

Highlands Council Update

June 2025

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Recently preserved property in Peapack and Gladstone Borough, Somerset County.

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | June 1-30, 2025

From the Executive Director

As June ends, in addition to recapping a very busy month, we also need to look forward as there will be a new administration leading New Jersey in six months. It is imperative that New Jersey's next governor understand the indisputable connection between the resources of the Highlands region and the long-term future of the state, and what's needed to ensure the region's protection. I will devote a portion of this and each subsequent monthly report through the end of 2025 to outlining the needs of this agency and the vital nature of its mission.

Protection of the Highlands and its resources is not a political matter. It is a key element of responsible governance, and the new governor will need to carefully consider the investments necessary for effectively safeguarding the future of New Jersey. But first, a review of our work in June.

Affordable Housing. Once again, we highlight our work on this important issue. June 30 was the deadline for municipalities to adopt new Fair Share Housing elements. The staff is busy reviewing plans from our towns and assessing them for compliance with the Highlands Act, the Regional Master Plan (RMP), our Affordable Housing guidance, and the law. Towns that have properly followed the guidance in preparing their plans are being notified that they are both eligible for reimbursement from the Highlands Council for this work and that they are entitled to an enhanced legal presumption of validity for their land use actions taken in furtherance of these plans.

Highlands municipalities should note that in addition to adoption of these plans, they should have already, or be in the process of, adopting the modified Highlands Land Use Ordinance contained in the Affordable Housing Guidance document. We will continue to work with Highlands towns on meeting their affordable housing obligations and proactively planning to balance this requirement with the protection of Highlands resources.

RMP Conformance. The structure of the Highlands Act puts a great deal of responsibility for protecting the region on the actions of municipal government in the Highlands. This is particularly true when it comes to the Planning Area portion of the region where many of the mandatory restrictions governing the Preservation Area do not exist. Because of this, the voluntary alignment of land use and other provisions of the Act and RMP by municipalities in the Planning Area is an essential part of successfully protecting the state's water supply. The past year has seen a number of towns that had previously only been conforming for the Preservation Area portions of their towns, seeking conformance for their Planning Area lands as well. This is a very positive development.

The Town of Belvidere (Planning Area only) and the Planning Area portion of Jefferson Township were both approved by the Highlands Council at the June meeting. The Planning Area portion of Roxbury Township is anticipated to be considered by the Council at the July meeting while Mendham Township, a municipality fully in the Planning Area, which was scheduled for consideration at the June meeting, will be back before the Council in September, after addressing several issues that came up during the comment period on their petition. Conformance petitions for Mount Arlington and the Planning Area portion of

Allamuchy Township will also be considered at that meeting as well. More of the region's towns are recognizing that the Highlands Council is an asset at their disposal to assist with the challenges they face and that the Highlands Act itself is a tool for charting a sustainable future for both our towns and the remainder of the state that relies upon the important resources that are here.

Branding & Marketing Plan. The June Council meeting featured a presentation from North Star Place Branding & Marketing, the firm that has been retained by the Council to develop a marketable regional identity that can be used by the municipalities, counties, and businesses of the Highlands to take advantage of the many incredible features of the region in promoting visitation to this beautiful part of the state and encourage patronage of the farms, restaurants, and other enterprises that offer the bounty of the Highlands to people both within and outside the region. The natural beauty of the Highlands and its many natural resources are its most marketable assets, and they are currently largely overlooked by the 20 million people living within a two-hour drive.

Heightening awareness of the region is important for the economic well-being of the Highlands because people invest in protecting what they know and love. Creating an identity for the Highlands as a destination and a place that should be valued for its resources is ultimately the goal of this project. In the coming months we will be identifying resources that allow the Highlands to implement the recommendations and begin rolling out some of the marketing materials, such as a regional logo and tag line that highlight the fact that if you weren't familiar with all the great things the Highlands has to offer, you never really "Knew Jersey."

Looking Forward. In underscoring the needs of the Highlands Council as an agency, it is important to first understand its current status. The Council has been very successful in carrying out its mission with limited resources. However, what has been and is being accomplished is only a fraction of what is needed to safeguard the resources of the region, and particularly a primary source of the water supply for 7 million New Jersey residents. The Highlands Act, and with it the Highlands Council, was created for an extremely important reason. Not only have we failed as a state to appropriately invest in supporting the implementation of the Act, it seems that the reason it was adopted in the first place has also been forgotten.

