

Highlands Council Monthly Report

June 2024

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Along the Morris Canal Greenway, Wharton Borough, Morris County

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | June 1-30, 2024

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

- **Climate Impacts in the New Jersey Highlands.** When the Highlands Act was passed in 2004, it wasn't seen as a climate change mitigation measure. However, as time has passed, the role of the Highlands region in helping New Jersey navigate the challenges of a changing climate has become evident. While much of the attention regarding the effects of climate change has been focused on New Jersey's coastal areas, the implications of a changing climate in the Highlands region present a more consequential (and more ominous) set of challenges for the state at-large and highlight the importance of protecting the Highlands. Managing the Highlands region effectively in the context of climate change has dramatic implications not only for water supply, but also food production, flooding, and forest health.

Water. At the most basic level, the Highlands must continue to supply plentiful clean drinking water to over 7 million people regardless of whether the state is in a period of abundant rainfall or drought. Climate change will affect the availability and quality of water resources from the Highlands. Resilience in the face of increasingly erratic precipitation cycles is a major concern. Increased evaporation rates combined with altered precipitation patterns may lead to changes in streamflow, reduced groundwater recharge, and potential water scarcity. There will be significant repercussions both inside and outside of the region if we fail to take appropriate measures to anticipate and address these conditions.

Agriculture. Beyond the threats to drinking water supply, climate change can pose challenges for agriculture in the Highlands. Shifts in temperature and precipitation patterns will impact crop yields, alter growing seasons, and increase susceptibility to pests and diseases. Farmers may need to adapt practices and consider different crop varieties to maintain productivity. This is important because food production capacity in a location that is within a two-hour drive of over 20 million people will become increasingly important, particularly if a changing climate makes growing food crops difficult or impossible in places like California's Central Valley or Florida.

Forests and Wetlands. The forests and wetlands of the Highlands have an important function in the retention and gradual release of flood waters that will likely result from increased extreme precipitation events. Additionally, the region's forests will help to mitigate the impacts of increasing temperatures and extreme heat events. Forest and wetland health will be threatened by climate change as warming brings species migration along with pests and diseases. Increased temperatures and periodic drought conditions will increase the threats of wildfire. Degraded forests will not be able to provide the ecosystem services that are integral to the mission of the Highlands Council and vital to the state.

From the basic mission of ensuring a reliable and adequate supply of clean drinking water for the state's residents to the emerging role of the region's agricultural industry in ensuring there is food production capacity in proximity to the state's large population centers, the Highlands has a pivotal role in mitigation of and adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Highlands municipal officials,

county officials, nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups and residents must work in partnership with the Highlands Council to anticipate and address these factors before they become a critical issue.

The impacts of climate change [are upon us and the rate at which these changes are being manifested is accelerating](#). The resources of the Highlands region are perhaps the best assets the state has for addressing the effects that we are seeing today and that will likely only multiply. There are specific actions that need to be taken now to safeguard the state's water supply, support the region's agricultural industry and ensure protection against extreme weather events. Managing the region's forests for increased coverage and health, limiting overall land development in the Highlands and helping farmers adapt to new challenges are at the top of the list of accomplishments that must be achieved. There is no time to debate these issues, these steps must be taken now.

- **Highlands Council Grant Funding Availability.** Because appropriate stormwater management is a critical component of the Highlands Council's mission to protect water quality, the Council set aside a significant portion of its grant budget in the past year to assist municipalities with the new MS4 permit requirements. However, high demand for these grants has made it necessary for the Council to implement a funding request deadline and prioritize funding requests. At the end of June, the Highlands Council reached out to its municipal partners to share these new details. Municipalities now have until August 30 to apply for Highlands Council MS4 funding and priority will be given to municipalities that have or are in the process of conforming with the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The Council will be offering similar support to Highlands municipalities as they work on updated housing elements and fair share plans. It's likely that demand for affordable housing grants will be similarly strong and further exacerbate the pressure on Highlands Council available grant funding, resulting in the need for similar prioritization.

