



NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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Press Release

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Highlands Plan Can Protect Historic and Scenic Sites

Historic Resource Protections Possible Under Proposed Highlands Regional Master Plan; Improvements Still Needed In Many Areas; Scenic Resources Protection Inventory being Created

Boonton, NJ: Leaders of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition and the Boonton Historical Society today called attention to the Highland Act's mandate to preserve and protect historic and scenic resources. Preservationists have long noted that the 2004 Highlands Act not only called for the protection of drinking water supplies serving over 5.4 million New Jersey residents, but also mandated an "assessment of scenic, aesthetic, cultural, historic, open space, farmland, and outdoor recreation resources of the region, together with a determination of overall policies required to maintain and enhance such resources;" (Section 11.a(1)(b)).

"In the Regional Master Plan," **said Marion Harris, chairman of the Morris County Trust for Historic Preservation**, "a process will be spelled out to protect these resources. We worried for a while about how well the process would work, but the latest revisions are very encouraging."

New Jersey's 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act specifically calls upon the Council to ensure that the region's historic, cultural and archaeological resources are properly protected. The Highlands Council staff will gather information on known sites listed by the State and Federal Historic Registry programs. However, additional historic and cultural resources of the region must also be protected through cross-referencing historic resource reviews throughout the Regional Master Plan. Besides calling for historic resource reviews in areas like lake communities and riparian buffers, the Highlands Council must expand their purview to capture all of the region's historic and cultural significance without, however, requiring a lengthy nomination procedure which simply adds the resource to an inventory list instead of ensuring its protection, enhancement and/or restoration.

Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, noted, "The Highlands Act mandated strong protections of not just the Region's drinking water resources, but also the unique human features that contribute much to the Highlands' character. Historic, cultural and archaeological sites are prevalent throughout the Region and reveal a story of life, progress and change that cannot be fully appreciated from a history book. Protection of these resources cannot be dependent solely on existing State and Federal inventories. The Highlands Council should recognize the Region's wealth of historic and scenic sites and landmarks in all applications that come before them and ensure that these meaningful resources do not continue to become degraded."

Historic and scenic sites will benefit from RMP policies and guidance documents that will help shape how these resources are addressed. The RMP includes guidelines currently in the works to ensure that new development harmonizes with existing community character, and to encourage both local governments and owners to treat historic structures and sites appropriately. These guidelines are necessary to meet the mandates of the Highlands Act to protect all of the diverse resources of the Highlands region.”

Michael D. Henderson of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, historian and independent curator, and formerly of the Morristown National Historic Park, describes the types of historic resources particularly found in the Highlands because of the way it has developed over the centuries. “As in the rest of the country,” he said, “only a fraction, perhaps as little as one half of one percent, of historically significant resources have been identified and formally recognized. We know there is a lot of value here, but we still have to find it.” He pointed out that local people will have a major part to play in the building of the Highlands Inventory and individual citizens should be allowed and encouraged to add suggested sites for consideration.

Dave Peifer, Highlands Project Director for the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions explained, “Humans have inhabited the Highlands Region for thousands of years in many different capacities. From Native American villages and Revolutionary War battlefields, to riverfront industrial towns and iron mines, the extent of historic and cultural resources in the Highlands must be fully captured through an inventory process that makes sense and allows the region’s unique heritage to be fully protected for future generations.”

Wilma Frey, Highlands Project Manager for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, and a trained Landscape Architect, stated: “The Highlands was recognized in 1992 as ‘a landscape of national significance,’ but the region also faced ‘the immediate prospect of unprecedented urbanization and change.’ Recognizing that the scenic character of the Highlands will make or break the Region’s success as a recreation and tourism destination, the Highlands Act is very clear about its intent to protect scenic, aesthetic and outdoor recreation resources. Highlands Act goals mandate protecting the Region’s scenic resources and maintaining the “essential character of the Highlands environment.”

As a first step, the DEP Highlands rules identify all existing preserved public lands – Federal, state, county, municipal and private -- as “existing public scenic attributes.” Before issuing a Preservation Area permit, the DEP must find that the proposed activity would result in “minimal practicable degradation of public scenic attributes.” The current Draft Highlands RMP includes policies and mechanism to address scenic protection. There is a Highlands Scenic Resource Inventory. The Council is developing procedures to nominate and evaluate significant scenic resources, such as scenic byways, trails or corridors, panoramas, ridgelines, natural features and cultural landscapes. There will be scenic resource protection guidelines and standards.

Under the banner of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, a committee of historic preservationists has been commenting on the plan since its first draft was released. “It is a pleasure to see so many of our suggestions appearing in the latest version of the historic section,” **said Harris,** “We look forward to enjoying the continued benefits of protected Highlands’s historic and scenic resources.”

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition is made up of a diverse and effective group of organizations and individuals — small and large, local, regional, statewide and national — all working together to protect, enhance and restore the New Jersey Highlands

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