Currently the Council is operating with essentially the same operating budget, the same staffing levels, only half of the original municipal grant budget, and with no source of funding for land preservation or land stewardship for the past 16 years. **There are few more fundamental responsibilities of government than protecting and ensuring an adequate supply of clean drinking water for the citizens it serves.** August 10, 2004, the date of passage for the Highlands Act, should have marked both the low point in the condition of the Highlands' resources and the point where New Jersey took the responsibility of protecting its water supply seriously. Instead of working to improve conditions since then, we have only managed to slow the rate of decline. The lack of investment in the work and obligations of the Highlands Council indicates that the state is simply not adequately committed to that task. This neglect has been bipartisan.

The comparison has been made here before between the substantial dedication of resources made by New York City in protecting its water supply and the failure by our state to similarly support an analogous effort

in the Highlands. New Jersey has made an assumption that under the terms of the Highlands Act, the law alone would be sufficient. It is clear that it is not. Simply expecting that regulation alone is sufficient is a serious mistake. It takes, and will take, a serious investment of resources and effort to successfully carry out the purpose of the Act.

Responsible management of the state's main water supply area requires a combination of appropriate regulation, land acquisition, ecological restoration, forest management, a partnership between public and private landowners along with sound land use planning to be successful. While we know what to do, we are nowhere near actually engaging in the comprehensive set of management practices that are necessary. Increasing forest coverage, preserving land that remains at risk of development, anticipating the impacts of climate change, managing water resources, engaging in land restoration projects and working with agricultural interests to implement better practices are just some of the activities that are necessary to protect the region's water resources. These are not optional endeavors, but they cannot be carried out by an agency that has been chronically underfunded, understaffed, under resourced and without access to a source of funding for appropriate land management activities such as acquisition and stewardship.

New York City invests, on average, \$108 million annually to protect and manage the resources in the Catskill/Delaware watershed. Or just consider the operations of the Watershed Agricultural Council, a non-profit organization specifically created and funded by New York City to work with private landowners in their watershed. That organization spends over \$18 million each year on land stewardship activities to protect water quality and quantity. Because of this investment in sound water resource management, New York City does not need to filter water sourced from its west of Hudson reservoir system. Compare that with the Highlands Council which operates on an annual budget of just over \$3 million with responsibility for a similar land area, serving a similar-sized population and with similar demand on the water supply – the Highlands exports approximately 840 million gallons each day to the rest of the state. Expecting comparable results to what New York City achieves through its efforts while only investing a fraction of what the NYC Department of Environmental Protection does is simply irresponsible. There is a choice to be made; either invest in the promise of the Highlands Act and ensure the state's future water supply is secure or wait until a crisis spurs further action. Problems are always best solved when they are avoided in the first place.



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.

- **Califon Borough, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan

- **Green Township, Sussex County.** Farmland Preservation Plan
- **Hunterdon County.** Sustainable Economic Development Plan – Tourism Phase II (partial completion)
- **Lebanon Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Ringwood Borough, Passaic County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Rockaway Township, Morris County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan Element
- **West Milford, Passaic County.** Master Plan Update; Historic Preservation Plan; Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Washington Township, Warren County.** Highlands Conformance Ordinance; 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.

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Montville Township, Morris County.** Permit requirements for Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Reconnection Pilot Project

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.

- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Housing Element and Fair Share Plan
- **Peapack and Gladstone Borough, Somerset County.** Plan Conformance Assessment

Scopes/Funding Requests

The following municipalities submitted scopes of work for the specified projects. The scopes are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff.

- **Hunterdon County.** Bicycle Plan (administrative costs) and Stormwater Planning
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County.** Wastewater Management Planning (Infiltration and Inflow Study of a section of the Borough sanitary sewer system)
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County.** Watershed Management Planning
- **Mount Olive Township.** Dam Removal
- **Jefferson Township.** Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Survey
- **Byram Township.** Stormwater Management
- **Hopatcong Borough.** Open Space/Recreation Plan and ERI

Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Belvidere and Jefferson Township Join in RMP Implementation.** At the June 19 Highlands Council meeting, the Council approved petitions for plan conformance from the Town of

Belvidere, Warren County and Jefferson Township, Morris County. Petition approval is a critical step toward implementation of the RMP at the local level. With an approved petition, the municipalities are now eligible for additional grant funding to support a wide range of land use planning and resource management activities that help implement the New Jersey Highlands Water protection and Planning Act and the RMP.

