

Highlands Council Monthly Report

March 2023

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | March 1-31, 2023

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

- **The Importance of Agriculture in the Highlands.** Agriculture is the second largest land use in the Highlands behind residential. The region contains some of the best soils, not only in New Jersey, but in the world. For this reason alone these lands demand protection. Consider that agriculture is also a critical economic driver in the region and their protection becomes a top priority in the Highlands.

The Highlands Council's Agricultural Advisory Committee met in March to discuss these matters. The Committee is chaired by Highlands Council Vice Chair Kurt Alstede, founder and General Manager of Alstede Farms LLC, with membership that includes experienced agriculture professionals representing a wide range of specialties. At the meeting, a number of agricultural sustainability issues were discussed including the need for additional funding to support innovative agricultural projects, the need for a food processing facility in the region, and stronger coordination among relevant state agencies and organizations. Minutes from this meeting will be posted on the Highlands Council website on the calendar page along with April meeting materials.

Also in March, Highlands Council staff invited colleagues from the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) on a tour of farmland at risk for warehouse and solar development in the Highlands. The Highlands Council's land preservation programs continue to be critically important to the agricultural community since many farms in the Highlands do not qualify for preservation through SADC but do qualify for Highlands preservation programs. Unfortunately, Highlands Council preservation programs remain unfunded, but the Council is actively engaged in attempting to secure a permanent funding source for these programs.

- **Land Preservation Funding Update.** The Highlands Council received strong support from legislators regarding its request that a portion of the Corporation Business Tax (CBT) be directly allocated to the Highlands Council for land preservation efforts. As noted above, the Highlands Council land preservation programs fill a unique need in the state, providing a route to preservation and natural resource protection that is unmet by other state programs. This applies to both farmland and other types of preservation. It's important to keep in mind that land preservation, especially in the NJ Highlands, is primarily designed to protect the resources present on the land from any form of degradation, and although public access to preserved lands is wonderful, it is not required to achieve resource protection.
- **Warehousing in the Highlands.** In advance of the April public meeting, Highlands Council members will receive a draft document that establishes policy standards for siting of warehouse facilities in the New Jersey Highlands Region. This document is intended to supplement statewide guidance on this issue by providing a tool that will assist Highlands

local governments and other state agencies in making permitting and land use decisions that best meet their local needs while simultaneously ensuring that the resource protection and planning goals of the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan are upheld. Along with the [Local Zoning/Local Control grants](#), these policies will help Highlands communities retain control over their jurisdictions and ensure that any future warehouse developments in the Highlands are appropriately located and appropriately designed.

- **Forest Management Guidelines.** Highlands staff continues to work on creating Highlands-specific forest management guidelines and Best Management Practices (BMPs). As part of this effort, the Highlands staff has been conducting research and outreach to ensure that these proposed practices are appropriate and that they adequately protect the resources of the region that are the responsibility of the Highlands Council and that are the subject of the Highlands Act. Part of this research included a site visit to the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area with a scientist from the NJDEP. A report of that site visit will be available to the Council members at the April meeting.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Progress on Highlands Council-funded projects.

- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County**
 - Submitted a scope of work (SOW) to complete a Master Plan Reexamination Report. The SOW was reviewed and approved by staff.
- **Boonton Township, Morris County**
 - Completed a Stormwater Management Plan and provided all associated deliverables. Staff reviewed the materials and found them consistent with the approved SOW.
- **Byram Township, Sussex County**
 - Completed a Master Plan Reexamination Report and initial steps towards implementation of water deficit mitigation strategies identified in the Township's Water Use and Conservation Management Plan. All work was found to be consistent with the approved scopes of work.
- **Chester Township, Morris County**
 - The Highlands Council released for public comment its Review and Recommendations Report regarding [Chester Township's request](#) for a map adjustment (Land Use Capability Zones) to accommodate an affordable housing proposal at the former Glenlora Nursing Home (Block 26.06, Lot 7). Public comments were accepted between March 2 and April 2, no comments were received.
- **Harding Township**
 - Submitted a SOW to complete an Initial Assessment Report. The SOW was reviewed by staff and found sufficient. The Highlands Council voted at its March meeting to approve a grant for this work. An Initial Assessment Report is designed to help a municipality better understand what's involved in aligning local planning and regulatory documents with the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

