

Highlands Council Monthly Report

April 2024

Released May 9, 2024



Hummingbird Clearwing spotted on Take Your Child to Work Day hike by one of our visitors.
Chester Township, Morris County

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | April 1- 30, 2024

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

Affordable Housing. Just as this remains a top priority for Highlands municipalities, it remains a top priority for the Highlands Council. At its April meeting, the Highlands Council opened a public comment period for a draft RMP amendment that deals with Affordable Housing. The amendment outlines specific changes that will be made to the RMP as a result of the new Affordable Housing Law (P.L.2024, c.2.) and provides clarifications about what the changes in the new law mean for Highlands municipalities. The Highlands Act, the Highlands RMP, the Land Use Capability Zones and municipal build-out numbers are all factors that require consideration as municipalities in the region prepare and implement their Round Four Fair Share plans. As mentioned in previous reports, the Highlands Council will be providing additional guidance and grant funding to assist towns with this important task.

Comments on the draft amendment are being accepted through Monday, June 24, and six public hearings have been scheduled to receive comments in person (the first was Wednesday, May 8). A copy of the proposed amendment along with information about how to submit comments and the full public hearing schedule is available on the [Highlands Council's website](#).

Highlands Agriculture and Food Security. In April, the Highlands Council began advancing a collaboration with the New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA). As discussed many times in this report, Agriculture is a defining characteristic of the Highlands; farming is a core element of the region's history, identity and economy. The Highlands is home to a plethora of farms capable of producing an incredible variety of agricultural products, all within a 2-hour drive of more than 20 million people. This number includes around 9 million right here in the Garden State, many of whom face food insecurity. The purpose of working with the OFSA is to connect Highlands farmers with some of the largest food banks in the state.

Leveraging the food production capacity of the Highlands to meet the ongoing demands of the state's food banks is a win for everyone. For the Highlands farm economy, it creates a reliable market for the region's products. For the food banks seeking to add fresh food to their offerings, it provides a local, high-quality supplier. And for the clients served, it brings healthier options to their kitchens.

This collaboration also highlights the fact that in addition to providing most of the state's drinking water, the Highlands region can be a significant source of fresh, local food. This is one more tangible step in the Council's efforts to be a resource for the agricultural industry in the region.

State Plan Update. The NJ Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA) and the State Planning Commission (SPC) are in the process of updating the NJ [State Development and Redevelopment Plan](#). In April, Highlands municipal officials received information from the SPC regarding the update process and the method by which they may comment on the State Plan, which is referred

to as “cross-acceptance.” The letter explained that the Highlands Council will be the negotiating entity during the cross-acceptance process for conforming Highlands municipalities; recommended that all other Highlands municipalities also choose to have the Highlands Council as the negotiating entity; and advised that any Highlands municipality that does *not* want to be represented by the Highlands Council must notify the SPC in writing.

For the entirety of the Highlands region – regardless of Planning Area/Preservation Area location and conformance status – the updated State Plan uses the Highlands Council’s Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) map in place of the State Plan’s Planning Area designations. This recognizes the underlying science that supports the efficacy of the LUCZ map in making development and infrastructure investment decisions and identifying locations where environmental and other features dictate that large scale development is discouraged. This is major recognition of the goals of the Highlands Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan in state-level policy.

Partnering with the Highlands Council in this process means tapping into staff expertise regarding planning and resource management in the Highlands and also providing municipalities with a knowledgeable *local* point of contact on any matters related to the State Plan. Highlands Council [municipal and county liaisons](#) are available to help.

A personal note from Executive Director Spinelli.

Following a 35+ year career dedicated to conservation and farmland preservation in the Garden State, **Susan Payne**, the current Executive Director of the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) – a position she has held for nearly 20 years – will be retiring effective June 1.

I have had the pleasure to work with Susan on agricultural retention issues throughout her tenure at the SADC. She and her staff have always been extraordinarily professional and effective. The New Jersey program overseen by Susan is considered to be the most successful Farmland Preservation effort in the country, due in no small part to her dedication to the SADC’s mission and her willingness to be practical and effective in working with the agricultural community throughout the state and her understanding of what it takes to negotiate and complete land preservation transactions.

