

Highlands Council Monthly Report

April 2023

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Liverleaf (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *obtusa*)
Hepatica is a harbinger of spring and a beautiful Highlands native wildflower.

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Summary of Activities | April 1-30, 2023

Executive Director Priorities Spotlight

- **Warehousing Policy in the Highlands.** At its April meeting the Highlands Council released an important policy document related to warehousing in the Highlands region. “[Policy Standards for Warehousing in the New Jersey Highlands Region](#)” provides guidance for municipal and county officials to help ensure warehousing and similar development occurs in a manner consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP). Building upon state-wide guidance released in September by the Office of Planning Advocacy, the Highlands policies address the protection of the region’s resources, the provisions of the Highlands Act and the goals and policies of the RMP. Release of this policy was especially relevant given a petition that was before the Council at the April meeting to expand a Highlands Center designation in Alpha Borough. The Borough has been considering an application for development of a warehousing facility and adherence to the Policy Standards was incorporated into the petition approval. Given the increasing pressure on Highlands municipalities for this type of development, we will be offering not only grant funding but also technical assistance to municipalities to help implement the provisions of these Policy Standards to help ensure protection of the resources and communities of the Highlands region.
- **Affordable Housing.** In February the Highlands Council opened a request for qualifications (RFQ) seeking consulting partners with expertise in Affordable Housing to help ensure that fourth round affordable housing obligations within the region align with the provisions of the Highlands RMP. The obligations resulting from the third-round settlements for affordable units alone more than double what the Highlands 2008 build-out analyses determined the region’s resources could handle. This is an untenable position that must be rectified. Meeting affordable housing needs and protecting natural resources are not mutually exclusive goals, but they do require careful planning and the Highlands RMP must lead these efforts. The RFQ received five responses and staff expects the Affordable Housing Committee to provide a recommendation to the full Council at the May meeting.
- **Additional Staffing.** The Highlands Council submitted a request for additional funding in the FY2024 budget to accommodate the addition of four new staff positions. The intention is to hire an agricultural specialist, a stormwater engineer, a climate specialist, and a habitat restoration/management specialist. Agriculture represents the largest land use in the Highlands by acreage and is a key element of the region’s economic health. The new stormwater requirements for the entire state have a particularly significant impact in the Highlands: 1/3 of the municipalities in the state going from Tier B to Tier A designation are in the region. Climate change will have unique impacts on the Highlands and its resources, potentially effecting the region’s capacity to reliably provide drinking water to 70% of the state’s residents. Finally, the ability to implement projects that will maintain or restore the health of natural features of the Highlands is essential to carrying out the long-term goals of the Highlands Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan. Having on-staff expertise to guide and support these critical components of our work is essential.

- **Land Preservation Funding.** We continue to pursue a repeating, reliable, and predictable source of funding for the Highlands land preservation initiatives. The Highlands Council has never had funding of this nature and the only significant past source of land preservation funding has been the mitigation payments made as a result of the construction of the Roseland-Susquehanna Transmission Line in 2015. Those funds have been exhausted, but they resulted in the preservation of over 2,000 acres of important resource-rich land in the region. Funds can be provided through either a direct allocation from the Corporation Business Tax or a voluntary inter-agency agreement with Green Acres and the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC). Currently, 17% of the land in the Highlands region (Approx. 146,000 acres or 228 square miles) remains undeveloped but developable. That land is represented by about 19,000 individual parcels, 96% of which are less than 50 acres in size. Having a source of funding will allow the Highlands Council to partner in traditional land preservation transactions but also reach properties that do not fall squarely within the priorities or requirements of Green Acres or the SADC. Additionally, we will be able to match and effectively double any funds provided through the Federal Highlands Conservation Act. The Highlands Council has demonstrated it can facilitate land conservation transactions in an effective and efficient manner. Every dollar (including the matching funds) will be directly applied to preservation of land in the region. Later this month, the Highlands Council will be participating in a meeting with representatives of the 4-state Federal Highlands region and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (with the Highlands Council serving as New Jersey’s representative) to outline priorities for the Highlands Conservation Act funds. The meeting is scheduled to be held in the New Jersey Highlands.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Progress on Highlands Council-funded projects.

