

Highlands Council Update

May 2025

Released June 6, 2025



Charlotteburg Reservoir (part of Newark Watershed) as viewed from West Milford Township

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | May 1-31, 2025

From the Executive Director

May was a busy month at the Highlands Council. Assisting our municipalities with meeting the looming deadline for adopting affordable housing plans, finalizing grants for implementation of the region's sustainable economic development initiatives, and shepherding nine more Highlands towns through the plan conformance process were just some of the activities that occupied the Council and its staff this past month.

However, our efforts continue to be constrained by a lack of adequate resources. As I have mentioned before, New York City manages a watershed of similar size with similar demands on the drinking water resources present in their Delaware/Catskills watershed by investing an average of \$108 million per year in stewardship and land protection efforts alone. Here in the Highlands, we are tasked with accomplishing protection of the resources of our region with a budget of about \$3 million. There is no adequate source of land preservation monies, no money for forest stewardship, no money for ecological restoration and reforestation projects, and only limited available funds for promoting innovative agricultural practices. This is not sustainable for the long-term health of the state. Even so, the Council's staff continues to make remarkable progress in protection of the region.

Drought Concerns Lessen. May brought plentiful rainfall to the Highlands, easing drought concerns slightly. Only one month ago, conditions remained abnormally dry with wildfires occurring in scattered locations. This past month, over six inches of rain fell at the Council offices in Chester, marking the first above-normal month for precipitation since last August. Reservoir levels have recovered as have stream flows. However, groundwater levels remain a concern for the long-term as the extended dry period that dates back to last May has taken a toll and **the region remains in a 12-month year-to-year rainfall deficit of over 10 inches**. Despite the recent wetter-than-normal conditions, we will need to remain vigilant as we head into the Summer. For now, however, there is good news for drinking water supplies, agricultural interests, and the ecological condition of the Highlands rivers, streams, and forests. The variability in precipitation patterns will increasingly be an issue for the state's water supply as the impacts of climate change continue to create uncertainty. This only highlights the importance of the work of the Highlands Council as responsible management of the region's resources will be the best insurance for protection of the state's water supply and related resources for the long-term.

Council Membership. The lack of new members for the Highlands Council remains an issue. The May meeting was cancelled due to a lack of available members, and the ability to hold a very busy upcoming June meeting may also be threatened. There are currently 5 vacancies on the Council, and only 3 of the 10 sitting members are serving on current unexpired terms. Warren and Somerset Counties do not have their legislatively mandated representation on the Council, and Morris County only has one of its required two representatives. This creates an operational challenge for the Highlands Council, as both monthly public meetings and the periodic committee meetings have attendance issues and representation challenges for the public since the Council's actions are being taken without appropriate involvement of all seven

Highlands counties. The lack of proper Council membership must be addressed as soon as is practically possible.

Watershed Moratorium Aid. Protection of the state's water supply necessitates protection of resources and restrictions on development in watersheds that contribute to New Jersey's drinking water. One result of these efforts is an impact on the local tax base of municipalities that host these resources. The legislature has provided for payments to these communities in the form of Watershed Moratorium Aid that is intended to offset some of the economic impact on towns that have had development potential restricted. There were a number of Highlands communities that are home to watershed lands and facilities that were omitted from the roster of towns receiving this aid. In 2024, the Highlands Council passed a resolution urging legislative action on this matter, and a recent bill (S-3466/A-4627) enacted in March 2025 has allowed for the inclusion of 15 Highlands communities that have restricted watershed lands but have not been receiving moratorium aid. This will be a significant benefit to these municipalities and in particular to the three communities that have over 1,000 acres of watershed lands (Ringwood Borough, Wanaque Borough, and Harmony Township).

Pequannock Watershed (Newark Watershed Lands). The City of Newark's 35,000-acre watershed, located entirely within the Highlands region, provides the water supply for the state's largest city along with Clifton, Wayne, Bloomfield, Montclair, and Cedar Grove. Newark is the largest single owner of land in the Highlands and the largest single consumer of the region's water. The Highlands Council and the City have been actively looking for ways to cooperate on the protection and stewardship of the watershed to help ensure the drinking water sources are adequately safeguarded in perpetuity. This past month, Highlands staff along with other scientists and Newark's newly hired foresters toured the site of a large wildfire that occurred on watershed lands in April of 2023 to see what impacts were present at the fire's location. The fire site demonstrated strong re-growth of native vegetation and robust recovery from this event. The Pequannock Watershed contains some of the healthiest forests in the Highlands, and keeping them in this condition is a priority for the Highlands Council and the city. Currently, the Highlands Council and the City's Department of Water & Sewer are cooperating on bringing both technical and financial resources to the long-term job of protecting this important asset. This includes a joint application to the U.S. Forest Service for a grant that would fund an assessment of the overall condition of the forests and a plan for maintaining the overall excellent health of the watershed.

