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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 28, 2022

Highlands Council Releases Creative Tool for Towns to Identify Important Natural Resources

CHESTER, N.J. — The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) recently announced the availability of a free Highlands Region Interactive Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). The application simplifies what can be an onerous and costly process for Highlands municipalities, while simultaneously providing a more accurate and valuable ERI. The application is available to anyone at www.highlandseri.com.

“ERIs are incredibly important tools for municipalities, providing a comprehensive inventory of natural and built environmental features within a town,” explains Lisa J. Plevin, Highlands Council Executive Director. “They’re used in a number of ways, but primarily they help inform municipal review of proposed development projects and provide the basis for regulation of environmental resources within the municipality, particularly during master plan development and land use ordinance development.”

Traditionally, ERIs are updated about every 10 years. They provide a static, point-in-time snapshot of all environmental resources present in a municipality at the time they are created. They are costly to prepare and quickly become outdated, losing their value as a planning tool. Because the Highlands Council provides grant funding to support development of ERIs to help ensure protection of Highlands resources specifically, an effort began in 2018 to develop a better way to capture this data. In September 2019, a contract was awarded to T&M Associates to help build the Interactive ERI.

The Highlands Region Interactive ERI pulls data in real-time from authoritative sources to create reports and maps that support development of municipal ERIs. Because users can view data and produce reports and maps at the Highlands Region, county, municipal, watershed, parcel or multi-parcel level, the application can also be used for planning and project review discussions.

In addition to Highlands Council-generated data, the Interactive ERI pulls from multiple state, federal and other sources. The application links to the original data source allowing users to access the best-available data.

“Using streams as an example,” explains Jocelyn van den Akker, GIS Specialist and project lead for development of the Interactive ERI, “whenever the NJ Department of Environmental Protection, as the data owner, updates its stream information, the Interactive ERI will automatically be updated. So instead of turning to a static printed document on a shelf or having to go to multiple sources for current data, environmental commissions, planners, or land use officials can use the Interactive ERI to get the most up-to-date information available all in one place.”

Following a robust stakeholder engagement and beta testing process, the application went live in April, with initial training sessions offered in May. Feedback from the sessions was enthusiastic and users indicated they were eager to put the application to use in their home municipalities.

“Protection of the precious natural resources in the Highlands is what the Highlands Council was created to do,” says Carl Richko, Highlands Council Chairman. “It’s wonderful when we can provide free valuable tools to our municipal partners that makes this easier and more cost effective. That’s a win for everyone.”

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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