

The Daily Record

Smart planning in the Highlands

By Julia M. Somers • January 2, 2009

Your "Housing confusion" editorial of Dec. 28 was itself confusing, and some of it was incorrect.

New Jersey's Highlands region is the water supply for much of the state's population -- 5.4 million people receive some or all of their water from the Highlands -- as well as the water needed to support the state's economy. When it passed the Highlands Act, the state Legislature recognized that only a regional plan could protect this critical resource in the future.

Last September, Gov. Jon Corzine directed the Highlands Council and the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) to work together. They are to plan for at least 20 percent affordable housing in the region as a part of future growth and development, and the Highlands Regional Master Plan is to be the guide for where and how much housing and commercial development can be built.

New Jersey now seeks to have every municipality in the state plan for affordable housing. In the Highlands Planning Area, towns were given the choice of deferring the submittal of their affordable housing plan to COAH, if they wish to first consider conforming to the Highlands Regional Master Plan. By taking that option, no town is required to complete the conformance process, but rather will file its COAH plan in December 2009.

Sixty-five of 83 eligible towns have chosen that option and their COAH Plan will either reflect COAH's affordable housing numbers or the Highlands Regional Master Plan's numbers.

These towns represent nearly 90 percent of the land in the Highlands, and many may choose to stay under the protective umbrella of the Highlands.

Does this represent "coercion" as you state in your editorial?

Surely, it is only smart planning to give towns a reasonable amount of time to make an informed choice. Will towns that ultimately conform to the master plan have to plan for building fewer, more affordable homes for people? Possibly -- each town will be different. But if this happens, it will only be because the true capacity of the natural resources of the region are shown to be incapable of supporting the amount of development COAH has predicted.

There will be much work for Highlands towns in 2009. The Highlands Council is offering each town up to \$100,000 to help pay for that work, as well as providing much of the data towns need to complete the conformance process.

At the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, we hope the public will be closely involved in planning for their municipality's future by attending their planning board and environmental commission's meetings. We have materials available to help people work through the process and answer questions.

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