



Highlands Council Monthly Report

December 2022

Released January 13, 2023

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Period Covered: December 1-31, 2022

Executive Director Priorities

- **Open Space Funding.** At present, there is a tremendous gap between land preservation needs and available funding in the Highlands region. In addition, the recent reauthorization of the Federal Highlands Conservation Act makes substantial funding available for land preservation, but matching funds are required. At its January public meeting, the Highlands Council will consider a resolution to request a portion of Corporate Business Tax funding be specifically allocated to Highlands Council land preservation programs. The proposed resolution was presented to the Plan Conformance Committee in early January and referred to the full Council for consideration. Additional information will be provided at the public meeting.
- **Support for Proposed Bills S3356 & A4475 (Warehousing Bills).** In December the Highlands Council formally expressed support for proposed bills S3356 & A4475 dealing with siting of warehouse developments in the state. Our comments to each bill included a request for the inclusion of provisions that require any municipality within the Highlands Region to limit all warehouse development to locations that are consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP). Support letters were sent to the sponsors of the bills, Senator Shirley K. Turner and Assembly woman Beth Sawyer.
- **Forest Stewardship.** The Highlands Council Science team has been conducting research and outreach that will aid in the development of Highlands-specific forest management guidance similar to guidance that exists in the Pinelands. The Highlands forest guidance will be tailored to the unique conditions found in the region and reflect the goals and policies of the Highlands Regional Master Plan and Highlands Act. Related to this work, the Highlands Council has submitted a request to Senator Smith that any legislation emerging from the work of the Forest Stewardship Task Force require the creation of Highlands-specific guidelines and Best Management Practices (BMPs) and that any approved forest stewardship plan for land within the Highlands region be required to be consistent with those BMPs.
- **Climate Policy.** In December the Council continued our work with New Jersey Future to develop Climate Hazard Mitigation guidance for Highlands municipalities (See [Contract Projects](#), below). This guidance will have Highlands-specific elements that address both the unique threats to the region and the role the region will have in the overall resilience of the state by mitigating future climate impacts and helping to meet the state's resource needs in the face of a changing climate. This will require developing coherent policies, goals and action steps to address this challenge with Highlands-centric measures that can be implemented at the local, county and state levels.

- **Affordable Housing Policy.** The Affordable Housing Committee met in December and has been considering a proposed Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for services that will be presented to Council for consideration at the January 19 meeting. As articulated in the [presentation at the December Council Meeting](#), the goal is to ensure that the Highlands Council is involved in the upcoming Round 4 review of affordable housing for the region's 88 municipalities and that the goals of the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP are reflected in the assigned obligations and housing plans.
- **Engagement of Outside Entities.** As reflected in the [Outreach and Education](#) section below, the Highlands Council has been actively pursuing engagement of partner organizations. This includes not only the Highlands municipalities that have not been working with the Council to date, but Highlands counties, nonprofits and educational institutions that are working in the region. The goal is to leverage resources and raise the visibility of the Council's work on the issues the Highlands is facing.

Municipal and County RMP Implementation

Progress on Highlands Council-funded projects.

- **Chester Township, Morris County.**
 - Completed a **Commercial Zone Study** as part of a larger Redevelopment Plan funded by the Council.
 - Submitted a request for a **map adjustment** (Land Use Capability Zones) to accommodate an affordable housing proposal at the former Glenlora Nursing Home. Staff are currently reviewing the request.
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County**
 - Adopted a **Stormwater Management Ordinance** that is consistent with the Highlands RMP.
- **Rockaway Township, Morris County**
 - Completed an **Assessment of the Lakes and Watersheds of Rockaway Township.**
- **Mount Arlington, Morris County**
 - Completed a **Restoration Plan for the Mount Arlington Municipal Beach.**
- **Alpha Borough, Warren County**
 - Staff completed its review of Alpha Borough's amended petition for plan conformance seeking to expand its designated center. The Highlands Council's Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report and all associated materials are currently [available for public comment](#). Following the public comment period, the amended petition will be brought before the Council at an upcoming public meeting.

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 Regional Master Plan (RMP).

- **Municipal Project Review: Bridge Point 78 Phase III, Lopatcong Township, Warren County.** Proposed development includes the construction of one (1) warehouse/office building (877, 019 sq. ft.) with associated driveways, parking areas, loading areas, trailer storage areas, landscaping, and other related site improvements. A portion of some existing solar panels will be relocated to the roof of the proposed building.
Highlands Council finding: consistent with the RMP, subject to conditions.
- **Highlands Preservation Area Approval Review – General Permit #1 (w/ NJDEP): Waterloo Road Amphibian Crossing Project, Byram Township, Sussex County.** The NJDEP Division of Fish & Wildlife is proposing construction of an amphibian passage system along a 1,200-foot section of Waterloo Road and surrounding lands (Allamuchy Mountain State Park and Waterloo Village) to enable amphibians to move safely between the forest on the north side of the road and vernal pool habitats on the south side of the road without entering the dividing road surface.
Highlands Council Staff Review: Pending.
- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment Review: Station Square Orchards, Mount Arlington, Morris County.** An Amendment to the Upper Raritan WQMP was proposed related to the redevelopment of portions of an existing strip center into two (2) residential buildings containing 84 total units and a 2,523 sq.ft. common space.
Highlands Council staff finding: consistent with RMP.
- **WQMP Amendment Review: Mason Ridge, Denville, Morris County.** A site-specific amendment to the Northeast WQMP was requested in association with the development of 96 market-rate and 24 affordable housing units.
Highlands staff finding: consistent with RMP.

