Highlands); NJDEP Drought Public Hearing; Northeast Mid-Atlantic Partnership for Forests & Water Forum; Newark/Pequannock Watershed (MOU Implementation); Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan Steering Committee; Montclair University (Jennings Creek Wildfire); Jersey Water Works Conference; NJDEP (Highlands Coordination); Food Processing and Innovation Center committee meeting.

Council Committee Meetings

- In December, the Budget and Finance Committee and the Plan Conformance Committee met.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The January Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 16. The February public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 20, 2025. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.