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County**
 - The Highlands Council [approved a petition](#) from Alpha requesting an expansion to its designated Highlands Center. The Borough requested the expansion to advance municipal goals including establishing a more cohesive downtown, improving walkability and bike-ability, and building-out its industrial district.
 - Submitted a scope of work for an Open Space and Recreation Plan, which was reviewed and approved by staff.
- **Harding Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted interim components of a Water Use and Conservation Management Plan.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted a proposal to complete a Trout Habitat Quality and Post-Stocking Analysis of Trout Population Dynamics and Conservation at Lake Hopatcong in 2023.
- **Morris County**
 - Submitted scopes of work related to a stormwater management project focusing on an area of Roxbury Township, and analysis and design work related to an oxygenation system for Lake Hopatcong. The scopes were reviewed and approved by staff.

- **Mount Olive, Morris County**
 - Provided project materials related to the completion of a Lake Management Plan (Budd Lake Beach Improvement Plan) that were reviewed and approved by staff.
- **Netcong Borough, Morris County**
 - Passed a resolution expressing the Borough’s intent to revise its master plan and development regulations to align with the Highlands RMP and the Highlands Center designation procedures.
- **Vernon Township, Sussex County**
 - Completed a Farmland Preservation Plan. The final plan was reviewed by staff and found consistent with the approved scope of work for the project.
 - Submitted a draft Water Use and Conservation Management Plan. Staff reviewed the plan and provided comments back to the Township.
- **West Milford, Passaic County**
 - Completed a Sustainable Economic Development Plan. The final deliverables were reviewed by staff and found consistent with the approved scope of work for the project.

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 Regional Master Plan (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 Lake Glenwood Water Main Replacement - Township of Vernon, Sussex County.**
Applicant is seeking to replace a water main located off Glen Drive in Vernon. (Read more about [Exemption 11.](#))
Highlands Council staff review is pending.
- **Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD), Exemption #11 (w/NJDEP): Allamuchy Water Storage Tank replacement, Allamuchy Township, Warren County.** Applicant is seeking to replace an existing ground water storage tank. (Read more about [Exemption 11.](#))
Highlands Council staff review is pending.
- **Planning Area Consistency Review: Ramsey Pole, Mahwah, Bergen County.** The Ramsey Board of Public Works is seeking to install wireless communications equipment on a previously disturbed site in Mahwah Township.
Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent with the RMP.
- **Planning Area Consistency Review – Conditions Compliance: Bridge Point 78 Phase III.** Staff received materials from the project applicant to demonstrate compliance with the conditions of a planning area consistency review completed in November 2022. Staff reviewed the materials and found that four of the seven conditions were met, one remained pending, and two were unmet. Additional guidance was provided to the project applicant to aid in meeting the conditions.

GIS Updates

- **Karst Field Analysis.** GIS Specialists Owen Selles and Weston Strubert assisted Suburban Engineering with field checking several potential karst sites across the region. This was part of an ongoing project to create an inventory of karst areas and a method of ranking karst susceptibility.

Science Initiatives

- **Harmful Algal Blooms.** Members of the science staff participated in the Montclair State University (MSU) Traveling HAB Lab Program Launch and Welcome Event, an Introduction to Phytoplankton & Cyanobacteria training session, and a Microscopy, Phytoplankton Processing & Safety Protocol training session. Highlands Staff members are participating in this project as one of the Citizen Science teams. Training sessions will continue in May with field sampling anticipated to begin in July, following NJDEP approval of the Quality Assurance Project Plan.

Contract Projects

- **Affordable Housing RFQ.** Five proposals were received. Interviews were conducted with 3 consulting teams. A recommendation is expected to be brought to Council at the May meeting.
- **Watershed Restoration and Protection Plans RFP.** Four proposals were received and are currently being reviewed by staff. Interviews will be scheduled.

