

# Highlands Council Update

February 2026

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Delaware River, looking toward Milford Borough, Hunterdon County

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | February 1-28, 2026

## From the Executive Director

**Properly Funding Highlands Municipalities.** Jefferson Township in Morris County has been in the news quite a bit lately highlighting an issue that we at the Highlands Council have been talking about for some time now: because of the vital role the New Jersey Highlands plays in providing water for the entire state, things here need to be handled differently.

This is why the Highlands Council pushed to ensure that [Highlands resource mapping was incorporated](#) in the most recent affordable housing legislation. And why when the State Planning Commission issued Warehousing Guidelines in 2022, the Highlands Council augmented that guidance with our own [Warehousing Policy Standards](#). And why we issued region-specific [Climate Adaptation Guidance](#) for Highlands municipalities working toward 2021 updates to the Municipal Land Use Law.

As aptly noted by the advocates trying to remedy Jefferson Township's current funding struggle, the 88 municipalities of the Highlands have an incredible responsibility to protect the watersheds of the Highlands region. While Jefferson's current budget shortfall is tied more directly to school funding than to limitations due to the Highlands Act, protecting one of the primary sources of state drinking water has a financial impact. Jefferson Township in particular feels this, as both Newark and Jersey City own substantial tracts of property protecting their respective water supplies. Highlands communities need some measure of financial support to account for the resource protection actions they take at the local level.

Consider that New York City pays \$165 million annually in local taxes across the Catskill/Delaware watershed in addition to funding the Catskill Development Corporation and the Watershed Agricultural Council's respective activities. Meanwhile, each year, Newark and Jersey City appeal their taxes to receive reduced assessments. This places an increasing burden on the local district.

Watershed Moratorium Aid provisions, which were initially put into place before the Highlands Act existed, provide some relief for municipalities but are inadequate. Funding for this program is currently provided by the Highlands Protection Fund, which is an allocation from the Realty Transfer Fee. Although Jefferson, along with neighboring West Milford and Vernon, currently receive annual allocations of this aid (\$192,794, \$757,687, and \$294,455 respectively), it is not applied region-wide and where available is only incremental at \$47/acre, an amount that has remained stagnant since 1999 despite a directive in the legislation for it to be adjusted annually per the consumer price index.

In addition, Watershed Moratorium Aid funds are currently distributed as far away as Lower Alloways Creek Township in Salem County, while some Highlands municipalities that have significant watershed lands are omitted from funding. As a result of Highlands Council efforts, legislation in 2025 authorized payment to Highlands towns that have been left out of this program, however funding for that purpose was never allocated. An adequate additional allocation of the Realty Transfer Fee is necessary to meet these legislative requirements.

As I have said many times before, there is currently a one-way flow of benefits outbound from the Highlands with a clearly insufficient effort to underwrite the costs and consequences of the responsibilities placed on Highlands municipalities. We appreciate the efforts of Highlands region residents, community leaders, and legislators who have brought attention to this important matter and we look forward to finding a solution. We are all in this together.

**Drought.** In case you're new here, we're still in a drought. See this [recent article from NorthJersey.com](#) for additional insights from our state climatologist. While much of the state benefited from the recent blizzard that brought over two feet of snow to portions of New Jersey, snowfall amounts in the Highlands region were far less. The snow-to-rain equivalent was only around an inch region-wide and there were no other significant precipitation events to supplement what occurred on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month. The weekly update released by the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) now puts portions of the Highlands in Extreme Drought status with the remainder of the region in Severe Drought.

Again, I will point out that the region exports over 860 million gallons of water each day and is the source of all or a portion of the drinking water for around 70% of the state's population. If the Highlands is in a drought, the state is in a drought. The best defense against the consequences of an extended period of below normal precipitation is to avoid those impacts by ensuring that the Highlands region is properly protected. For a more detailed look at what it will take to protect the region, I encourage you to read the [State of the Highlands report](#) released in February. Investing in the work of the Highlands Council to safeguard the resources that protect and enhance our water supply is the logical answer. Limiting development, increasing forest coverage and forest soil health, protecting wetlands and streams, and restoring degraded ecosystems are necessary actions that must be taken. Growth and economic development in the remainder of the state cannot take place if the water supply in the Highlands is not defended. This is the long view that will ensure that New Jersey will always remain a healthy and prosperous place to live. Protecting the future is what the Highlands Council's mission is all about.

