

# Highlands Council Update

July 2025

Released August 11, 2025



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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | July 1-31, 2025

## From the Executive Director

In last month's report I promised that over the course of the next several months I would highlight the resources needed by the Highlands Council to effectively accomplish its mission of protecting the region's important resources. This month I'll focus on the need to secure a source of funds for appropriate land management activities. We frequently talk about 'land preservation,' but the term 'land management' more accurately reflects the need for a comprehensive approach that both permanently preserves land and incorporates stewardship and restoration activities. The Highlands Council has been denied the ability to create and implement a land management strategy due to a lack of funding.

Currently, there are approximately 19,000 undeveloped but developable lots regionwide. This represents about 230 square miles of the region's total area of around 1,340 square miles. Much of this development can take place within the provisions of the Highlands Act and the various waivers and exemptions contained in the law. With no source of open space funding, the high resource value lands, the agricultural lands and the lands with a combination of both important natural resources and agricultural value are all at risk. The Highlands Council, with its unique knowledge of the region, relationships with landowners and municipalities, and the ability to focus on preservation efforts that advance the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP is the most logical entity to pursue a land preservation strategy in the region.

In addition to funds for preservation of the substantial land that remains at risk of development, resources are also needed to undertake appropriate stewardship activities. The Council must have the ability to work with both public and private landowners on management measures that will enhance and protect the environmental assets of the region and maximize their water protection capacity. The ability to create a program that will underwrite the costs of better forestry practices, better agricultural methods, stream restoration and dam removal projects, reforestation efforts and other ecologically beneficial activities is essential. These are precisely the types of undertakings that are routinely sponsored by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and its non-profit arm, the Watershed Environmental Council, to protect the Catskill/Delaware Watershed just 50 miles north of the Highlands – and accomplished with great effect.

New Jersey has consistently failed to provide adequate financial support for the protection of the Highlands. This is not due to a lack of available funds. There are substantial available balances in the funds generated by the constitutionally dedicated portion of the Corporation Business Tax set aside for land protection – on the scale of hundreds of millions of dollars. This lack of support has been true for the entirety of the nearly 21 years of the Highlands Council's existence. While the state clearly recognized the need to protect the region because of its vital importance to the well-being of the entire state, that commitment has fallen woefully short of a corresponding investment in safeguarding and stewarding Highlands resources. This has been largely a political decision that has come from the administrations of both parties as well as leadership at the NJ DEP. There must be an adequate and appropriate investment

in comprehensive land management programs in the Highlands if the Council can ever hope to implement the intent of the Highlands Act and the Highlands RMP.

I will repeat this statement again: **There are few more fundamental responsibilities of government than protecting and ensuring an adequate supply of clean drinking water for the citizens it serves.** Protection of these resources is not an exercise in politics. It is not a matter of ideology. It is an essential element of sound responsible governing practices. It is also an obligation to current and future residents of the State of New Jersey that must be fulfilled.

And now, some updates.

**July Highlights.** Staff continued to review new Housing and Fair Share Plans from the region's municipalities as they take the necessary steps to comply with the state's new Affordable Housing legislation. We are moving forward with measures designed to implement the recently completed Branding and Marketing Plan. Highlands science staff continue to work with our partners on assessing the conditions of Highlands waterways and assisting the City of Newark with the management of their 35,000 acres of watershed lands in the Highlands portions of Passaic, Morris and Sussex Counties.

**RMP Conformance.** The roster of conforming municipalities continues to grow. Municipalities that have previously shied away from working with the Council are now seeking Plan Conformance and taking the necessary steps to align their local planning with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP.) Last month we welcomed Roxbury Township as the newest municipality to have a petition for full conformance approved by the Council. Mendham Township and Mount Arlington Borough will be on the agenda for the Council's consideration at its September meeting and the Planning Area portion of Allamuchy Township will likely be scheduled for Council review and approval at the October meeting. The importance of this cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to conformance within the Planning Area of the Highlands where mandatory restrictions on development don't exist, but important resources are present. Implementation of the Highlands Act is highly dependent on municipal action. Because of this, having as much of the land area of the region managed by municipal governments in accordance with the Highlands RMP is an essential element of successfully carrying out the legislative intent of the Highlands Act. Adding additional towns will place a strain on the staff as we need to work closely with Highlands municipalities to ensure that required measures are adopted across the region, but that is a challenge the Council welcomes. We look forward to working with these new municipal partners, along with our established municipal and county partners, in protection of a region that is so important to the well-being of the entire state.