Susan’s ability to work with her partners throughout New Jersey set a standard for everyone in state government. My work with her dates back three decades to my days as mayor of Chester Township where Susan helped us jump-start our farmland preservation efforts that eventually led to the preservation of over 1,500 acres of land on 27 individual farms, ensuring that agriculture will always be a part of the Township’s landscape. It would not have happened without her guidance and assistance. This is a story repeated over and over throughout New Jersey’s agricultural communities. Susan’s legacy will speak for itself as her work has made a positive difference in the state for generations to come. We wish Susan the best as she starts a new chapter in her life. She will be missed.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

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

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County.** The borough submitted a draft Open Space and Recreation Plan. Staff reviewed for consistency with the approved Scope of Work (SOW) and provided comments to the borough for consideration.
- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County.** The township has submitted a SOW and request for funding to support activities related to MS4 Permit compliance (stormwater management). Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing.
- **Chester Borough, Morris County.** The borough submitted a revised grant SOW related to stormwater planning efforts. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing.
- **Harding Township, Morris County.** The township submitted a revised Water Use and Conservation Management Plan (WUCMP). Staff are currently reviewing the edits.
- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** The Borough submitted deliverables related to a Main Street Redevelopment Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed the plan and found that it was consistent with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** The township has submitted a SOW and requested additional funding to support the next phase of its WUCMP. Highlands Council approved the SOW, authorizing project work to begin.
- **Hunterdon County.** Hunterdon County completed and adopted their Growth Management Plan. Highlands Council staff have been involved in its development throughout the process and the Plan is consistent with the Highlands RMP.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** The township has submitted a request for funding to continue a trout study that began in 2022 to assess the health of the stocked trout population from year-to-year. Staff are currently reviewing the request.
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** The township completed a Trails Plan as part of the township's sustainable economic development planning. The plan was reviewed by staff and found to be consistent with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** The township submitted materials related to the completion of a Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project. The materials were reviewed by staff and found to be consistent with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement. This project is still in progress.
- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County.** The borough completed an Initial Assessment Report (IAR) for the portion of the municipality that is located in the Highlands Planning Area. An IAR is designed to help a municipality better understand what is involved in aligning local planning and regulatory documents with the Highlands RMP (plan conformance). Mount Arlington is already working toward plan conformance for its Preservation Area lands. Staff is currently reviewing the IAR.
- **Rockaway Township, Morris County.** The township submitted a SOW to develop an Open Space and Recreation Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed and approved the SOW authorizing project work to begin.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** The township submitted a SOW and request for funding to complete an update to the municipality's Trail Plan which was originally prepared

and adopted in 2005. Highlands Council staff have reviewed and approved the SOW, authorizing project work to begin.

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).

- **Highlands Preservation Area Approval (HPAA) (with NJDEP) – Subaru World of Hackettstown, Block 8200 Lots 5 and 6, Mount Olive Township, Morris County.** This project previously received a Highlands Redevelopment Area designation and HPAA/HRAD approvals. The current project proposes new HPAA & HRAD approvals to supersede expired HPAA and HRAD permits.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with Conditions.

- **Municipal Referral – Redevelopment of Lanidex Plaza West, Block 226, Lots 3 and 3.2, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County.** Applicant plans to construct a warehouse and office building, along with associated parking and other facilities on a previously developed site. The existing vacant office building and parking area will be removed.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **WQMP – Proposed amendment to the Upper Raritan and Upper Delaware Water Quality Management Plans (WQMPs).** Hunterdon County is requesting a statement of consent from the Highlands Council on a proposed amendment to the Upper Raritan and Upper Delaware WQMP to incorporate the Glen Gardner Borough WMP as a chapter in the WQMP.

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption 11 (with NJDEP) – 3 Locations in Washington Township, Morris County:**

Hager Water System - Liberty Hills Court and Old Farmers Road

Hager Water System - Overlook Drive and Oak Terrance

Schooley's Mountain Water System – Ann Road

The Washington Township Municipal Utilities Authority is seeking a Highlands Act [exemption #11](#) to replace aging water main infrastructure within public rights-of-way at three different locations within the Township.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Purposes of the Highlands Act

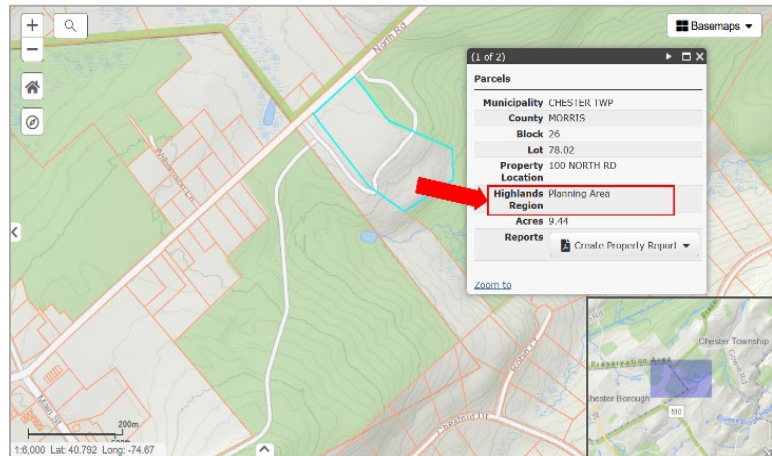
- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption 9 (with NJDEP) – Silas Condict County Park Septic System Replacements, Block 10401 Lot 101, Borough of Kinnelon, Morris County.**

