

Highlands Council Update

December 2025

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Highlands Ridge Park, Chester Township

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | December 2025

From the Executive Director

As we turn the page to a new year, the Highlands Council is looking forward to an increased commitment to the mission of the Highlands Council with the new administration in Trenton. That mission is not partisan or political – the importance of protecting the resources of the Highlands is not just about the Highlands region, it is a critical element of ensuring a healthy and prosperous future for the entire state of New Jersey. I will say yet again and repeat it until the appropriate commitment of funds and other assets necessary to protect the Highlands is made: there are few more fundamental responsibilities of government than ensuring that the drinking water supply of the people it serves is properly secured.

Council Appointments. Anyone who has followed the work of the Highlands Council or read one of these monthly updates over the past three years knows that the work of the Council has been hampered by a lack of Council membership. During the last weeks of 2025, this critical need was finally addressed. Governor Murphy put forward seven new Council nominations at the end of the year and as of publication, the full Senate has acted on four of those nominations. Another two received confirmation of the Senate Judiciary Committee just yesterday and are likely to be considered by the full Senate early next week. The remaining nomination to fill the vacancy left by Judge Michael Dressler's passing in early December is expected to be acted upon soon.

These new members will bring the Council to its full 15-person membership for the first time in several years. Additionally, filling long-time vacancies means the Council now has representatives from all seven Highlands counties as required by the Highlands Act. Most notably, Warren County, which has not been represented on the Council since 2013, will now have two representatives due to the inclusion of both a Warren County elected official and another county resident who will fill an at-large public member vacancy.

Having representation from all seven Highlands counties is not a small matter. A public body that does not adequately reflect its constituency can potentially impact the acceptance of its actions. Proper representation across the region is important for the legitimacy of the Council's work. This is critical as the Highlands Council works to engage the entirety of the region. The addition of these new Council members will also alleviate the issues faced throughout 2025 when just mustering a quorum of 8 members necessary to hold a public meeting became a challenge. We welcome our new members and look forward to their productive tenures on the Council.

Unfortunately, welcoming new Council members means saying goodbye to one of the Council's most dedicated representatives, Michael Francis, who has represented Sussex County on the Council since 2011. The former mayor of Hopatcong Borough, Mike was dedicated to serving on the Council and provided a valuable perspective on our work. He was dependable and engaged throughout his time at the Highlands and he will be missed. We wish him a happy and healthy retirement from public service and acknowledge his valuable contributions to work of the Highlands Council.

New SADC Valuation Formula. In the first half of 2025, the New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC) introduced a new valuation methodology for their highly successful Farmland Preservation program. The [new funding formula](#) has the potential to have a significant impact on the per acre amounts paid to landowners in exchange for the permanent preservation of their properties. This is particularly so in the Highlands, where a combination of stagnant values for unrestricted land (the “before” value) and rising values for raw farmland (the “after” value) had led to declining per acre valuation for preservation transactions. Unsurprisingly, this decline had become a disincentive for many farm owners in the region to enter the Farmland Preservation program.

The new formula allows the SADC to compensate landowners for not only the agricultural value of the land, but the natural resource value as well. This includes factors such as aquifer recharge, water quality protection, proximity to other preserved lands, and the presence of upland forests and wetlands. This is exceptionally advantageous for farms in the Highlands where most properties contain both high value agricultural land and these important natural resources. By placing restrictions that protect both, a landowner may be able to receive up to 90% of the unrestricted fee value of the property. Preserving agricultural production in the Highlands is a key element of protection of the region.

Agriculture is the second-largest use of land in the Highlands, accounting for approximately 110,000 acres that could otherwise be developed. Farmland preservation is an important component of the overall land preservation strategy in the Highlands, and the new funding methodology makes it an attractive option for our farmers. [More information about the new formula is available from the SADC.](#)

Drought Continues. The entirety of the Highlands remains in either moderate or severe drought status. A drought warning was declared last month for the entire state. While the status for all of New Jersey was elevated in December, the region has been in a drought for the past two years. Twenty of the past 24 months have seen below normal rainfall in the Highlands. Stream flows are at a critical level which has severe environmental impacts. There is limited snowpack present, which will have an effect on groundwater recharge. Most important, however, is the status of drinking water supplies. Reservoir levels continue to be dangerously low, which has led to draw down of back-up water sources such as Monksville Reservoir and Split Rock Reservoir along with reduced passing flows, which further reduces water levels in the region’s waterways.

The effects of this prolonged drought should serve to highlight the importance of investing in the protection of the resources of the Highlands and the overall need to limit development in the region. Protecting the source is a more effective solution than responding to recurring shortages. Overdevelopment both increases the internal demand for Highlands water and reduces the capacity of the natural systems to produce adequate clean drinking water for the remainder of the state.

The failure to invest in both the protection of the region’s forests and wetlands and taking measures to increase overall forest coverage and protect and enhance the wetlands and streams that contribute to the water supply diminishes the region’s resilience to changes in precipitation patterns. Ensuring that the region can supply the state’s drinking water needs every day regardless of whether we are in a time of plentiful rainfall or a drought is dependent upon the condition of the natural resources of the Highlands.

While we tend to concentrate on consumption every time there is a drought warning or emergency, in reality it is a supply problem as well, and that is what the mission of the Highlands is all about.



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 RMP and eligible for reimbursement.

- **Wharton Borough, Morris County.** Borough Master Plan
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Stormwater Management/MS4 compliance

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.

