

Moving Forward in New Jersey's Highlands

The New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council has finally completed its enormous and controversial task with the adoption of the Highlands Regional Master Plan, a guide to preservation and planning in the 860,000 acre Highlands Region. The Plan will be critically important for protecting Highlands' supplies of clean and plentiful drinking water to over 5.4 million New Jersey residents and businesses.

The Highlands Council can now begin implementation of the Regional Master Plan. And with the Governor's intervention, by signing of Executive Order #114, the Council must also take the steps needed to coordinate with other state agencies, including the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH). These two agencies must resolve the conflicting claims between these them about the amount of land available for development in the Highlands.

In recognition of this conflict, Governor Corzine's Executive Order, directing COAH to work with the Highlands Council to adjust all affordable housing requirements in conforming municipalities throughout the Region, was a necessary measure. It is clear, common sense that in order to promote sustainable growth and development, including affordable housing, protection of our water supply must be figured into the equation. The members of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition welcome this balanced and reasonable recognition of true natural resource and capacity-based planning.

The Governor's directive provides Planning Area municipalities with an unanticipated incentive to conform to the Regional Master Plan, as conformance will provide an opportunity to adjust COAH numbers to reflect the constraints necessary to protect our water supplies. The Governor, in the Order, directed the Council and COAH to resolve their differences within 60 days. We commend the Governor for finally seeing what lay ahead and taking action. It has since been reported by the media that leadership at COAH is dragging its feet in response to the Executive Order. An agreement between the Highlands Council and COAH would go a long way towards easing the concerns and diminishing the confusion often expressed by the Highlands municipalities who are burdened by these agencies' conflicting mandates.

However, the Governor's actions can only be considered an interim measure. Without long-term re-authorization of the Garden State Preservation Trust, the state's widely popular Farmland, Open Space, and Historic Preservation programs will be out of money before Highlands's preservation efforts can even begin. The Governor has pledged many times since his election to re-authorize the Garden State Preservation Trust with a dedicated funding source. He has yet to make good on that. Until he does, we in the environmental community remain wary of the Governor's stated commitment to preserving open space. The Governor must follow through on his promise. The GSPT is the lynchpin upon which the Highlands Regional Master Plan can succeed, as it will provide compensation for Highlands landowners and ensure that matching grants to counties, municipalities and non-profits for preservation can continue.

In addition, new appointments to the Highlands Council will also be the responsibility of this administration. Eight Council members have terms on the Council that expire before the end of 2008. One of those seats has remained unfilled for almost two years. The

Highlands Act requires a balance among its fifteen members; seven are to be public seats and eight seats are to be held by elected officials. However, ten of the fifteen Council members are elected officials, or were so at the time of their appointment to the Council. The Governor has the opportunity to correct this imbalance by filling expiring terms appropriately and appointing individuals who will be strong advocates for protecting the region's critical drinking water supplies, as well as its unique environmental, agricultural and historic resources.

The State's 5.4 million people who rely on clean and plentiful drinking water must continue to demand the strongest resource protections for the Highlands region, with a dedicated and long-term funding source for the Garden State Preservation Trust, with new and reasonable appointments to the Highlands Council to achieve the balance of public and elected officials as mandated by the Highlands Act and finally, with a memorandum of understanding between the Highlands Council and COAH reflecting the resource constraints of the Region. We will be there every step of the way.

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