- **Mount Arlington Borough, Morris County** passed a resolution formally petitioning the Highlands Council for plan conformance in the planning area portion of the town. Mount Arlington is already conforming with the RMP in the preservation area portion of the town.
- **Highlands and State Plan Cross Acceptance.** At the June 19 Highlands Council meeting, the Council adopted resolution No. 2025-14 authorizing submission of a report to the State Planning Commission and the Office of Planning Advocacy summarizing the cross-acceptance process in the Highlands. The State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan) cross-acceptance process seeks to create maximum alignment of planning policies at the municipal, county, regional, and state levels. In the Highlands region, the State Plan will use the Highlands Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) map as the State Plan Policy Map. The Highlands Council acted as the “negotiating entity” for most Highlands municipalities during the cross-acceptance process, helping ensure local priorities were adequately reflected in both the State Plan and the LUCZ.
- **Branding and Marketing Project Milestone.** At the June Highlands Council public meeting, place branding and marketing firm North Star presented the final creative results of this important project designed to help create a unique identity for the Highlands that will help foster sustainable economic opportunities throughout the region. The rollout of the brand will begin over the summer, with the recent Highlands Tourism expansion grantees as early ambassadors.
- **Securing Funding to Assess Brownfield Revitalization Opportunities in the Highlands Region.** The Highlands Council is supporting preparation of a grant application to secure funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to inventory, prioritize, assess, and plan for the economic sustainability and revitalization of priority targets areas/sites throughout the Highlands regions.

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 #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 determination: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.

- Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP).
Branchburg-New York (BB-NY) Right-of-Way (ROW) Access Road Repair/Maintenance Activities**

Hopatcong Borough, Sussex County

The New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) is seeking to repair damaged sections of access roads within the BB-NY ROW. The project involves the addition of clean crushed stone to provide a uniform, non-skid surface within the current road width. No Highlands resources will be affected by the project and there will be no increase in impervious coverage.

Highlands Council staff determination: Consistent with the Goals and Purposes of the Highlands Act.
- Preservation Area Consistency Review, General Permit #1 Authorization (w/NJDEP).
Anglers Anonymous Inc./South Branch of the Raritan River Restoration and Habitat Enhancement.**

Washington Township, Morris County

Anglers Anonymous is seeking authorization to conduct a restoration project to improve trout habitat within the South Branch of the Raritan River. This effort is part of a larger restoration/habitat improvement project of the United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS), funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with technical support and oversight by the USDA-NRCS.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands RMP with modifications
- 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 Black River Fish and Game Club is seeking authorization to conduct stream habitat improvement activities within the Lamington River (aka the Black River). The project involves the creation of multiple pools within the river and vernal pools in wooded areas adjacent to the project area.

Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the Highlands RMP with modifications
- Preservation Area Consistency Review, General Permit #1 Authorization (w/NJDEP).
Rockaway Creek Restoration Project**

Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County

(incoming 6/26) Proposed project to restore less than 200 linear feet of the Rockaway Creek including stabilizing the left and right banks in Tewksbury Township. Channel restoration to increase the carrying capacity of the stream.

Highlands Council review in progress
- Planning Area Consistency Review.
Carmco, Inc Industrial/Office Park**

Lopatcong Township, Warren County

Applicant is seeking to construct an 8,000 square-foot building with a paved parking area on a primarily impervious site, currently being used to store construction vehicles and equipment.

Highlands Council staff determination: deferred to Township officials with requested conditions.

GIS Updates

- **The following data layers received notable updates in June.**
 - Preserved Lands – parcel updates.
 - Land Use Capability Zones (LUCZ) – recent RMP updates.

Science Initiatives

- **Requests for Proposals (RFP): Climate Change Technical report for the New Jersey Highlands.** In June, the Highlands Council released an [RFP to prepare a Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands region](#). The project will involve compiling and reviewing existing climate data and projections relevant to the Highlands region, assessing potential impacts of climate change on the region's key resources, and recommending adaptation and resilience strategies. The findings will support future amendments to the RMP. Proposals are being accepted through Sunday, August 10, 2025.
- **Stream Monitoring.** The science team, in partnership with Raritan Headwaters, went to 8 different stream sites across the Highlands region to take samples to monitor the health and quality of the water. The science team hopes to make this a bigger project in the coming years and to work with DEP in ramping up these monitoring efforts.

Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Open Space Partnership Funding Program Update: 34 acres of farmland preserved in Somerset County.** The Highlands Council worked in partnership with the New Jersey State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), Somerset County Agricultural Development Board



(SCADB), the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to preserve over 34 acres of farmland along Willow Avenue in Peapack and Gladstone, Somerset County. The property provides grazing land for Black Angus cattle and contains important farmland soils, forested areas, and critical wildlife habitat.

In June 2025, a Deed of Easement was purchased for \$1.5 million using Federal Highlands Conservation Act funds, matched by grants from SADC and SCADB, and a donation from the landowner. The SCADB will own and manage the easement for the long-term conservation of the property and will ensure that the significant environmental features within the agricultural land will be preserved and protected from non-agricultural development.

