

Highlands Council Monthly Report

January 2024

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Eastern Red Cedar/Juniper

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | January 1-31, 2024

Executive Director Priority Spotlight

Amending the Regional Master Plan (RMP). At the end of January, the Highlands Council announced the opening of a public comment period and a schedule of public hearings regarding two proposed amendments to the RMP: adoption of the Policy Standards for Warehousing in the NJ Highlands Region and an update to the Land Use Capability Zone Map and Technical Report. Both proposals and a review of the process for updating the RMP were discussed in [last month's report](#) and at the [Highlands Council January public meeting](#). Members of the public with an interest in these amendments are encouraged to submit written or in-person comments at one of the hearings. The Warehouse Siting Guidelines are intended to ensure that large warehouse developments in the region are appropriately located and appropriately designed. The goal is to minimize both impacts to important environmental resources and the loss of important agricultural lands by preventing poorly planned improperly located projects from being built while enabling sensible projects on sites that have been planned for development and that can be adequately served by infrastructure to proceed.

The second proposed amendment is the update to the Land Use Capability Zone Map. This map and the data that underlies the Capability Zone designations support nearly all of the Highlands Council's activities in managing the region. The capability zone designations are based upon an objective assessment of environmental factors set forth in the Regional Master Plan. Project reviews, local zoning recommendations, affordable housing guidance, open space priorities and more are all predicated upon complex assessments that are reflected by the mapping designations. It is essential that this mapping be periodically updated to accurately reflect the latest data available, verify with actual on-the-ground conditions and incorporate new information like the latest land use/land cover data and updated flood hazard designations. See page 6 or visit the [Highlands Council website](#) for details.

Region-wide RMP Implementation Projects. Two significant projects that will reap benefits for the entire Highlands region will be moving forward this year. Request for Proposals (RFP) for both projects were issued late last year and attracted significant interest. The first is an *Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Highlands Region*. One of the greatest misconceptions that persists related to the New Jersey Highlands is that the "Preservation Area" is preserved. It is not. While the Highlands Rules provide some level of regulatory protection in the Preservation Area, a variety of exemptions, waivers, and other factors leave some areas vulnerable to inappropriate development. In addition, much of the "Planning Area" of the New Jersey Highlands is comprised of precious farmland and other important resources that, if developed, could compromise the future of New Jersey's water. Currently there are approximately 19,000 individual lots in the region that are undeveloped but developable. This represents about 17% of the region's land mass or roughly 230 square miles of the Highlands. The vast majority of these properties do not fit squarely within any existing open space preservation program other than the Highlands Program, which is presently unfunded.

An Open Space and Recreation Plan for the entire Highlands Region will help us identify and prioritize lands that should be permanently protected and propose strategies for maximizing the

limited resources available to complete these transactions. It will also assist our preservation partners at Green Acres, the SADC, NGO's and the various county and municipal governments actively involved in land preservation to locate properties, plan their acquisition strategies, and create a coordinated and efficient approach to securing the future of the region while meeting the needs for active and passive recreation, agricultural retention and resource protection. It should also make a strong case for funding both the Highlands Open Space Program and stewardship efforts for these important lands. Providing this source of money would enable the Highlands to access matching Federal funds for acquisition and stewardship. Staff have secured a funding commitment from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for over half of the cost to complete this project and the Council will consider a resolution at the February meeting to award the contract to one of the seven highly qualified respondents to draft and complete the plan.

The second project is to develop a comprehensive *Branding and Marketing Plan for the Highlands Region*. The deadline for proposals was in mid-January and staff are currently reviewing the eight responses received. This project grew from the Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan completed in 2022. The goal of the Economic Sustainability Plan was to provide a framework for securing the economic future of the Highlands Region, and to do so by means that are compatible with and complementary to the work of the Highlands Council and its partners in protecting and enhancing the natural resources of the Region. The Plan identified the need to raise the profile of the Highlands Region and all it has to offer as a desirable place to live, work, and play as well as the need to foster and support important Highlands economic drivers like the agricultural industry and outdoor recreation. This project is a fundamental first step.

Commitment to Protecting the Highlands. The Governor has nominated 7 people to fill the current vacancies on the Highlands Council. These nominations will be considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee in the coming weeks for an eventual confirmation vote by the full Senate. If approved, the Highlands Council will have its full complement of members for the first time since 2012. Seating the new members will mean that Warren and Hunterdon Counties will have their statutorily mandated members in place after many years without representation. Also, Morris County will have its second required member on the Council and Somerset County will have the vacancy created by the retirement of long-time member Bob Holtaway filled. Some of these appointments may be confirmed before the Council's February public meeting. The Council and staff look forward to working with the new members and welcome them to join in our important work.