GIS Updates

- **Interactive Map Updates.**
 - An update was made to the Highlands Interactive Map to ensure the most up-to-date resource percentages, acreages, and other data points are reflected in the Advanced and Basic Property Reports generated from the application. Links to primary sources were updated.
 - A scripting change was made to streamline and simplify interactive map updates and fixes.
- **Impervious Surface Data.** A final deliverable was received and is currently being reviewed by staff regarding a project to develop impervious surface data that will aid the Council in its work.

Contract Projects

- **Highlands Municipal Climate Guidance.** A kick-off meeting of the Highlands Climate Resilience Advisory Committee was held on Monday, December 12. A copy of the presentation from the meeting is [available online](#). Also in December, invitations were sent to Highlands municipal officials and planners to attend an informational webinar on Thursday, January 26, 2023, hosted by the project team led by NJ Future. Response to the event has been robust. We have already had over 50 people register for the session.
- **Functional Ecosystem Valuation (FEV) Model.** Final deliverables for the field testing of the project were received in December and are currently being reviewed by staff. The FEV contract was originally awarded in 2014 and a draft model was completed in 2019. The council awarded a contract for field testing of the model in early 2020. This portion of the project was delayed due to COVID. The FEV project seeks to establish a defensible and scientifically sound methodology to evaluate habitat in the Highlands Region and develop a unified scalable mechanism that will serve as a quantifiable and marketable ecosystem currency in support of Highlands resource protection. If implemented, this methodology would support the RMP and Highlands Act goal of “no net loss of habitat values” as applicants, landowners, and land managers assess habitat values of critical habitat and forested areas of the Highlands Region.

Open Space and HDC Updates

- **Land Preservation Status Report.** The Highlands Region 2022 Land Preservation Status Report was released in December. The report was posted to the Highlands Council website and sent to our Open Space partners, local government officials, and state legislators. [The report is available on the Highlands Council website.](#)
- **Regional Recreation and Open Space Plan.** The 2018 RMP Monitoring Program Recommendation Report identified the need for a Highlands region-wide recreation and open space plan. In December, USFWS announced availability of Highlands Conservation Act funding that could be used for this purpose and could potentially fund part of the plan. Highlands Council staff are currently developing a proposal to secure this funding to aid in the development of the Recreation and Open Space Plan.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Open Positions/Recent Hires**
 - **GIS Specialist 2.** A candidate was selected and has accepted the position; finalization of paperwork is in progress.

- **Environmental Scientist 2.** A candidate has been identified. Pending completion of references and social media background check, a job offer letter to candidate for acceptance is expected to be extended.
- **Administrative Assistant.** This open position was posted from December 19, 2022, through January 3, 2023. Twenty-six applications were received.
- **Professional Development**
 - In December, Regional Planner and Land Preservation Coordinator Allison Bittner successfully completed the requirements to be certified as a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP).

Outreach & Education

Following are just some activities and events from December.

- **Municipal & County Meetings.** The Highlands Council met with 3 municipalities in December: Chester Borough, High Bridge Borough, and Mt. Olive Township.
- **Inter-Agency Coordination.** In December, the Highlands Council met with the Pinelands Commission, the Department of Agriculture, Office of Planning Advocacy (State Planning Commission), and the Department of Transportation.
- **Meetings/Sessions Attended.** Interagency Council on Climate Resilience, County Coalition (Economic Sustainability), Hunterdon County Growth Management Plan Public Session, Forestry in the Highlands (Highlands Coalition), 78/22 Coalition Meeting, TNJ Institute - Food Security and Food Recovery.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 13 inquiries from constituents in December.
- **Interactive ERI Training.** Highlands Council staff is currently working on updates to training sessions held in 2022 and anticipates offering additional sessions within the next few months. Following a conversation at the annual League of Municipalities Conference in November, the Raritan Headwaters Association has reached out requesting Interactive ERI training for its municipal partners, which will likely be the first session of 2023.
- **Native Plant Workshop.** Highlands Council staff are in the process of developing a Native Plant educational workshop designed to highlight the importance of avoiding non-native and invasive species in everything from backyard gardens to large-scale landscaping plans. In December, staff began collaborating with NJDEP Fish and Wildlife colleagues to premier the workshop at an upcoming lunch-time public program at the Pequest Education Center in Oxford, NJ.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The January Highlands Council meeting will be held on Thursday, January 19 and the February Meeting will be held on Thursday, February 23. 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](#).