**Data Centers.** Over the coming months, Highlands staff will be taking a close look at the potential impacts of the proliferation of Data Centers. This is a nation-wide issue, but one that has the potential of significantly impacting the Highlands region and its resources. Open land, substantial available water supplies, proximity to both power and data distribution lines and high demand for these facilities are a potential threat to the region. The Planning Area portion of the Highlands is particularly vulnerable. A recent white paper produced by the [Urban Land Institute](#) highlighted the planning considerations and potential impacts of data centers that should be taken into consideration by any entity responsible for land

use planning. The main issues for the Highlands are centered around water usage, impervious coverage, and loss of agricultural lands. As municipalities search for sources of tax revenue and as demand for these facilities increases it will become imperative for the Highlands Council to ensure that the locations selected for these projects are appropriate and the impact on Highlands resources is minimized or avoided. It is likely the Council will produce siting guidelines similar to what was done regarding [warehousing](#) in the region.



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 Borough, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Harding Township, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Holland Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Mendham Township, Morris County.** MS4 Permitting and Stormwater Planning (partial)
- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Rockaway Township, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Union 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.

- **Bloomsbury Borough, Hunterdon County.** Wastewater Management Plan
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Trout Habitat and Tagging Study-Year 3

### **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.

- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Hydrogeological Study (Phase 1)
- **Passaic County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan and Farmland Preservation Plan

- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Farmland Preservation Plan
- **Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County.** 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.

- **Peapack-Gladstone Borough, Somerset County.** Highlands Conformance Assessment

### Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Public Comments Being Accepted on Two Petition Reviews.** The Highlands Council is currently accepting comments on [Mount Arlington Borough's](#) request for conformance with the Highlands RMP and on a revised review of [Mendham Township's](#) request for conformance.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County – Planning Area Petition Approved.** 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. Following a [staff review of the Township's petition materials](#), the Highlands Council voted to approve the request at the Council's July public meeting.
- **Tourism Expansion Grants.** At its July meeting the Highlands Council approved funding to support three additional projects under the Tourism Expansion Grant Program.
  - **Hackettstown Business Improvement District (BID).** The Hackettstown BID plans to establish itself as a Highlands Brand Ambassador, encouraging visitors to explore beyond the town limits. Grant funding will also support enhancements to two well-established events in the town. Award amount: \$23,424.
  - **New York-New Jersey Trail Conference.** The NY-NJ Trail Conference will enhance Highlands Trail digital and on-trail information and connections with downtowns focusing on Jefferson, Ringwood, West Milford and Vernon. Grant funding will also support development of Highlands Trail merchandise. Award amount: \$35,000.
  - **Town of Clinton.** The town of Clinton will enhance the visitor experience in the well-established tourism destination in Hunterdon County. Improvements will include the conversion of information kiosks to serve as preliminary visitor centers, and the installation of portable restroom facilities at 2 of the kiosks. Award amount: \$9,450

The Tourism Expansion Grant Program grew from a recommendation in the 2022 Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan and launched in January 2025. The grant program is designed to support new or existing tourism initiatives that will benefit the regional economy. The Council previously approved six grants earlier this year totaling \$315,000.

### 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: Preservation Area Consistency Review, General Permit #1 Authorization (w/NJDEP). Black River Fish and Game Club Stream Improvement Project**  
*Chester and Washington Townships, Morris County*

The Highlands Council issued a Consistency Determination (CD) regarding a GP1 application for the Black River Fish and Game Club to conduct stream habitat improvement activities within the Lamington River (aka the Black River). The CD found the project Consistent with the Highlands RMP with modifications. Additional materials and revised plans were submitted, and site visits conducted in July.

