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Highlands Council Releases Economic Sustainability Plan for the Region

CHESTER, N.J. — The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council today released an Economic Sustainability Plan for the region that provides a roadmap for ensuring that the economic future of the Highlands is supported and bolstered by its unique resources. The plan is intended to be used as a tool by economic development and conservation partners throughout the region to help inform their decision-making for creating strong, sustainable communities.

“Both the Highlands Act and the Regional Master Plan emphasize the importance of a vibrant and thriving economy to the overall health of the region,” notes Lisa J. Plevin, Highlands Council Executive Director. “We worked with a diverse group of stakeholders, who understand that environmental protection and sustainable economic development can and should work together. This plan provides tools and strategies that will help the entire region thrive.”

Developed with guidance and input from economic development, business, conservation and planning experts from across the Highlands Region and beyond, the plan provides municipalities and counties with critical insights about which industries demonstrate the greatest economic potential, where industry growth is best suited, and outlines an implementation plan for the partners that will help secure a sustainable economic future for the Highlands.

The Plan is organized around five goals reflecting the core themes identified during the research and engagement phases of the project. Each goal is supported by strategies, and specific recommended actions for implementation. The Plan also includes an Action Plan Matrix, which prioritizes suggested strategies and identifies a timeline and key partners for implementation of the plan. A full economic profile and analysis of growth potential for the region support a robust implementation plan.

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“The New Jersey Highlands Region is home to a tremendous collection of natural and cultural resources, and the Highlands Act was put in place to ensure their protection,” explains Carl Richko, Chairman of the Highlands Council. “However, it is very possible to expand economic activity within an environmentally sensitive landscape and that’s what this plan can help achieve.”

Initially prompted by a recommendation included in the 2018 RMP Monitoring Program Recommendation Report, development of the Economic Sustainability Plan began in 2019 with the establishment of a steering committee comprised of economic development representatives from all seven Highlands counties. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the project parameters were quickly amended to ensure newly emerging economic challenges would be factored into the resulting plan.

A technical advisory committee comprised of a broad range of industry, environmental, and infrastructure experts from throughout the region was formed to provide input throughout development of the Plan. Public engagement included both online business surveys and one-on-one interviews, as well as release of the draft plan for feedback earlier this year. Additional insight came through a youth collaboration in a partnership with the Center for Community Planning that solicited input from high school students about the type of communities they can picture themselves living in, in the future. These facets of the project were complemented by comprehensive data and industry analysis, with all project components coordinated through a consulting team led by Camoin Associates, a nationally recognized economic development firm.

The Highlands Council will continue to lead efforts to work in partnership with economic development entities throughout the region to implement the plan. The full plan can be found on the Highlands Council website: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/master/economic-sustainability. Also visit the Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan Facebook page: www.facebook.com/NJHighlandsCouncil

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 December 9, 2021 meeting).

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

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