While the Council appreciates this attention from the administration, there is still much to do to support the New Jersey Highlands region. Recently an [article](#) was posted to the New Jersey Spotlight News website discussing the need for the Murphy administration to increase funding to the NJ Pinelands Commission. It's notable that the Pinelands Commission staffing and budget are effectively double that of the Highlands Council, despite the fact that the two agencies have similar missions and responsibility for managing areas of nearly equal size. The Highlands Council has been operating with the same staffing and budget levels for over a decade. In order to effectively pursue its mission, the Highlands Council needs to add an agricultural specialist, a stormwater engineer, a climate scientist and a habitat restoration specialist. We are also currently seeking a senior planner to replace long-time staff member Judy Thornton who retired at the end of January. Our 2024-25 budget request reflects the

need to provide the Council with the resources necessary to fulfill the mandates of the Highlands Act and to serve the needs of Highlands residents, the Highlands municipalities and the people of the entire State of New Jersey.

Sparta Mountain. The need to manage the region’s forests in a manner that assures protection of water quality, quantity and timing as well as the imperative to take steps that will result in both improved health and greater coverage of those forests long into the future has been discussed in this report on several occasions. All land managers in the region should be implementing practices that lead to those goals. This includes state-owned and -managed lands. [NJDEP recently announced plans and opened a public comment period](#) for implementation of the next phase of its habitat creation project at the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The Highlands Council is preparing and will be submitting comments on this project that highlight the need to avoid impacts on the many sensitive resources that are present at this location and necessity of managing lands in the Highlands in a manner that is consistent with the Highlands Act, the Highlands RMP and the accompanying regulations designed to protect important environmental features.

While there are many active forest management activities that are appropriate in the Highlands region, they should all be conducted with an eye towards keeping healthy existing forests healthy, restoring degraded forests, protecting the health of forest soils, and increasing overall forest cover while addressing the threats of climate change, invasive species and overpopulation of deer. The Highlands Act was put in place to protect the vital resources of the region and to safeguard the drinking water supply for more than 7 million residents of New Jersey. Healthy forests and forest soils are the biggest factors in securing water source protection. It is essential that Highlands forests be in a better condition 20, 50 or 100 years from now than they are in today. It is the job of the Highlands Council to make sure these priorities are always considered whenever land-use activities may impact them. Our comments will reflect these core concerns of our mission.

Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

- **Boonton Township, Morris County.** Completed its Stormwater Management Plan. Highlands Council staff reviewed all deliverables and found them to be in alignment with the approved Scope of Work (SOW) and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Clinton Township, Hunterdon County.** Submitted deliverables for several previously completed projects, including: a Housing Element and Fair Share Plan; a Master Plan Reexamination Report; Highlands Land Use Ordinances; Zoning Map Adjustments; a Wastewater Management Plan; a Stormwater Management Plan; and a Highlands Center Designation Report. Highlands Council staff have reviewed the materials and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOWs and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Hope Township, Warren County.** Completed a Municipal Zoning Analysis. Highlands Council staff reviewed all deliverables and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement. The Township also submitted a SOW to support MS4 permit compliance activities, which is being reviewed by staff.

- **Vernon Township, Sussex County.** Completed a Town Center Trail Feasibility Study. Highlands Council staff reviewed all deliverables and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Mount Olive, Morris County.** Completed Phase 1 of a beachfront restoration project. Staff reviewed all deliverables and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.
- **Wharton Borough, Morris County.** Completed a Municipal Drainage Study. Highlands Council staff reviewed all deliverables and found them to be in alignment with the approved SOW and eligible for reimbursement.

Branding and Marketing Plan for the New Jersey Highlands Region

- The deadline for proposals to develop a comprehensive Branding and Marketing Plan for the Highlands Region was January 16. Eight proposals were received. Highlands Council staff are currently reviewing and expect to conduct interviews with candidates in February.

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 Preservation Area Approval (HPAA) with Public Health and Safety waiver (w/NJDEP). *Mount Olive Solid Waste Transfer Station Water Source, Morris County.*** The Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority (MCMUA) has applied to the NJDEP for an HPAA with waiver to connect a solid waste transfer station to a new source of water for fire suppression. The existing suppression system is aging and has been deemed unreliable. No increase in water usage is requested; only a line extension to a new water source.
Highlands Council staff finding: Project is consistent with the Highlands Act, the Regional Master Plan, and the Highlands Council Project Review Procedures and Standards.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Updates

- **Data Layer Updates.** The GIS team recently completed a significant update of the data layers that form the foundation of the Highlands Council’s Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) map. The NJDEP’s most recent Land Use Land Cover (LULC) dataset, finalized in December 2023, along with the latest versions of other supporting datasets, are now reflected in the Highlands Council data, available on the Highlands Council’s Open Data site. In addition, these newest datasets informed the recent updates to the LUCZ that are part of the proposed amendment to the RMP, discussed on page 6.