Protecting the drinking water supply for approximately 7 million residents of the state involves a diverse and demanding set of tasks as well as an appropriate investment of resources. What has been covered here only scratches the surface of both the ongoing work of the Highlands Council and what will be necessary to safeguard the future of the region and the state.



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.

- **Chester Township, Morris County.** Redevelopment Study
- **Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Green Township, Sussex County.** Master Plan Reexamination and Update
- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan and Build-Out Analysis
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Conformance Assessment
- **Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan

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.

- **Vernon Township, Sussex County.** Lake and Watershed 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.

- **Town of Clinton.** Open Space and Recreation Plan
- **Denville Township.** Environmental Resource Inventory
- **Passaic County.** Farmland Plan & Open Space and Recreation 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.

- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Study of Lake Hopatcong
- **Mount Olive, Morris County.** Mine Brook Dam Removal (design and public engagement)
- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Farmland Preservation Plan Update

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Harding Township, Morris County - Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) Map Change Request.** Harding Township has requested a change from Protection Zone to Existing Community Zone for several parcels within the township to accommodate previously committed affordable housing plans. Highlands Council staff are reviewing the request.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County – Planning Area Petition.** Roxbury Township was approved for conformance in the Preservation Area portion of the township in 2013. Earlier this year, the township submitted a request to include the Planning Area portion of the municipality. A

staff review of this request is available for public comment through Saturday, June 28 on the [Roxbury Township](#) page of the Highlands Council website.

- **Washington Township, Warren County – Fully Conforming.** Washington Township, Warren County adopted an “Ordinance for Highlands Council Regional Master Plan Conformance” in May. The township had previously petitioned and been approved for the Preservation Area portion of the municipality and recently added its Planning Area lands. With adoption of this conformance ordinance, Washington Township is now fully conforming with the Highlands RMP.
- **Highlands Tourism Expansion Grants.** Formal Grant Agreements were sent in May to the first six recipients of Highlands Tourism Expansion grants. Project proposals were approved at the April Highlands Council meeting. Stemming from a recommendation in the 2022 Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan, the grant program is designed to support new or existing tourism initiatives that will benefit the regional economy. Eligible applicants include Highlands region municipal and county governments, nonprofits, business improvement districts (BIDs), and destination marketing organizations (DMOs). The grant program opened in January, and applications are accepted on a rolling basis. Awardees are required to incorporate the Highlands region brand once finalized. Brief summaries of each project follow below.
 - **The Growing Stage.** This historic theater plans to expand its program and create new partnerships to increase visitor traffic to the location and nearby businesses in downtown Netcong. Award amount, \$35,000.
 - **Hunterdon County.** Hunterdon County will expand its established and growing brand, “Explore Hunterdon,” into new markets. Award amount, \$100,000.
 - **Morris County Historical Society.** The Morris County Historical Society intends to increase heritage tourism in and around Morris County by increasing offerings and expanding the promotion of Acorn Hall and four established tourism events produced by the society. Award amount, \$35,000.
 - **Morris County Economic Development Alliance (MCEDA).** The MCEDA has requested funding to support its plans to mark the 250th Anniversary of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. Award amount, \$100,000.
 - **Ringwood Borough Tourism Initiative.** The borough plans to increase ecotourism by implementing recommendations from its 2024 *Connecting Ringwood* and *Economic Sustainability Trails and Tourism* plans. Award amount, \$35,000.
 - **Washington Borough Business Improvement District (BID).** The Washington Borough BID will leverage funding from the Highlands Council to support its large, established Festival in the Borough. Award amount, \$10,000.
- **Highlands Council Sustainable Agriculture Grant Program Update.** City Green, Inc. provided scopes of work and proposed budgets to continue enhancing regenerative farming practices at its operation on South Branch Preserve in Mount Olive. Produce grown at City Green’s farms is distributed to local communities through a network of farmer’s markets and location-specific deliveries via its “Veggie Mobile” with a goal of providing access to local farm-fresh food along with meaningful job and volunteer opportunities in an agricultural setting. City Green has experienced record harvests at the Preserve since first partnering with the Highlands Council in 2023.