Open Space and Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Program Updates

- **HDC Application.** One new HDC allocation application was received in April for a 149-acre residential property in Independence Township, Warren County. A review of the application is in progress.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Part-Time Communications Specialist.** The Highlands Council received 14 applications for the Part-Time Communications Specialist position. Three candidates were interviewed and Roberta Burkhardt will be joining the team in late May.
- **Green Infrastructure (GI) Champions Training.** Several staff members are attending free GI Champions training offered by the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Water Resources Program. A minimum of five classes is required for certification. GI Champions are key players in implementing green infrastructure as an approach to stormwater management. (More information on the program: [Water Resources Program at Rutgers NJAES.](#))

Outreach, Education, & Meetings

- **“Local Impact” Radio Appearance.** Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli appeared on the “Local Impact” radio program on WRNJ on Wednesday, April 5. Spinelli was part of a panel discussion regarding warehousing in Warren County. Other panelists included James Kern III, Warren County Commissioner; Matthew Moench, Warren County Planning Board

Attorney; and Julia Somers, Highlands Coalition Executive Director. A [recording](#) of the 1-hour program is available online.

- **Using Native Plants in the Home Landscape.** Senior Natural Resources Management Specialist Carolyn Klaube led a public workshop at the NJDEP Pequest Trout Hatchery and Natural Resource Education Center in Oxford Township, Warren County. Following the morning presentation, attendees were invited to help with some native plantings in a small garden area outside the hatchery.



Native Plants in the Home Landscape post-workshop planting at Pequest NJDEP Pequest Trout Hatchery in Oxford.

- **Take Your Child to Work Day.** Highlands Council staff welcomed seven young Highlands Heroes (HH) to the office in Chester on Thursday, April 27 for Take Your Child to Work Day. These eager and energetic young people learned about the water cycle, watersheds, pollution caused by stormwater runoff, and basic mapping skills. They were also provided with a list of 10 things they can do to protect their watersheds. The HH crew also enjoyed participating in the [Tick Safety Dance](#) (created by Highlands staff member Weston Strubert) before a short hike around the property to identify native plants on the Highlands office grounds and learn more about the important role they can play in keeping the Highlands Region healthy. The outdoor portion of the program concluded with monitoring an adjacent stream for nitrate, chloride, and macroinvertebrates where they discovered low levels of pollutants as well as stonefly, caddisfly and dragonfly nymphs indicating a healthy waterbody.



Learning all about water quality in the Highlands during Take Your Child to Work Day at the Highlands Council office in Chester.

- **Municipal & County Meetings.** The Highlands Council met with 5 municipalities to discuss RMP implementation or project review matters in April: Town of Belvidere, Warren County;

Town of Clinton, Hunterdon County; Netcong Borough, Morris County; Borough of Peapack & Gladstone, Somerset County; Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County.

- **Inter-Agency Coordination.** In April, the Highlands Council met with the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) (multiple projects); NJDEP (CBT Funding)
- **The Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan County Coalition** met in April.
- **Nonprofit Community meetings** in April included: The Center for Large Landscape Conservation/The Nature Conservancy (Review of Habitat Connectivity Policies in NJ); New Jersey Audubon; NJ Future/Jersey Water Works (Green Infrastructure); New Jersey Conference of Mayors; North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority.
- **Events/Sessions Attended.** Staff members attended the following events in April: Raritan Headwaters Association; NJ American Water Resource Association-Burnt Mill Dam Removal Field Trip; Musconetcong Watershed Association Island Park Opening; NJ Invasive Species Strike Team 16th Annual Professional Conference
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 15 inquiries from constituents in April.

Council and Committee Meetings

- **The Highlands Council** held its monthly public meeting on Thursday, April 20, 2023. Two resolutions were passed including the [approval of a petition](#) from Alpha Borough to expand its Highlands Center designation and the [approval of grant funding](#) to support projects in Roxbury Township and Montville Township in Morris County, and a project in Hunterdon County. Complete information including a recording of the meeting is available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.
- **Committee Meetings.** The following Council committees met in April: Budget & Finance Committee, Plan Conformance Committee.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The May Highlands Council meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 18. The June Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 22. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.
- **Interactive ERI Training.** The Highlands Council is working in collaboration with Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) to deliver an online training session for RHA members on the Highlands Interactive ERI. The training is scheduled for Tuesday, May 23 and [registration is now open](#).



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