The Morris County Park Commission is seeking a Highlands Act [Exemption #9](#) to replace existing individual subsurface sewage disposal fields at the maintenance building and the casino building/picnic shelter at Silas Condict Park.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Purposes of the Highlands Act

GIS Updates

- **Updated LUCZ Technical Report Adopted.** At its April meeting the Highlands Council adopted an [RMP amendment](#) that revises the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) Map Technical Report. The LUCZ is the foundational mapping that underpins almost everything the Highlands Council does. The revised map reflects updates to the underlying data used to create it.
- **Preservation Area or Planning Area?** A recent enhancement to the [Highlands Council's Interactive Map](#) makes it easier to quickly identify whether a particular property is located within the Highlands Preservation Area or Planning Area. Once a parcel has been located on the map, clicking on the lot opens a small pop-up window that now includes a field indicating whether the property is located in the Planning or Preservation Area of the Highlands region.



Location of a property within the Preservation or Planning Area of the

Highlands Region is just one of many factors to consider when understanding how being in the Highlands affects a property. Conformance status with the Highlands RMP, Highlands Act exemptions, and applicability of NJDEP Highlands Rules are other important factors. Highlands Council [municipal liaisons](#) can always provide additional information.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Site inspections.** Properties that have been protected from future development through the HDC program continue to be inspected to ensure compliance with the terms of the deed restrictions placed on the lands. In April, seven inspections were completed. No issues were identified.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Allison Bittner Promoted.** In April, staff member Allison Bittner was promoted to Principal Planner (Planning Associate 2). Allison first joined the Highlands Council in 2022 as a regional planner.
- **Open Position: Regional Planner.** The Highlands Council is currently seeking a full-time professional planner to join our team. Applications are being accepted through Wednesday, May 15, and complete details are available in the [posting](#).
- **Floodplain Management Training Continues.** Science Manager Kelley Curran and Water Resources Management Specialist Casey Ezyske continue to advance through the necessary training to become Certified Floodplain Managers. This designation will increase

in-house knowledge and expertise regarding flood risks and strategies for protection of public safety, property, and local economies in the Highlands.

Outreach & Education

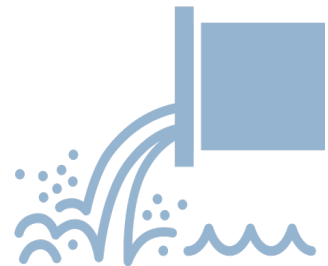
- **Take Your Child to Work Day.** Highlands Council staff welcomed 10 young visitors to the office in Chester on Thursday, April 25, for Take your Child to Work Day. Staff collaborated to develop a full day of activities that included building a model watershed to learn more about flooding and how pervious and impervious surfaces impact stormwater; taking a short hike around the property near the Highlands Council office to visit a recently installed weather station and explore other fun stuff along the way; assembling a giant floor map of the Highlands region; constructing model towns that meet the needs of diverse citizenry; and committing to break bad eco-habits with the help of some Taekwondo instruction.



- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 25 inquiries from constituents in April.

Stormwater Program Coordinators - Save this Date: Wednesday, June 5.

The Highlands Council will be hosting an NJDEP Stormwater Project Coordinator Training at our office in Chester on Wednesday June 5. This training is a required component of the MS4 permit. Space will be limited, and the session will be open to all north Jersey towns, so watch your email for an invite coming from NJDEP in the next week or two, with more details.



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 April, the Highlands Council met with Franklin Borough, Sussex County (stormwater planning) and Mahwah Township, Bergen County (redevelopment project).

Agency & Organization Collaboration

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

- In April, Highlands Council staff met with the NJ Department of Agriculture (assistance with in-house agricultural expertise at the Highlands Council); Department of Community Affairs (Affordable Housing); Office of Planning Advocacy (State Plan/Highlands municipalities); Office of Food Security Advocate (connecting Highlands farmers with food banks).
- Staff members attended a celebration of progress and naming ceremony at the Boonton Reservoir Trail on April 16 hosted by the Open Space Institute and Morris County Parks. The Highlands Council is providing funding for trail planning.

Council Committee Meetings

- The following committees met in March: Budget and Finance; Plan Conformance; Affordable Housing; RMP Amendment.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The Highlands Council public meeting scheduled for May 16 has been cancelled. The June public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 20. 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.

