



State of New Jersey

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Highlands Council Announces New HDC Purchase Program and Open Space Matching Grant Program *Council to leverage \$9 million in mitigation funds*

CHESTER, N.J. — At its most recent meeting the Highlands Council provided details regarding a proposed new Land Owner Equity and Land Preservation Program, which includes two components: a Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Purchase Program; and an Open Space Matching Grant program.

The HDC Purchase Program would replace the ‘Initial Purchase Program,’ (IPP), which was closed in November 2014. The IPP had served as the primary mechanism to address some of the equity concerns of property owners in the Preservation Area, allowing willing property owners to deed restrict their land from future development in exchange for funding from the HDC Bank. Initial funding to the IPP was used to protect nearly 600 acres in the Highlands, providing nearly \$9 million to property owners.

“With no further funding available in the IPP, the Council has developed a proposal for a new program designed to stretch funds currently available to it for the purpose of addressing landowner equity,” explains Jim Rilee, Highlands Council Chairman. “Through this program we are also hoping to encourage municipalities and counties to become reengaged in open space acquisition within the Preservation Area.”

In the new program, primary consideration would be given to lands with high conservation or agricultural value. Consideration would also be given to criteria identified in mitigation agreements that govern the use of funding that has resulted from such agreements.

In a similar vein, an Open Space Matching Grant Program would be created to provide a source of open space funding for acquisition of priority lands identified in the Highlands Region. Eligible

projects would include the purchase of private property for passive recreation or conservation purposes in partnership with the State of New Jersey, Highlands Region county or municipal governments, and charitable conservancies. Applications would be considered for acquisition of property in fee simple or through conservation easements.

Initial funding of \$9 million for both programs will come from funds received by the Council in connection with mitigation requirements of utility projects in the region. The mitigation requirements specify that priority be given to properties in close proximity to the project or that provide protection to scenic resources.

“We are very pleased to be introducing these two programs that speak directly to key requirements of the Act related to equity and preservation,” says Highlands Council Executive Director Margaret Nordstrom. “We look forward to working closely with individual property owners, county and local governments and private conservancies to accomplish these goals.”

The resolution adopted by Council authorizes the Executive Director to initiate a rulemaking process for the program as outlined in the state’s Administrative Procedure Act. Although the first round of consideration for funding in the new programs will not be finalized until the formal adoption of the program, which is anticipated to take place later this year, the first step for property owners interested in the HDC Purchase Program is to request an allocation of HDCs, which can be done immediately. The Allocation Application request form is available on the Highlands Council website (www.nj.gov/njhighlands/hdcbank/purchase/).

Also at the January meeting, Council approved a resolution authorizing the use of the Checklist Approach for Franklin Township, Warren County. The Checklist Approach is designed to simplify the Plan Conformance process for municipalities with very limited development potential, by directing certain development applications to the Highlands Council for review. The Checklist approach ensures protection of Highlands resources, while efficiently and appropriately implementing the Highlands RMP at the local level.

Council also adopted a resolution amending the Plan Conformance Petition for Mahwah Township in Bergen County, designating two Highlands Centers within the Township. Highlands Centers are specific areas in a municipality where development and redevelopment are planned and encouraged. Once a Highlands Center is designated, the municipality can then work with the Council to develop tailored plans that support sustainable economic growth while protecting critical natural and cultural resources.

Actions taken by the Council at this meeting will take effect following the Governor’s review and consideration of the meeting minutes, up to 10 business days from receipt of the minutes. Materials related to this meeting including resolutions, presentations, audio and minutes will be posted at: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calend/ (click on January 22 meeting).

The Highlands Council is a regional planning entity, established in 2004 with the passing of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands.

Additional Information: [DRAFT: Land Owner Equity and Land Preservation Program](#) (pdf)