The Highlands Council brings not only funding, but also technical expertise to our municipal partners. Managing local government is only going to become more challenging from both a policy and fiscal perspective. Municipalities that are interested in good local planning and getting ahead of these challenges are encouraged to [contact Highlands Council staff now](#).

- **What does it mean to be “in the Highlands”?** Ever been fly fishing in Ken Lockwood Gorge? You were in the Highlands. If you're looking down from the Pinwheel Vista along the Appalachian Trail, you're in the Highlands. Strolling through the beautiful State Botanical Gardens in Ringwood? You're in the Highlands. If you're choosing and cutting your own Christmas Tree at a Warren County farm this Fall, you're in the Highlands. Taking in a show at the Mayo Performing Arts Center in Morristown? You're in the Highlands. Browsing the shops of downtown Chester, dining out in Hackettstown, enjoying locally brewed beer, spirits, wines or hard ciders at any of the dozens of craft breweries, cideries, distilleries and wineries in towns stretching from Hunterdon to Passaic Counties? That's right, you're in the Highlands.

All of these things and more are part of what it's like to live in or visit the Highlands region of New Jersey. Over 800,000 people call the Highlands their home and millions more visit each year to take in what the region offers. However, most visitors, as well as many people who live here, don't equate these activities with the "Highlands region." The resources of the Highlands are not only essential to the overall health of the state, they also represent a tremendous potential for the region's economy based upon outdoor recreation, agriculture and local attractions.

Although protecting the Highlands for the important role it plays in the state's drinking water supply is perhaps the most well-known aspect of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, several other goals were also articulated, including the importance of ensuring the region remains economically viable. It is one of the more challenging aspects of implementing the Act: to protect natural resources in a place that is home to so many. That's why the Highlands Council has taken on a project to develop a marketable brand for the region. The attractions of this area represent tremendous economic opportunity, but more importantly, economic opportunity that is consistent with the resource protection goals of the Highlands Act.

In the coming weeks and months, you will be hearing more about this project, and you can sign up for updates and share ideas at www.authenticnjhighlands.com.

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.

- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Main Street Redevelopment Plan.
- **Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County.** Zoning Map Updates.

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.

- **West Milford, Passaic County.** Marshall Hill Road Redevelopment Study.
- **Harding Township, Morris County.** Water Use and Conservation Management Plan.

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.

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County.** Center plan updates related to: land use, circulation, preservation, economic development, and climate change hazard analysis.
- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County.** Initial assessment grant for Planning Area (already conforming in Preservation Area).

Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Lopatcong Township, Warren County.** Stormwater and MS4 Compliance.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** Stormwater Basin Retrofit Plan.
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Stormwater and MS4 Compliance.
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Third Round Housing Element and Fair Share Plan.

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Launch of Highlands Region Branding Project Website.** Stemming from the 2021 New Jersey Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan, the Highlands region branding effort seeks to create a regional identity that will help Highlands communities leverage their special status in ways that will benefit their residents and business owners. A project website was launched, www.authenticnjhighlands.com, where visitors can learn more about the project, how to get involved, and sign up for project updates. In July the project team will be touring the Highlands and speaking with stakeholders throughout the region.

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 - Warehouse Development, 2 Hilton Court**
Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County
Applicant submitted revised site plans and responses to staff comments sent in December 2023 that were in response to changes made to this proposed project to meet the conditions of a consistency review originally completed by Highlands Council staff in 2021.
Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the RMP subject to specified conditions including submission of approving municipal resolution and site photographs.
- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 – Wanaque Valley Regional Sewerage Authority (WVRS) Capital Improvements.**
Wanaque Borough, Passaic County
The WVRS is seeking an [Exemption 11](#) to make improvements at an existing wastewater treatment facility to ensure reliability and enhance water quality discharge from the plant. No facility expansions or flow increases are proposed.
Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the goals and purposes of the Highlands Act.
- **Highlands Preservation Area Approval (HPAA) – Proposed NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife (NJFW) Headquarters**
Union Township, Hunterdon County
NJFW is proposing a Wildlife Resource Education Center on Clinton Wildlife Management Area. The Center will host indoor educational displays on NJ Wildlife, NJ Highlands, wildlife management activities, and an outdoor educational trail highlighting various critical habitats for