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) – GP1.**

- **Black River Fish and Game Club Stream Improvement Project.**

- Washington Township, Morris County*

- Applicant is seeking to improve conditions for wild and stocked trout in the Black River. The proposed project will enhance pool habitat, increase insect-producing riffles, and add thermal refuge for summer months at pools located where cold water tributaries enter the river. A total of 13 pools will be created or enhanced along 3,500 ft of the Black River.

- **Highlands Preservation Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #9 (w/NJDEP).
County Route 635 Resurfacing and Rehabilitation; County Right-of-Way.**

- Bethlehem Township and Hampton Borough, Hunterdon County*

Hunterdon County is proposing improvements to County Route 635 to address inconsistent and potentially unsafe roadway conditions. The project will entail roadway resurfacing, shoulder reconstruction, and tree maintenance in consultation with a certified arborist. New disturbances and impervious surface will be minimized by limiting the reconstruction to the minimum width required to maintain a standard 11-foot lane. No Highlands Region resources will be affected by this project.

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

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).
Transmission Line 69/70, Towers NM40, NM41, NM43, and NM45 Shoreline Armoring.**

- Mahwah Township, Bergen County*

Rockland Electric Company is seeking to address erosion issues that have compromised the integrity of transmission tower footings and base pads adjacent to Masonicus Brook.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).
Jersey Central Power & Light Company (JCP&L) Flanders Substation Upgrades.**

- Flanders, Mount Olive Township, Morris County*

JCP&L is seeking an Exemption #11 from the NJDEP for the replacement of existing transformers and the installation of an associated structure and related equipment. This activity will occur within the existing gravel footprint; however, the southern portion of the site will need to be extended for access, safety setbacks, and maneuverability. The proposed work will require approximately 0.20 acres of additional gravel be added to the footprint of the site.

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

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #9 (w/NJDEP).
Greenwood Lake Airport Obstruction Removal Phase 1.**

- West Milford Township, Passaic County*

The New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) is seeking to improve aircraft safety at Greenwood Lake Airport by removing and/or topping trees to maintain a runway approach and departure surfaces free of obstructions. Phase 1 includes the removal of 93 obstructions associated

with 76 trees. An additional 170 obstructions associated with 113 trees have been identified and will be addressed in a future phase.

Highlands Council staff review is pending.

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

Mine Hill Township, Morris County

An application was made to the NJDEP to expand the sewer service area to accommodate a proposed development in the township. The proposed development is located within the Existing Community Zone of the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone map.

Highlands Council consents to the WQMP revision.

- **Wastewater Management Plan (WMP) Chapter.**

Chester Borough, Morris County

Morris County has received NJDEP approval for an amendment application to the Upper Raritan WQMP to incorporate the Chester Borough Wastewater Management Plan as a chapter in the Morris County Wastewater Management Plan. The new chapter would supersede the prior Chester Borough WMP adopted in 1985.

Highlands Council finds the WMP consistent with the RMP.

- **Conditions Compliance.**

Paradox Properties, LLC Restoration and Habitat Enhancement of the South Branch Raritan River.

Washington Township, Morris County

Highlands Council staff received updated information and materials related to an RMP Consistency Determination (CD) issued in February of 2024 regarding a stream enhancement project on the South Branch of the Raritan River. The new information combined with a rapid habitat assessment and benthic aquatic macroinvertebrate survey conducted on site by Highlands science staff satisfied the conditions of the CD.

Highlands Council staff determination: All conditions of Consistency Determination have been met.

- **Conditions Compliance.**

MacArthur Boulevard, LLC – Building 2.

Mahwah Township, Bergen County

Highlands Council staff received updated information and materials related to an RMP Consistency Determination (CD) issued in December of 2024 regarding the construction of a two-story, 142,250 square-foot structure adjacent to an existing building in the Existing Community Zone of the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone map. Highlands Council staff found the project consistent with the Highlands RMP and subject to conditions related to the landscaping plan, invasive species management, and modifications to on-site stormwater management.