- **Letter of Support: Wildcat Ridge Preserve (Heller Tract).** In June the Highlands Council provided a letter to the Morris County Open Space Trust Committee in support of The Land Conservancy of New Jersey's application to preserve a 123- acre tract in Rockaway Township, Morris County. The property is located in the Highlands Preservation Area within a 10,593-acre forest block. The acquisition will prevent forest fragmentation and secure an ecologically important parcel within the Highlands Conservation Focal Area.



We need your help to improve open space and recreational opportunities in the New Jersey Highlands!

This survey is being conducted on behalf of the New Jersey Highlands Council by Trust for Public Land to assist with the development of an Open Space and Recreation Plan for the New Jersey Highlands Region.

TAKE THE SURVEY



SCAN ME

The Highlands Council is looking for your input on open space and recreation priorities!

The New Jersey Highlands Council is developing an Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Highlands Region. The Plan will be a tool to assist the Highlands Council in analyzing existing preserved land and highlight land to be preserved, while targeting specific ways or mechanisms to preserve such properties and enhance recreation opportunities for the entire Highlands region.

Please take a few moments to complete the [survey](#).

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Welcome Ian Barstow.** In June, the Highlands Council welcomed Ian Barstow to the team, filling the role of GIS specialist. Ian comes from the Highlands Coalition and brings a wealth of passion for the region and climate knowledge to the Council. He earned his Master's in Geography and Planning from West Chester University and has previously worked as a consultant for NASA via their NASA DEVELOP program and as a Night Sky Ranger at Great Basin via the Geoscientists in the Parks program.
- **Administrative Assistant.** The Highlands Council continues to interview candidates for this open position.

Outreach & Education

- **Warren County Bicentennial Celebration.** On Saturday, June 28, Highlands Council staff met and provided information about our work to many residents of Warren County and beyond at the [Warren County Bicentennial Celebration](#). The Council was invited to participate along with other government and non-government organizations by the Warren County Division of Cultural & Heritage Affairs. Events and activities related to the milestone will continue throughout the year.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 8 inquiries from constituents in June.

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 June Highlands Council staff met with **West Milford, Passaic County** (Site-specific matter; with NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and NJ Department of Agriculture); **Ringwood Borough, Passaic County** (Affordable Housing)

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 June Highlands Council staff met with the City of Newark (watershed management); NJDEP, NJ Department of Law and Public Safety, NJ Department of Treasury (Watershed Moratorium Offset Aid); New Jersey Water Purveyors (watershed protection); Highlands Coalition and Garden State Preservation Trust (Open Space Funding); NJDEP (regular coordination meeting).

Council Committee Meetings

- The Plan Conformance Committee met in June.

Legislative Update

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

Highlands-specific legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5627 / S4350	Reynolds-Jackson, Verlina Carter, Linda S. Turner, Shirley K. Smith, Bob	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. Note: This legislation does <i>not</i> include an allocation of CBT funds for Highlands Council land preservation efforts.	6/2/2025: Transferred to Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee 6/9/2025: Reported from Senate Committee, 2nd Reading
AR180	Katz, Andrea Calabrese, Clinton Singh, Balvir	Urges DEP, Pinelands Commission, and Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council to engage in alternative forest management practices during periods of drought when prescribed burning is unsafe.	6/30/2025: Resolution Passed Assembly (80-0-0) 6/30/2025: Filed with Secretary of State

Highlands-related legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsors	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A5667 / S4451	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.	6/5/2025: Reported from Senate Committee, 2nd Reading 6/30/2025: Passed by the Senate (23-14)
S2788 Aca w/GR (2R) / A4569 Aa (1R)	Cruz-Perez, Nilsa I. Turner, Shirley K. Freiman, Roy Katz, Andrea Simmons, Heather Freiman, Roy Katz, Andrea Simmons, Heather	Appropriates \$128.241 million from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues to State Agriculture Development Committee for farmland preservation purposes.	6/30/2025: Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (80-0-0) 6/30/2025: Approved P.L.2025, c.63.
S4567 / A5860 Aca (1R)	Greenstein, Linda R. Singleton, Troy Morales, Carmen Theresa Singh, Balvir Swain, Lisa Morales, Carmen Theresa Singh, Balvir Swain, Lisa	Appropriates \$107,999,000 from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues and various Green Acres funds to DEP for local government open space acquisition, park development, and planning projects, and for certain administrative expenses.	6/30/2025: Passed Assembly (Passed Both Houses) (79-1-0)

Looking Ahead

- Public Council Meetings.** The July Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 17. The August public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, August 21. 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.