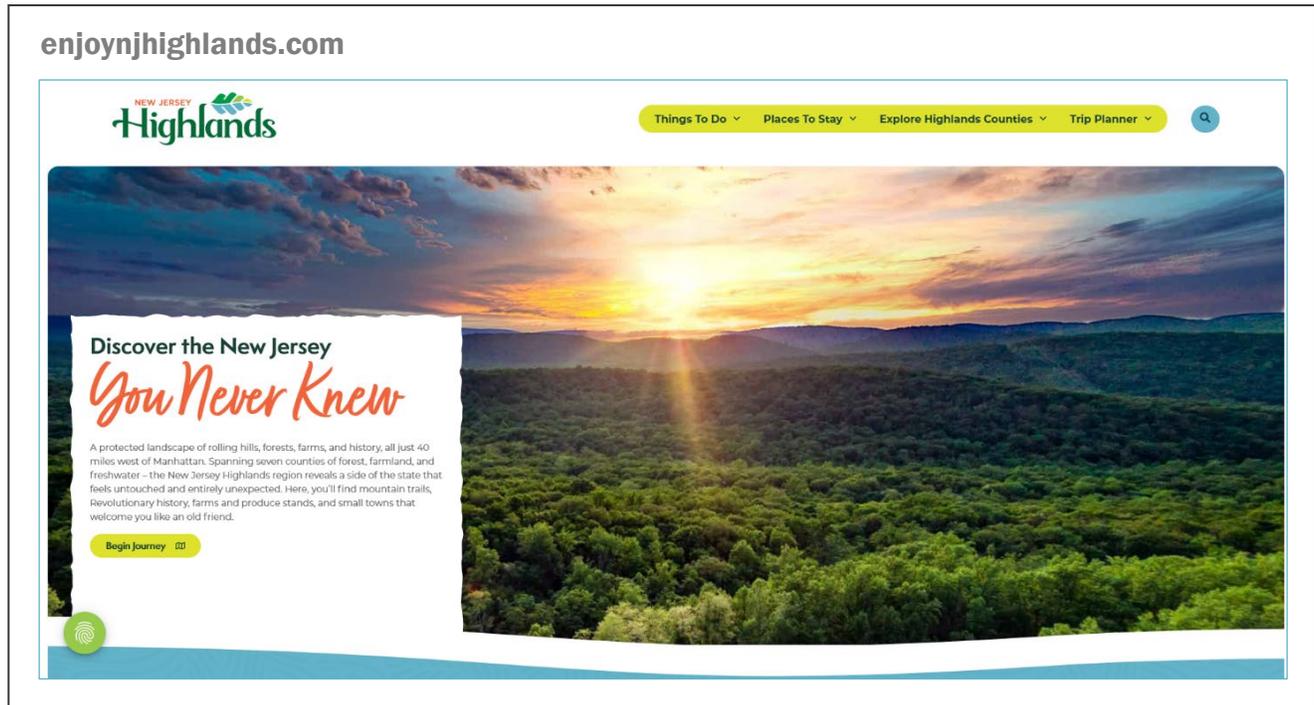
**You Never Knew Jersey.** February saw the roll out of the Highlands region tourism website, [enjoynjhighlands.com](#), designed to highlight sustainable economic opportunities in the Highlands. While the region's most important resource is the drinking water that so many New Jersey residents rely upon, there is so much more that the Highlands has to offer. The forests, farms, and waterways that safeguard our water supply are also places that offer recreation and entertainment for around 18 million visitors each year. Protecting these features also means protecting the economic opportunities they represent. Hiking, fishing, boating, kayaking, visiting farms, strolling the streets of charming small towns and more are just some of the activities that draw people to our region.

It isn't easy to balance resource protection with economic development. Here in the Highlands the resources are the driver of the economy. People protect what they love. While people clearly come to the region in large numbers, the realization that when they pick up locally grown produce at their favorite farm, cast a line in a beautiful trout stream, or take in the vista from atop a Highlands peak, that they are indeed in the Highlands region is not always evident. Understanding that protecting the Highlands means protecting the places held dear goes a long way towards building support for our mission. So, if you're

looking for something to do this weekend (or any weekend for that matter) check out [enjoynjhighlands.com](http://enjoynjhighlands.com) and see why the Highlands is a special place.

*Ben*

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.

- **Chester Borough, Morris County.** Stormwater Management/MS4 Permit Compliance

### Deliverables Received

The following municipalities have submitted project deliverables that are currently being reviewed by Highlands Council staff for consistency with the RMP.