Highlands Council staff determination: All conditions of Consistency Determination have been met.

- **UPDATE: Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) review. Site-Specific Somerset County WQMP Amendment, Liberty Corner Proposed Mixed-Use project.**

Bernards Township, Somerset County

In December 2024, the Highlands Council issued a consistency determination finding the above referenced project inconsistent with the Highlands Act and RMP. Subsequently, the NJDEP affirmed this finding and requested additional information from the applicant regarding other

aspects of the project. In May, the Highlands Council staff met with the applicant to discuss and clarify its findings specifically related to forest impacts.

Science Initiatives

- **Newark Watershed Site Visit.** Members of the Highlands Council executive and science staff visited Newark Watershed lands in West Milford to examine conditions following a 2023 wildfire. See the message from the Executive Director above for additional details.
- **NFWF Grant Submission.** In May, Highlands Council staff submitted a grant application to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), proposing a 'Forest Stewardship Initiative for Water Protection' in the Highlands portion of the Delaware River watershed.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Allocation.**

Byram Township, Sussex County (all lots residential)

- Block 336, Lot 1 - 191.25 HDCs
- Block 348, Lot 10 - 101.75 HDCs
- Block 348, Lot 9.03 - 10.00 HDCs
- Block 336, Lot 41 - 0 HDCs

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Administrative Assistant.** The Highlands Council received more than 60 applications for the Administrative Assistant position, and 6 candidates were selected for interviews.
- **Summer Intern.** In May, the Highlands Council welcomed Adelaide Rafieyan, a sophomore at Lafayette College pursuing a double major in History and Government and Law. Adelaide will be assisting staff through the end of July.

Outreach & Education

- **Warren County Bicentennial Celebration.** The Highlands Council will have an information table at the [Warren County Bicentennial Celebration](#) on Saturday, June 28 at Warren County Community College. Stop by and say hello!
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 16 inquiries from constituents in May.

Municipal & County Coordination

Highlands Council staff frequently meet with our constituent municipalities and counties to discuss their priorities and how they intersect with the implementation of the Highlands RMP.

- In May, the Highlands Council met with: Alpha Borough, Warren County (Affordable Housing); Harding Township, Morris County (proposed development); Hardyston Township, Sussex County (RMP conformance); Jefferson Township, Morris County (Recycling); Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County (RMP Implementation).
- In May, the Highlands Council Executive Director sent a letter of support to Jefferson Township regarding the Township's application to the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT)

for funding under the Transportation Alternatives Program. Jefferson intends to leverage funding from NJDOT to create a safe crossing of Lake Hopatcong on Brady Road for non-motorized vehicles and pedestrians. Currently, the bridge on Brady Road is a very narrow, two-lane bridge with virtually no shoulders and limited sight distance.

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 May, Highlands Council staff met with the State Agriculture Development Committee (Statewide Farmland Preservation Formula); the Fair Share Housing Center (affordable housing in the Highlands); and NJDEP (Highlands region coordination).

Legislative Update

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

Bill Number	Prime Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5667 / S4451	Lopez, Yvonne Singleton, Troy	This bill modifies certain requirements for the preparation and adoption of a municipal master plan pursuant to section 19 of P.L.1975, c.291 (C.40:55D-28). Specifically, the bill requires a municipal master plan to include a housing plan element, and specifies that the housing plan element is to evaluate the need for, and establish a plan for, the provision of housing in the municipality, which is to include affordable housing.	5/8/2025: Introduced, Referred to Assembly Housing Committee 5/19/2025: Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Community and Urban Affairs Committee
A5627 / S4350	Reynolds- Jackson, Verlina, Carter, Linda S. Turner, Shirley K.	Changes certain allocations and amounts of constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues for Fiscal Year 2026 and thereafter; authorizes Garden State Preservation Trust and local governments to acquire lands in urban areas for agricultural or horticultural purposes. <i>Note:</i> This legislation does <i>not</i> include an allocation of CBT funds for Highlands Council land preservation efforts.	5/8/2025: Introduced, Referred to Assembly Commerce, Economic Development and Agriculture Committee 6/2/2025: Transferred to Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The June Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 19. The July public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 17. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [Public Meetings](#) page of the Highlands Council website.