- **Morristown, Morris County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan Element
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County.** Community Forestry Plan.
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County.** Trails Plan (Sustainable Economic Development Planning)

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- In December, both Jefferson and Roxbury Townships were deemed to be fully conforming with the Highlands RMP, having adopted ordinances in November that codify the Highlands RMP into local land use regulations.
- On December 10, the Highlands Council received the New Jersey Tourism Industry Association (NJTIA) President's Award, in recognition of the Council's successful Tourism Expansion Grant Program. The award was presented at the association's annual Celebration of Tourism Luncheon, part of the NJTIA Annual Conference, in Atlantic City. NJTIA president Ben Rose said the President's Award is reserved for truly exceptional projects. [Read more in the Press Release.](#)



(Photo: Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko, Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, and Executive Director Ben Spinelli at NJTIA Celebration of Tourism Luncheon.)

- The towns of Hopatcong Borough (Sussex), Lopatcong Township (Warren), Pohatcong Township (Warren), Randolph Township (Morris), and Washington Township (Morris) were notified that previously approved Highlands Center Designations have been deemed invalid due to lack of implementing activities specified as a requirement of the approvals. Highlands Center Designations can be reinstated once required planning work is complete.

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 Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc., Lake Glenwood PFAS Treatment System Construction.**

Vernon Township, Sussex County

Veolia Water New Jersey, Inc. will make modifications to the Lake Glenwood Public Community Water System (PCWS) to address removal of per and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) from the groundwater tapped by this PCWS system. The proposed project will result in an addition of 925 square feet of new impervious surface and the removal of one 18-inch diameter tree.

Highlands Council Staff finding: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Jersey Central Power & Light – Tewksbury Substation.**

Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County

Jersey Central Power & Light is proposing modifications to an existing substation in Tewksbury Township to improve reliability, as part of FirstEnergy’s “Energize365” initiative. Proposed improvements include the addition of a 12 ft. by 12 ft. structure to be placed on a slab foundation inside the existing substation fencing. No expansion is proposed.

Highlands Council Staff finding: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment. 56 Kitchell Road**

Harding Township, Morris County

A site-specific amendment to the Northeast WQMP is required to accommodate a proposed 100% affordable housing development that will result in an additional 5.13 acres added to the WQMP area. The development will consist of approximately 54 dwelling units.

Highlands Council Staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Act and RMP

GIS Updates

- The **Highlands Resource Explorer (REX)** received an update adding a “What’s New” link in the left-hand nav that helps users know about new features and updates.

Science Initiatives

- **Highlands Climate Change Technical Report.** A project kick-off meeting was held in December following award of a contract to [environmental science, engineering, and consulting firm Verdantas](#) at the Highlands Council October meeting. In addition to members of the consulting team, Highlands Council planning, science and GIS teams were all represented. The

meeting agenda included a review of climate issues facing the Highlands and the overall impact for the rest of New Jersey, as well as a discussion of the project scope, approach, roles and data needs. The development of the Technical Advisory Committee for the project was also discussed.

- The draft Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) for the **Highlands Council Water Quality Monitoring Program** was submitted to the NJDEP for review and approval. An approved QAPP is required in order for collected data to be used by the NJDEP in the development of the biennial Integrated Water Quality Assessment Report ([NJDEP | Bureau of Environmental Analysis, Restoration and Standards | Integrated Water Quality Report](#)). Highlands Council staff, under the direction of Science Manager Kelley Curran, hope to begin conducting biological and habitat assessments in the region at sites identified by NJDEP this Spring. Additional monitoring parameters are anticipated in the future. This data will also provide research opportunities for the science staff.

Outreach & Education

- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 17 inquiries from constituents in December.

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 December, the Highlands Council met with Byram Township, Sussex County (project specific); Glen Gardner Borough, Hunterdon County (project specific); Hunterdon, Passaic and Warren County (EPA brownfields grant); Mahwah Township, Passaic County (project specific). The Economic Sustainability County Coalition also met (representatives from all 7 Highlands Counties).

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.

- Highlands Council staff participated in the following sister agency events/meetings:
 - NJDEP – Highlands Wastewater Management Plan (WMP) Processing
 - NJDEP Green Acres Appraisers' Seminar
 - NJDEP SFY 2027 Clean Water & Drinking Water Intended Use Plans stakeholder session
 - NJ Interagency Council on Climate Resilience Senior Staff meeting
 - New Jersey Waterworks Conference
 - NJ Section-American Water Resources Association - Water Leadership Forum
 - New York-New Jersey Trail Conference - Highlands Trail Town Project
 - North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority - Morris Canal Working Group
 - State Planning Commission – Monthly Meeting

Council Committee Meetings

- Budget and Finance

Legislative Update

Following is a summary of legislative updates from the month of December.

Highlands-related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S5007 / A5778	Turner, Shirley K. Spearman, William W.	Directs Garden State Preservation Trust to perform audit of State's land preservation programs, authorizes local governments and nonprofit organizations to utilize certain constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues for administrative expenses; appropriates \$150,000.	6/30/2025 - Passed by the Assembly (79-0-1). 10/20/2025 - Received in the Senate, Referred to Senate Economic Growth Committee. 12/18/2025 - Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The next Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 15, 2026. The February public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 19, 2026. All meetings are held at 4:00 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [Public Meetings](#) page of the Highlands Council website.



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