- **Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** Watershed Inventory Report (Phase 1 of the Watershed Improvement Plan)
- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Watershed Inventory Report (Phase 1 of the Watershed Improvement Plan)
- **Chester Borough, Morris County.** Stormwater Management/MS4 Permit Compliance work.

- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Watershed Inventory Report (Phase 1 of the Watershed Improvement Plan)
- **Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County.** Watershed Inventory Report (Phase 1 of the Watershed Improvement Plan)
- **Hackettstown, Warren County.** MS4 Infrastructure Map

### Scopes/Funding Requests

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

- **Pohatcong Township, Warren County.** Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.

### Municipal Requests to Align with the RMP

- **Town of Boonton, Morris County** submitted a petition for plan conformance including a request for a Highlands Center Designation for the entirety of the town. The Town of Boonton is located entirely within the planning area of the Highlands region.

### Other Notable Implementation Activities

- **Highlands Tourism Website Now Live!** Following recommendations from the 2022 Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan (ESP), the Highlands Council launched a branding and marketing effort in 2024 that resulted in the development of a Highlands region tourism brand with the tagline “*You Never Knew Jersey.*” The associated website, [enjoynjhighlands.com](http://enjoynjhighlands.com), went live in late February. The Highlands Economic Sustainability County Coalition will help advance the brand as they continue implementation of the ESP.
- **Boonton Reservoir Trail Project Letter of Support.** The Highlands Council provided a letter supporting Morris County Park Commission’s 2026 Green Acres Park Development Grant application. The Highlands Council previously provided funding to the Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills for early planning and research related to the trail and is enthusiastic about seeing it come to fruition.
- **Facilities Improvements at Horseshoe Lake Letter of Support.** The Highlands Council provided a letter supporting Roxbury Township’s 2026 Green Acres Park Development Grant application to make improvements at Horseshoe Lake Park.

### 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). Well 16 PFAS Treatment Facility**

*Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County*

The town proposes to construct a water treatment facility for the presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at an existing well, and a water main that will transport water from another existing well (in Clinton Township) so that water may also be treated.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP). Musconetcong River Road Water Main Replacement Project**

*Hampton Borough, Hunterdon County*

The borough is proposing the installation of an additional water main with associated valves and equipment, as well as a new two-inch copper line for service connections. The proposed changes will improve accessibility for maintenance, repairs, and future system modifications, while also enhancing the borough’s ability to monitor and evaluate water consumption, track usage patterns, identify potential leaks, and optimize overall resource management.

*Highlands Council staff review in progress.*

## Outreach, Education & Events

- **Municipal Exemption Determination Training.** As the result of an agreement between the Highlands Council and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), municipal officials can be trained and certified to issue some of the most common Highlands Act exemptions at the local level. The Highlands Council sent invitations in February to eligible municipalities for a training and certification program to be offered in March.
- **New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Northern New Jersey & Highlands Regional Mayors Luncheon.** Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko and Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler attended the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Northern New Jersey & Highlands Regional Mayors Luncheon on Wednesday, February 25. The event gathered municipal officials for a conversation about strengthening open space efforts, expanding recreational access, and supporting sustainable economic opportunity across our region.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 17 inquiries from constituents in February.

## Legislative Update

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

### Highlands Specific Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
A4456 / S3743	Dunn, Aura K. Bucco, Anthony M.	Makes supplemental appropriation of \$4.8 million to provide additional operational aid to Jefferson Township Public Schools.	2/24/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Education Committee

### Highlands Related Legislation

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S3258	Corrado, Kristin M.	Increases cap on grants for farmland stewardship activities to \$100,000 per application.	2/2/2026 Introduced in the Senate, Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Committee

Bill Number	Primary Sponsor(s)	Bill Summary	Bill Status
S743 Sca (1R)	Burzichelli, John J.	Appropriates \$111.6 million in dedicated natural resource damages revenues to DEP for habitat restoration, land acquisition, and restoration oversight projects.	2/12/2026 Reported from Senate Committee with Amendments, 2nd Reading  2/24/2026 Passed by the Senate (38-0)  2/24/2026 Received in the Assembly, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee
A4380	Sauickie, Alex	Establishes Watershed Council in DEP.	2/19/2026 Introduced, Referred to Assembly Environment and Solid Waste Committee

### Council & Committee Meetings

- **Committee Meetings.** The Budget and Finance Committee and the Plan Conformance Committee met in February.
- **Public Council Meetings.** The March Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 19, 2026. The April public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 16. 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.



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