

# Highlands Council Update

March/April 2025

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Musconetcong River, Mansfield Township, Warren County/Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County border.

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | March/April 2025

## From the Executive Director

At the April Highlands Council public meeting we said goodbye to long-time Council Member Rich Vohden. Rich is a resident of Green Township where he has been, in his words, living his life's dream as the owner and operator of Pequest Valley Farms since 1983. Rich has been a dedicated member of the Highlands Council for 14 years who rarely, if ever, missed either a public Council meeting or one of the Council's committee meetings. He is also a former Sussex County Commissioner/Freeholder who brought a valuable perspective to the Council. Rich will be missed, and we wish him the best going forward.

Replacing Council Member Vohden is Bill Kibler. Bill is an attorney and graduate of West Point. He served in the Army Corps of Engineers. The last three decades of his career have been dedicated to working on environmental and water protection issues in the Raritan basin. He was the executive director of the South Branch Watershed Association before that organization merged with the Upper Raritan Watershed Association in 2011 to create the Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA). Following the merger, Bill became the Director of Policy for RHA. In January 2025, he assumed the role of Executive Director at the Great Swamp Watershed Association. He was sworn in as the newest Highlands Council Member at the April meeting. We look forward to Bill's tenure on the Council as he brings both knowledge and passion for our mission to this new endeavor.

Unfortunately, bidding farewell to one Council Member and welcoming another does not address the long-standing concerns about Highlands Council membership. The Council is still operating with only ten of its statutorily authorized 15 members. Of the 10 sitting members, only three are serving on current, unexpired terms-the remainder being holdovers. The failure of the administration to appoint a full council membership creates a challenge for the Highlands Council. A quorum of eight members is required to hold a meeting and eight affirmative votes are required to pass any Council matter (even meeting minutes). Absences, illnesses, conflicts of interests or abstentions can handicap the ability of the Council to conduct even routine business. Additionally, three of the seven Highlands counties are not being afforded their appropriate representation as mandated by the Highlands Act. Ultimately this is an unsustainable set of circumstances, that is already impeding the Council's operations.

Also at the April meeting, the Highlands Council approved Plan Conformance petitions for Netcong Borough and the Planning Area portion of Union Township. Union already has an approved petition for the part of the township located in the Preservation Area. Three more Highlands municipalities are expected to be on the agenda for petition approval at an upcoming meeting. Mendham Township, Belvidere and the Planning Area portion of Jefferson Township (also already conforming for the Preservation Area) will all be presented for the Council's consideration at that time.

It is important to remember that approval of a municipality's petition is only the beginning of their work with the Council. The Conformance process is part of an ongoing relationship between the municipality and the Highlands Council. The Council will support the conforming town with both technical and financial assistance as the local governing body implements planning and zoning measures to align the

town's management of land use with the Regional Master Plan. More and more, Highlands towns in the Planning Area are coming to realize the benefits of working with the Council and the advantages of becoming a conforming municipality. We look forward to continuing our work with towns that are engaged in the conformance process and welcome any town in the region that chooses to work with us in the future.



Ben Spinelli  
Executive Director

## **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.** Open Space and Recreation Plan (partial completion)
- **Chester Township, Morris County.** Wastewater Management Plan
- **Harding Township, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment Report
- **Hunterdon County.** County Tourism Digital Marketing and Advertising Campaign (partial completion)
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Sustainable Economic Development Plan
- **Morris County.** Lake Hopatcong Aeration System Analysis (component of Lake Management Plan).
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** Lake Management Plan
- **Vernon Township, Sussex County.** Septic Management Plan, Lake/Watershed Management Plan
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Highlands Ordinance

### **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.

- **Morris County.** Mt. Hope Floristic Study.

### **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.

- **Bedminster Township, Somerset County.** Historic Preservation Plan
- **Bloomsbury Borough, Hunterdon County.** Sanitary Sewer Feasibility Study
- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan

- **Lopatcong Township, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Washington Borough, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan

### Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Passaic County.** Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan Update & Farmland Preservation Master Plan Update

### Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Petition Approvals: Netcong Borough, Morris County, and Union Township, Hunterdon County.** At its April meeting the Highlands Council approved petitions for Plan Conformance from two municipalities.
  - Netcong Borough in Morris County is located entirely within the Planning Area of the Highlands. Netcong petitioned the Highlands Council for designation of the entire municipality as a Highlands Center. The petition was approved at the Highlands Council April meeting with plans for the borough to work on Highlands Center Planning, infrastructure studies, an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI), and affordable housing requirements.
  - In 2022 the Highlands Council approved a petition from Union Township for conformance in the Preservation Area portion of the township (approximately 80% of the land area). At the April meeting the Highlands Council approved a petition to add the township's Planning Area land. The implementation plan accompanying the approval includes a Master Plan Examination Report, Stormwater Management Plan, an Agricultural Retention and Farm Preservation Plan, and an Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI).
- **Petition for Plan Conformance: Mendham Township.** In March, Mendham Township approved a resolution to pursue conformance with the Highlands RMP. The Highlands Council issued a public notice announcing it would be accepting comments on the township's request for conformance. The public comment period closed on April 26 and the Council is expected to take action on the petition at its May meeting.
- **Highlands Council Sustainable Agriculture Grant Program.** The Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA) submitted a scope of work for year-two activities related to a Highlands Sustainable Agriculture Grant awarded in 2023. The NOFA project focuses on expanding organic and regenerative farming practices in the Highlands region through demonstration projects on farms with differing conditions.
- **State Plan Cross Acceptance.** In March, the Highlands Council reached out to municipalities providing guidance on the State Plan Cross Acceptance process and offering support in this process. The Highlands Council provided municipalities with an online form and environmental mapping to assist in the completion of the municipal state plan cross acceptance report. To date 43 municipalities have completed the report. Staff is summarizing the reports for submission to the State Planning Commission and the Office of Planning Advocacy.

## 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).

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Review.**

- **1105 Mt. Kemble Ave**

- Harding Township, Morris County*

- A proposed redevelopment of property to multi-family residential use requires an amendment to the Northeast WQMP area. An additional 3.2 acres of Sewer Service Area is proposed. Water supply will be provided by New Jersey American Water.

- Highlands Council Staff review is in progress.*

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Review.**

- **Willows at Pohatcong/Clark Walnut Development**

- Pohatcong Township, Warren County*

- The proposed residential development project is located in the Planning Area and in a designated Highlands Center within Pohatcong. The projected wastewater generation of 22,516 gallons per day (gpd) will be conveyed to the Town of Phillipsburg Sewage Treatment Plant for treatment. The site is undeveloped, forested land, but the development will avoid the riparian areas associated with Lopatcong Creek and the adjoining unnamed tributary to a C-1 designated stream.

- Highlands Council staff finding: consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

- **AQUA New Jersey, Inc., Well 2 PFAS Treatment Enclosure**

- Byram Township, Sussex County*

- AQUA New Jersey is seeking an Exemption #11 related to the installation of a permanent treatment station adjacent to an existing well station location in Byram Township to address polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) found at the site. No Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

- Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

- **AQUA New Jersey, Inc., Bunnvale Well 5 PFAS Treatment**

- Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County*

- AQUA New Jersey is seeking an Exemption #11 related to the installation of a permanent treatment station adjacent to an existing well station location in Lebanon Township to address polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) found at the site. No Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

- Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).**

- **JCP&L Chester Distribution Reliability Improvement Project**

- Chester Township, Morris County*

- Jersey Central Power and Light Company (JCP&L) is seeking an Exemption #11 to complete upgrades at an existing facility that will involve the replacement and installation of new equipment. No Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

*Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).  
Woodland Heights Water System Improvements**

*West Milford, Passaic County*

The Woodland Heights Homeowners Association is seeking an Exemption #11 to upgrade an existing distribution system and well site to bring it into compliance with state regulatory guidelines. No Highlands resources will be affected by this project.

*Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #9 (w/NJDEP).  
Resurfacing and Rehabilitation of County Route 635**

*Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County*

Hunterdon County is seeking an Exemption #9 to regrade 2.43 miles of roadway and repair damaged shoulder areas to improve safety and rideability.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

- **Planning Area Exemption Determination  
Retail Redevelopment Project**

*Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County*

Applicant is seeking an Exemption #4 for the redevelopment of an existing retail site following destruction of the original structure by fire. The proposed redevelopment will remain within the current footprint with modifications to the parking lot, a relocation of the sidewalk, and minor utility improvements.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt*

- **Planning Area Consistency Review  
Pohatcong Heights Apartments**

*Pohatcong Township, Warren County*

The proposed project is located within the Existing Community Zone in the Planning Area and Highlands Designated Center of Pohatcong Township on a site currently occupied by a vacant two-story brick schoolhouse. The applicant is seeking to construct four new, three-story residential buildings containing 12 units per building for a total of 48 new units, 20% of which will be deed-restricted affordable housing units.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent subject to specified conditions.*

## GIS Updates

- **Introducing REX: the Highlands Resource Explorer.** The Highlands Interactive Map is now the Highlands Resource Explorer (REX). Because one of the key functions of the interactive map is to help users understand the region in the context of the many Highlands resources that are being protected, the map has been reimagined and relaunched as the Highlands Resource Explorer or ‘REX’ for short. The Highlands REX contains all the same functionality as the previous interactive map, but has an updated interface, improved response efficiency, and more mapping capabilities/customization. The Highlands REX is available directly from the homepage of the [Highlands Council website](http://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/gis/REX/) under the “Mapping & GIS” main menu or directly at [www.nj.gov/njhighlands/gis/REX/](http://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/gis/REX/).