- Submitted a SOW to complete a Water Use and Conservation Management Plan. Staff reviewed and approved the SOW and the Township may begin work immediately.
- **Hunterdon County**
 - Submitted scopes of work for an Historic Preservation Plan, GIS Parcel Update, and additional work related to the previously approved Growth Management Plan. The Historic Preservation Plan funding and the Growth Management Plan costs were previously approved by Council. Staff has reviewed the SOW and funding request for the GIS Parcel Update and recommend approval by the Council.
 - Provided staff with a copy of a recently completed draft Farmland Preservation Plan Update that was not funded by the Highlands Council, but that the county wanted staff to review for consistency with the Highlands RMP.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted a “Lake Hopatcong Trout Habitat and Tagging Study Report.” Highlands Council staff is currently reviewing for consistency with the approved scope of work for the project.
- **Kinnelon Borough, Morris County**
 - Submitted an Open Space and Recreation Plan Update. Highlands Council staff reviewed the plan and found it to be consistent with the approved SOW for the project.
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County**
 - Submitted two recently adopted ordinances related to multi-family housing zoning within the Township. Staff will review these for consistency with the RMP.
- **Montville Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted a request for funding to support design of a Township Walking and Biking Trail through municipally-owned land starting just south of Rt. 287/202 and continuing on to the Towaco Town Center and the nearby train station.
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County**
 - Met with the Borough Administrator and members of the Borough Council to discuss Plan Conformance, Center Designation, and areas of potential collaboration with the Highlands Council, including a Borough-wide stormwater assessment and potential creation of a stormwater utility for Netcong with the technical and financial support of the Council
- **Town of Phillipsburg, Warren County**
 - Provided materials related to development of the draft Circulation Plan Element, which is expected to be completed and adopted in the near future. Staff are currently reviewing this deliverable.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted a request for grant funding to conduct “Ecological and Engineering Data Collection and Planning for the Dredging and Beneficial Reuse of Sediment in the Landing Channel Section of Lake Hopatcong.” Staff is currently reviewing the request.

- **Vernon Township, Sussex County**
 - Completed an Open Space and Recreation Plan and provided all associated deliverables. Staff reviewed the materials and found them consistent with the approved SOW.

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). In some cases, the Highlands Council shares jurisdiction with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

- **Highlands Preservation Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #9/ Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD) (w/NJDEP): Otterhole Road Culvert Replacement, West Milford, Passaic County.** Highlands Council staff completed its review of this project, which involves the proposed replacement of the existing culvert over Post Brook. The existing culvert and asphalt carrying Otterhole Road over Post Brook is significantly aged and weathered. The proposed project is not expected to permanently impact any mapped Highlands resources and will improve and enhance public safety. (Read more about [Exemption 9](#).)
Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with Goals and Purposes of Highlands Act.
- **Planning Area Consistency Review: Ramsey Pole, Mahwah, Bergen County.** The Ramsey Board of Public Works is seeking to install wireless communications equipment on a previously disturbed site in Mahwah Township.
Highlands Council staff review in progress.
- **Planning Area Consistency Review: Ramsey Soccer Field, Mahwah, Bergen County.** Applicant provided updated materials to clarify a discrepancy that was discovered during a staff site visit in February. Subsequently, staff was able to complete review of the proposed project for consistency with the Highlands Act and RMP and found the project consistent with conditions. The proposed project involves the construction of a 39-stall porous pavement parking lot to improve access and public safety associated with the adjacent soccer field. Conditions include Highlands Council approval of a Landscape Plan and delivery of an approved Stormwater Management Plan and associated materials, among other requirements.
Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent subject to conditions.
- **Highlands Preservation Area Approval (HPAA)/Highlands Redevelopment Area Designation (w/NJDEP): Proposed Multi-Family Development, Oakland Borough, Bergen County and Wayne Township, Passaic County.** Project requires an HPAA and a [Highlands Redevelopment Area Designation](#) for the Oakland Borough portion of the project. The applicant, Cornerstone Builders Group, is proposing to raze an existing motel development and construct a new multi-family housing development on the parcels.
Highlands Council staff review in progress.

GIS Updates

- **Updated Census Data.** The state-wide municipal data layer was recently updated to include Census Population and Population Density (Population/Square Miles) information at 10-year intervals from 1980 to 2020. The Highlands Interactive Map reflects this update.