Land Preservation Program Updates

Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Highlands Region

- Review of proposals to develop an Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Highlands Region and interviews with selected candidates are complete. A vendor has been selected by staff and a

recommendation to award a contract will be presented to the full Highlands Council at the February public meeting.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **JOB POSTING: Principal Planner.** The Highlands Council is currently seeking an experienced professional planner to assist and provide guidance in complex regulatory, legal, and planning matters, formal and informal, including all facets of municipal, county, and regional land use planning, state-wide regulatory issues, and policy matters considered by the Highlands Council. Complete details are available in the [posting](#). PLEASE NOTE: The deadline included in the original posting (February 10, 2024) is being extended. Please check back at the Highlands Council website [staff page](#) for an updated posting in the coming days.

Outreach & Education

- **Brownfield Development Area (BDA) Program.** The Highlands Council collaborated with the New Jersey Office of Brownfield and Community Revitalization (OBRC) on outreach to Highlands municipalities that may be eligible to participate in OBRC's [BDA program](#). The program provides significant technical and financial support to municipalities affected by multiple brownfield sites. The current program application deadline is April 30, 2024.
- **Social Media.** In January, the Highlands Council Facebook community reached 100 followers. Since launching the Facebook and Instagram pages in August, the Highlands Council has shared more than 150 posts, reaching nearly 2,000 users. Interested members of the public are encouraged to start following the New Jersey Highlands Council on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) (@njhighlandscouncil).
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 28 inquiries from constituents in January.

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 January, Highlands Council staff met with the following municipalities to discuss matters of RMP implementation: Mount Olive Township and Chester Borough, both in Morris County; and Vernon Township, Sussex County.

Agency & Organization Collaboration

Highlands Council staff often meet with sister state agencies to ensure effective coordination; professional and nongovernmental organizations to learn and collaborate; and other entities that have a stake in protecting the New Jersey Highlands.

- In January, Highlands Council staff met with: the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (warehousing/impervious surface); the New Jersey Office of Brownfield and Community Revitalization (coordination on Brownfield Development Area program); the New Jersey Office of Planning Advocacy (Highlands region and the State Development and Redevelopment Plan); and the USFWS (grants and federal Highlands region boundary).

Council Committee Meetings

- The following Highlands Council committees met in January: Budget and Finance, Agricultural Advisory, RMP (Public), and Audit Review. Committee meeting minutes (with the exception of the Audit Review committee) are posted on the [Highlands Council calendar web page](#), with public meeting materials typically at the next full Council meeting following the committee meeting.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The February Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 15, 2024. The March public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 21, 2024. 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.

Proposed RMP Amendments: Public Comment and Public Hearing Information

Amendments Being Proposed

- Policy Standards for Warehousing in the New Jersey Highlands Region.
- Highlands Land Use Capability Zone (LUCZ) Map and Technical Report Update.

Details about these amendments and all associated documents can be found on the [Highlands Council website](#)

Submitting Public Comments

Written comments are being accepted through Monday, April 1, 2024, and can be submitted via email to comments@highlands.nj.gov or hard copy to the Highlands Council office, 100 North Road, Chester, NJ 07930.

Public Hearings

February 12, 2024 - 10:30am

Snow date: February 13, 2024 – same time

NJDEP Offices

1st Floor Public Hearing Room

401 E. State Street

Trenton, NJ 08625

February 12, 2024 - 4:00pm

Virtual via Zoom

[Join Meeting](#) [Not available until Feb 12]

Phone only: (929) 436-2866

[Additional access information](#) (pdf)

February 20, 2024 – 5:00pm

West Milford Public Library

1470 Union Valley Rd

West Milford, NJ 07480

February 21, 2024 – 10:00am

Snow date: February 22, 2024 – same time

New Jersey Highlands Council

100 North Road (Route 513)

Chester, NJ 07930

February 21, 2024 – 5:00pm

Town of Clinton Municipal Building

43 Leigh Street

Clinton, NJ 08809

February 22, 2024 – 5:00pm

Warren County Northeast Branch Library

40 US Hwy 46 West

Independence Township, NJ 07840