*Highlands Council staff finding: All conditions met*

- **Planning Area Consistency Review. Proposed Warehouse - Crossroads Mahwah**  
*Mahwah Township, Bergen County*

Applicant is proposing a 1.2-million square-foot warehouse building with associated office and parking space. All improvements are proposed within the previously developed portion of the property, outside of the 50' freshwater transition line as verified by NJDEP.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

- **Planning Area Consistency Review. Mahwah Disabled Veterans Project**  
*Mahwah Township, Bergen County*

The proposed project includes demolition of the existing structure and construction of a 6-unit residential building for disabled veterans. The project will be 100% affordable housing and is located in the Existing Community Zone and Designated Center within the Highlands Planning Area of the township. There are no anticipated impacts to Highlands resources.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan*

- **Planning Area Exemption Review. Music Hall Group, LLC**  
*Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County*

Applicant is seeking an exemption #4 to construct ten (10) age-restricted affordable apartments with 15 off-street parking spots on a previously developed site. The new development will be within 125% of the previous footprint and will result in a 24% reduction from the previous impervious coverage.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Exempt*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Tennessee Gas Pipeline (TGP), Mountain Trail Rectifier and Ground Bed Project**  
*Vernon Township, Sussex County*

Applicant proposes to install a new rectifier and ground bed at an existing Mountain Trail rectifier outside of TGP's existing ROW, and access to the site will be from existing roads and along the ROW. The pipeline is located within an area containing wetlands.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Transmission Line 69/70, Towers NM40, NM41, NM43, and NM45 Shoreline Armoring West Bank of Masonicus Brook.**  
*Mahwah Township, Bergen County*

*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 finding: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act*

## GIS Updates

- **The Highlands Resource Explorer (REX)** received a major update to add additional features and correct several bugs that were present in the initial release. New features of note include: the ability to export to a PDF and the ability to “Append to Existing Results” when searching for parcels. Additional updates to increase overall functionality and ease of use were also completed.
- The **Highlands Municipal Conformance Status** layer, viewable on REX, was updated to reflect conformance status as defined in the Highlands Council’s adopted Plan Conformance Procedures and most recent Affordable Housing legislation.

## Science Initiatives

- **Deadline Extended: Climate Change Technical Report Request for Proposals (RFP).** The deadline for submitting responses to the Climate Change Technical Report RFP has been extended to Wednesday, September 10, 2025. In addition, a Q&A document has been posted with Highlands Council responses to questions from prospective applicants. Details are available on the [RFP page of the Highlands Council website](#).

## Staffing and Staff Development

- **Administrative Assistant.** The Highlands Council has selected a candidate for the open Administrative Assistant position, who will be starting in September.
- **Environmental Systems Research Institute (Esri) User Conference.** The Highlands Council GIS staff participated virtually in this annual event focused on the latest updates, trends, and advancements within the Esri platform, which is the international standard for GIS. Staff also attended a dedicated training on Esri’s **ArcGIS Experience Builder**, which will improve the Highlands Council’s ability to interface with the public.

## Outreach & Education

- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 26 inquiries from constituents in July.

## 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 July Highlands Council staff met with **Mt. Olive Township, Morris County** (Sand Shore Development); **Hope Township, Warren County** (RMP conformance); and **Mendham Township, Morris County** (Petition revisions).

## 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 July Highlands Council staff met with the **NY-NJ Trail Conference** (Tourism Expansion Grant proposal); the **Trust for Public Land** (Highlands Open Space and Recreation Plan); **City of Newark** (watershed management); the **US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service** (Stream Visual Assessment Protocol).

### Council Committee Meetings

- The Budget and Finance Committee and the Plan Conformance Committee met in July.

### Legislative Update

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

#### Highlands-related legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
<a href="#">A5667 / S4451</a>	Lopez, Yvonne Karabinchak, Robert J.  Singleton, Troy Wimberly, Benjie E.	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.	6/30/2025: Passed by the Senate (23-14)  7/24/2025: Received in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Housing Committee

### Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The August Highlands Council public meeting has been canceled. The September public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 18. 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.