Contract Projects

- **Affordable Housing RFQ.** The deadline for responses to the Affordable Housing RFQ was March 17. The Council received five proposals and is in the process of reviewing them. We anticipate making a recommendation on engaging a team of professionals to assist with this important issue at the May meeting of the Highlands Council.

Open Space and Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Program Updates

- **Open Space Rules Readoption.** The Highlands Open Space Partnership Funding Program and Highlands Development Credit Purchase Program rules at [N.J.A.C. 7:70](#) (Rules) were created in 2016 to establish the Council’s matching grant land preservation program and formalize its HDC purchase program. The Rules were set to expire on April 18, 2023, and were submitted for readoption with no changes on March 8, 2023. The readoption notice is set to appear in the April 17 New Jersey Register. Upon adoption, the Rules shall continue in effect for a seven-year period from the date of filing.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Part-Time Communications Specialist.** An opening for a part-time communications specialist was posted to the Highlands Council website between March 9 and March 31. The Council received 14 complete application packages, which are currently being reviewed.

Outreach & Education

- **Special Occasion Events Law.** The Highlands Council shared information about this new legislation on the Council’s [Economic Sustainability Plan Facebook Page](#).
- **2022 Annual Report.** The Highlands Council released its 2022 Annual Report on March 24. The [Report](#) was posted to the Highlands Council website, and distributed to the Governor, Legislature and the governing body and chief executive officer of each municipality and county in the Highlands region, as required by the Highlands Act. Hard copies are available in the Highlands Council office and may be requested by contacting Carole Ann Dicton, Manager of Communications, at caroleann.dicton@highlands.nj.gov or 908-879-6737, ext. 105.
- **Guest Lecture at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.** Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler provided an overview of “Regional Planning in New Jersey” to students in a Comprehensive Planning course at the Bloustein School at Rutgers.
- **Legislative Meetings.** Executive Director Ben Spinelli met separately with Senator Bob Smith (District 17), and Senator Doug Steinhardt (District 23) to discuss Highlands priorities.

- **Municipal & County RMP Implementation Meetings.** The Highlands Council met with four municipalities and two counties to discuss RMP implementation projects: Butler Borough, Netcong Borough, Peapack-Gladstone, Alpha Borough, Warren County and Morris County.
- **Inter-Agency Coordination.** In March, the Highlands Council met with: NJDEP Office of Transactions and Public Land Administration; NJDEP Office of Natural Resource Restoration; Cannabis Regulatory Commission; and the Office of Planning Advocacy.
- **Nonprofit Community Meetings.** Native Plant Society of New Jersey; Foodshed Alliance; and the North Jersey Resource Conservation & Development.
- **Events/Sessions Attended.** Staff members attended the following events in March: Warren County Board of Agriculture Annual Legislative Meeting; The Land Conservancy Delaware River Watershed Initiative: NJ Highlands Cluster Meeting; Highlands Leadership Summit with US Fish and Wildlife Service; 2024 State Hazard Mitigation Plan Update Participant Kick-Off; Budd Lake Advisory Committee Meeting; NJ Water Supply Advisory Council Meeting; Water's Edge: The Delaware River Watershed's Challenges and Promises for NJ (NJ Spotlight); Natural and Working Lands Strategy Webinars – Aquatic Habitats, Tidal and Non-Tidal Wetlands, Developed Lands, Agricultural Lands and Forested Lands; Reimagining the Nature of New Jersey (New Jersey Conservation Foundation); 2023 Harmful Algal Bloom Virtual Summit; and the March meeting of the Warren County Environmental Advisory Committee.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 32 inquiries from constituents in March.

Council and Committee Meetings

- **The Highlands Council** held its monthly public meeting on Thursday, March 16, 2023. Three resolutions were passed including [acceptance of the annual audit](#), [approval to release the 2022 Annual Report](#), and [approval of four grants](#): two to Morris County, one to Butler Borough, and one to Union Township. Complete information including a recording of the meeting is available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.
- **Committee Meetings.** The following Council committees met in March: Plan Conformance Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Budget & Finance Committee.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The April Highlands Council meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 20. The May Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 18. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details will be available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website. Meetings of the Budget and Finance Committee, the Plan Conformance Committee and the Affordable Housing Committee are all scheduled for the month of April prior to the monthly meeting of the full Council.