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Highlands Council to Lead Branding Effort for the Highlands Region

What's so great about the New Jersey Highlands? Glad you asked.

CHESTER, N.J. — Those who live, play and work in the New Jersey Highlands already know what makes this place special. Take in the vistas from Wyanokie High Point in Norvin Green State Forest or take a walk on the Columbia Trail spanning Morris and Hunterdon counties. If outdoor adventure isn't on the agenda, enjoy a shopping stroll on the streets of downtown Chester or Clinton. Or visit one of the myriad farms offering not only delicious fresh local produce, but also family fun from corn mazes to haunted hayrides. Need a job? Small businesses and corporate centers abound. And Morristown and Dover offer city life vibes if that's more your style.

The Highlands is a diverse landscape with both rural and densely developed areas. Not only do the watersheds located within its borders supply 70% of New Jerseyans with clean drinking water, but the region is also home to more than 800,000 people and within a two-hour drive of 20 million more. The Highlands is also a hub for agriculture and rich with historic sites and recreational opportunities.

But one thing that is missing in the Highlands is a clear identity.

“When someone mentions the Pinelands or the Meadowlands, most people have a general idea what that means. That doesn't happen with the Highlands,” said Highlands Council Executive Director Ben Spinelli. “We want people – inside and outside of the region – to know and value this vital part of New Jersey. In the 20 years since the Highlands Act was passed, understanding of the importance

of the region has certainly grown, but not to the extent necessary for the Council to fulfill some of its core objectives, especially related to economic sustainability.”

One of the key recommendations to come out of the 2021 New Jersey Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan was the need to develop a Highlands brand that could be used to support region-wide growth across a variety of industries. In March, the Highlands Council awarded a contract to national place branding and marketing firm [North Star](#) to develop a unique brand and associated marketing plan for the Highlands. Highlands Council Planning Manager Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, who is leading the effort on staff, explained how having a Highlands region brand contributes to economic development.

“The Highlands region is incredibly diverse; we already have a lot of well-established municipal and county identities,” said Haddock-Weiler. “An overall Highlands brand allows us to showcase that variety of assets and help people understand why it’s important to protect and enhance those assets. Perhaps most importantly, a Highlands brand will help the seven counties and 88 municipalities of the Highlands leverage their special status in ways that will benefit their residents and business owners.”

The project kicked off in May as the North Star team connected with Highlands Council staff and the Economic Sustainability County Coalition to gather background information and begin planning for wider outreach. In July, members of the North Star team will meet with local stakeholders in focus groups and one-on-one interviews to gather information and opinions from key populations including residents, farmers, business owners, local officials, and more, so that the final branding product captures the essence of what makes the Highlands so unique.

Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko noted that while the Council and staff are keenly aware of all the Highlands has to offer, it would be beneficial to their work if more people knew.

“People tend to protect what they value,” said Richko. “My hope is that a wider audience will begin to see and understand what makes this region so special and why it deserves thoughtful planning and enhanced protections to safeguard its future. We’re really excited to hear from everyone about what aspects of the Highlands shine brightest in their minds.”

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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