- **Highlands Data Layer Updates.** Highlands Designated Center and Highlands Environmental Resource Zone (HERZ) data layers were added to the Highlands Council’s GIS mapping tools for Lopatcong and Pohatcong Townships in Warren County.

## Science Initiatives

- **Sparta Mountain Habitat Creation Project.** Highlands Council staff visited Sparta Mountain in March to view conditions. Separately, the Council responded to the [public comment period](#) regarding “Forest Management Activities” that was open through March 31.

## Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Easement Inspections.** Owners of 43 properties were notified in March that inspections would be taking place in April and June to ensure compliance with the terms of the easements placed on their properties through the HDC program.

## Staffing and Staff Development

- **Seeking Administrative Assistant.** The Highlands Council is currently seeking an experienced administrative professional to join its team. This is a full-time position based in Chester, NJ. Applications are being accepted through Friday, May 16, 2025. Complete details are available in the [job announcement](#).
- **GIS Specialist.** The Highlands Council received more than 45 applications for the GIS Specialist position and six candidates were selected for interviews. A candidate has been selected and an offer is in progress.

## Outreach & Education

- **MS4 Permit Compliance.** The Highlands Council partnered with Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) Water Resources Program to promote a webinar held in April, “How to Prepare a Watershed Inventory Report for the MS4 Permit.” The RCE Water Resources Program Municipal Stormwater Management Technical Assistance Program provides an abundance of resources including dedicated regional contacts to help navigate this complex process. See [program flyer](#) for information.
- **2024 Annual Report.** At its April public meeting the Highlands Council voted to release the [2024 Annual Report](#) summarizing the work of the Council over the past calendar year.
- **Highlands Council Website Update.** In late April the Highlands Council transitioned to an updated website. The new design is mobile-friendly and features a number of enhancements including an explorable homepage map that provides quick access to individual municipal pages and a revamped site architecture that seeks to present the work of the Highlands Council in a more user-centered context. The site is available at the same address: [www.nj.gov/njhighlands](http://www.nj.gov/njhighlands).
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 17 inquiries from constituents in March and 19 in April.



**New Highlands Council Website:** Desktop and mobile screen captures.

## 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.

- In March and April the Highlands Council met with Jefferson Township, Morris County (Water Use and Conservation Management Plan); Morris County (Trails & Recreational Planning Initiatives); Morris County Agricultural and Resiliency Committee; Clinton Township, Hunterdon County (former Exxon site); Passaic County (RMP implementation); Hunterdon County (stormwater management) and Mountain Lakes Borough (Conformance Ordinance).

## 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.

- In March and April the Highlands Council met with the Randolph Chamber of Commerce (Economic Sustainability); Department of Agriculture (Septic Replacement on Farms); Department of Environmental Protection (Water Resources)

## Council Committee Meetings

- In April, the Budget and Finance committee met twice, and the Plan Conformance committee met once.

## Legislative Update

Following is a summary of updates to Highlands-specific legislation that has been introduced and referred to committee in 2025.

Highlands-Specific Legislation			
Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S4102 / A5256	McKeon, John F. Smith, Bob Collazos-Gill, Alixon.	Allocates \$7.5 million annually of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenue for preservation of land in the Highlands Region.	2/3/2025: Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee  2/10/2025: Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee
Assembly Resolution (AR) 180	Katz, Andrea Calabrese, Clinton Singh, Balvir	Urges DEP, Pinelands Commission, and Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council to engage in alternative forest management practices during periods of drought when prescribed burning is unsafe.	3/6/2025: Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste (AEN) Committee.  3/10/2025: Reported out of Assembly Committee, 2nd Reading  AEN Committee Voting - 3/10/2025 - r/favorably  Yes: 7; No: 0; Not Voting: 0; Abstain: 0
S-3466 Sca (1R)/A-4627	Collazos-Gill, Alixon DiMaio, John  McKeon, John F. Greenstein, Linda R. Collazos-Gill, Alixon DiMaio, John	Extends expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres and farmland preservation program; provides aid for watershed lands.*	1/30/2025: Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (75-0-0)  3/17/2025: Approved P.L.2025, c.36.

## Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The May Highlands Council public meeting has been cancelled. The next public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 19. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the

Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [public meeting page](#) of the Highlands Council website.

**Take Your Child to Work Day 2025.** Highlands Council staff hosted 10 youngsters on Thursday, April 24 for Take Your Child to Work Day. Students ranging from elementary to middle-school age participated in science, planning and GIS activities that helped them better understand the work their parents are engaged in every day.



**Left to right:** Exploring soil types; learning about wetlands; mastering mapping skills with a geocaching adventure.