wildlife. There will be a 100-person room for educational programs and outdoor educational events including shooting sports. The facility will also be used to house conservation police, wildlife control, and staff from various wildlife bureaus who will participate in educational programs. Requires review as a Capital Project under Section 16 of the Highlands Act.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the RMP subject to specified conditions related to: submission of final approved site plans and other supporting documents; Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) accessibility standards; native plantings, and impervious surface.

- **Highlands Municipal Referral – Mindray DS USA Inc.**

Mahwah Township, Bergen County

Applicant is seeking to construct an additional warehouse building in an unused parking area of an existing warehouse and office complex.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **Highlands Municipal Referral – Rockaway Home Townhomes**

Rockaway Township, Morris County

The applicant is proposing the redevelopment of a residential parcel replacing an existing single-family home with four townhomes in two separate structures.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **Highlands Municipal Referral – Lanidex Plaza West Warehouse**

Parsippany-Troy Hills Township, Morris County

The applicant is seeking to redevelop a previously disturbed site with a 140,351 square-foot warehouse and 5,000-square-foot office space along with associated parking, loading docks and other facilities.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the RMP subject to specified conditions related to: NJDEP Freshwater Wetlands requirements; native plantings; enhanced protections to prevent contamination of wellhead areas; water conservation measures; parking; and submission of final approved site plans and other supporting documents.

- **Conditions Compliance – Bergen County United Way (BCUW)/Madeline Housing Partners, LLC**

Mahwah Township, Bergen County

Applicant provided revised site plans and additional information to satisfy the conditions of a Highlands Council consistency determination made in 2021.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **Wastewater Management Plan (WMP) – Mount Arlington Borough**

Highlands Council staff reviewed the Mount Arlington Borough WMP prepared for the borough by Morris County.

Highlands Council staff review finding: no conflicts between the WMP and the RMP.

GIS Updates

- **NJDEP Design Flood Elevation (DFE) Layers.** Two data layers from the Rutgers [NJADAPT](#) project that map NJDEP’s new Design Flood Elevation are now available on the [Highlands interactive map](#), under the Natural Hazards group. The DFE standard was established as a result of the 2023 Inland Flood Protection Rule. It is important to note that these data layers are meant

to be used for reference only as planning tools and should not be relied upon for site-specific flood impact analyses, permitting, or other legal or regulatory purposes.

- **Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ).** The revised LUCZ map adopted as an amendment to the Highlands RMP in April is now available via the [Highlands interactive map](#), under the Administrative group. 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.

Science Initiatives

- **Stream Monitoring.** Highlands Council staff collaborated with Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) to participate in their annual stream monitoring efforts to monitor water quality throughout the Raritan River watershed. Highlands Council staff focused specifically on portions of the river within the Highlands region. Monitoring involved visual stream assessments as well as collection of macroinvertebrates for laboratory analysis. In June, the Highlands Council team participated in four sampling events and monitored a total of eight sites.



LEFT: Highlands Council staff member Owen Selles recording data on the banks of the South Branch of the Raritan River in Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.

RIGHT: Highlands Council staff members Carolyn Klaube (left) and Casey Ezyse (right) examining collection net with another RHA volunteer.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan.** Following council approval of a contract in February, Highlands Staff and project partners held a kick-off meeting in June.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Administrative Assistant Position.** The vacant Administrative Assistant position was posted from June 7 through July 5. More than 100 resumes were received and are being reviewed. Interviews will be held the weeks of July 8 and July 15.
- **New Jersey Planning and Redevelopment Conference.** Members of the Highlands Council Planning staff attended workshops at this annual three-day conference.

