



Highlands Coalition wants Christie to support and fund Highlands Council

By Hunterdon County Democrat

February 25, 2010, 6:51AM

More than 40 environmental groups have written Governor Chris Christie alarmed by his decision to cut funds for the Highlands Council and the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The goal of Highlands Regional Master Plan, mandated by state law, is to preserve the water supply of the Highlands, a natural system that purifies water for 64% of the people in New Jersey and its major industries – and does it with no “operating costs.” If the natural system becomes degraded, future taxpayers will pay billions of dollars to build water treatment plants to do the job nature does now for free. New Jersey’s taxpayers will face an insurmountable tax burden and its businesses will leave the state.

According to Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, “Governor Christie is sending very mixed messages to everyone, including Highlands communities. On the one hand he says he understands the importance of protecting the State’s water supply, but then on the other, he strips the Council of the funds towns need to plan to protect Highlands waters. We call on him to make clear his support for the Highlands Council, its Plan and its work.”

The Highlands Coalition, an advocacy group representing more than 40 member organizations and 500 individuals, wrote to the governor urging him to support the Highlands Council, not to eliminate the Highlands Protection Fund. Without this funding, towns already working with the Highlands Council may be forced to suspend the important work they have done so far with no financial means to proceed with planning.

“In these tight economic times, these funds are the only way towns can afford to plan. The governor is essentially aborting efforts to make preservation of this crucial region affordable and possible”, said David Peifer, Highlands project director of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions.

Trouble started when the governor stripped \$18.5 million from the Highlands Protection Fund and cut \$88,000 from the Council’s operating budget. The Highlands Protection Fund provides grant money to municipalities in the Highlands region to do the necessary planning to conform to the Regional Master Plan. The fund also provides planning grants to municipalities, both within and outside the region, enabling them to determine the feasibility of accepting denser growth in a transfer of development rights program that compensates Highlands landowners in return for the protection of the Highlands water resources.

“The removal of funds from the Highlands Protection Fund will leave municipalities in the Preservation Area—where conformance is mandatory under law, to foot the bill for professionals consulting work, creating a potential unfunded mandate,” said Chester Township Mayor Bill Cogger.

"By taking the funds from the Highlands Council, the governor has jeopardized Highlands resources and the protection of the drinking water for 5.4 million people in 15 counties," said William Kibler, executive director of the South Branch Watershed Association.

Rick Ege, executive director of the New Jersey State Council Trout Unlimited added, "Short term financial maneuvering such as moving Highlands funds for short term gain, only destroys the long term goal of protecting the drinking water of the majority of New Jersey residents."

The Coalition also appealed to Christie to fill the 10 seats on the Council that are either empty or filled by people whose terms have expired, and said they expect the governor to make good on his campaign promise to establish a stable source of funding for open space and farmland preservation that voters supported by a greater margin than put the governor into office.

Further, the economic troubles faced in New Jersey are mirrored nationally. Yet the federal government continues to recognize the importance of the N.J. Highlands, the coalition said. In the 2010 budget, it has doubled the funding for land acquisition in the Highlands Region, highlighting the importance of protecting the water and natural resources found here.

The mission of the Highlands Coalition is to promote protection, preservation, and enhancement of the water, forests, wildlife, farmland and other natural, historic and cultural resources of the Highlands, to enhance the sustainability of natural and human communities and the quality of life for current and future generations.

© 2010 NJ.com. All rights reserved.