Outreach & Education

- **NJDEP Stormwater Program Coordinator Training.** Staff members from the NJDEP office of Stormwater Permitting & Water Quality Management hosted a Stormwater Program Coordinator (SPC) Training for Northern New Jersey at the Highlands Council office in Chester

on June 5. More than 50 SPCs attended, including representatives from 10 Highlands municipalities.

- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 21 inquiries from constituents in June.

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 June, the Highlands Council met with the Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County (warehousing), White Township, Warren County (sewer service), Randolph Township, Morris County (Fair Share planning), Clinton Township, Hunterdon County (water use and conservation management planning); West Milford, Passaic County, and Jefferson Township, Morris County (funding and implementation).

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.

- **New Jersey Department of Agriculture.** The Highlands Council provided a letter of support for the department's proposal to the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership program (RCPP) titled "Building Foundations – Planning and Implementing Climate-Smart Conservation on NJ's Working Lands." The goal of the proposed project is to support climate-smart agriculture and source water protection within a targeted area. The Highlands Council committed to provide both financial and technical expertise assistance.
- **New Jersey Office of Food Security.** This Highlands Council hosted a meeting at its office led by the New Jersey Office of Food Security and attended by representatives from established organizations in Northern New Jersey working to address food security in the region. The goal of the collaboration is to find ways to profitably connect the Highlands agricultural industry with the food security market, that results in a beneficial relationship for both.

Council Committee Meetings

- The Budget and Finance Committee met in June.

Legislative Update

Following is a summary of Highlands-specific legislation and current status. Please note: this is a new section in this report and as such the summary below includes all bills that have been introduced and referred to a committee since the beginning of 2024. Going forward, this report will only include updates that have occurred in the prior month.

Bill Numbers	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S3466 / A4627	McKeon, John F. Collazos-Gill, Alixon	Allocates \$7.5 million annually of constitutionally dedicated Corporation Business Tax (CBT) revenue for preservation of land in the Highlands Region; extends expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres and farmland preservation program; provides aid for watershed lands.	6/20/2024 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee; 6/25/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee.
S3146 / NA	Steinhardt, Douglas J.	Extends for five years the expiration date of special appraisal process for Green Acres program and farmland preservation program for lands in the Highlands Region.	5/6/2024 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee.
S1132 / A4076	McKeon, John F. Collazos-Gill, Alixon	Creates Highlands Conservation Trust to preserve land in the Highlands Region and authorizes Highlands conservation license plate to raise revenue therefor.	1/9/2024 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee; 3/18/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee.
A146 / NA	Fantasia, Dawn Inganamort, Michael	Prohibits state departments and agencies from considering or requiring compliance by Highlands planning area municipalities with Highlands Regional Master Plan in certain circumstances.	1/9/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee.
A1099 / S1872	DiMaio, John DeAngelo, Wayne P. Fantasia, Dawn Space, Parker	Provides "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act" exemption, and clarifies municipal planning or zoning authority, for certain development along commercial corridors in the Highlands Region.	1/9/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee; 1/9/2024 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee.
A3237 / S369	Dunn, Aura K. Pennacchio, Joseph	Provides for reduced sales tax imposition on certain sales in certain Highlands Region Preservation Area municipalities.	1/9/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee; 1/9/2024 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.
A1084 / NA	DiMaio, John	Prohibits DEP from imposing conditions on projects exempt from the "Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act."	1/9/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee.
A2672 / S391	Webber, Jay Pennacchio, Joseph	Exempts expansion or reconstruction, within 125% of existing footprint, of municipal and county buildings and certain emergency services buildings from the	1/9/2024 - Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment, Natural Resources, and Solid Waste Committee; 1/9/2024 - Introduced in the Senate,

Bill Numbers	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
		"Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act."	Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Looking Ahead

- Public Council Meetings.** The July Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 18. The August public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, August 15. 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.

