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N.J. report fails to see economic value of protecting Highlands resources

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BY JULIA SOMERS

COMMENTARY

Governor Chris Christie has been presented with a report from his transition team detailing recommendations on the Highlands Council. He shouldn't bother to read it but transfer the report directly to the recycling bin, because it's a waste of his time.

If the Governor does read the report he will recognize that the report's authors didn't bother to observe the Council, or read the Highlands Act, the DEP Highlands rules or the Regional Master Plan. Comments are glaringly incorrect or confused and it is evident that the report is based on biased preconceptions, not on any actual observation or research.

Protecting Highlands resources is critical for New Jersey's economic future. 64 percent of state residents receive their water from the Highlands; clean, cheap water that historically has also attracted key industries to this state that continue to depend on that water. These include Anheuser-Busch, multiple pharmaceutical businesses, and food companies such as Goya. Eco-tourism, a multi-billion dollar industry in the Highlands, will continue to be an economic engine in the region, but only if the Highlands are protected.

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act is the most significant environmental policy adopted by the State of New Jersey since the Pinelands were protected, a policy that laid the groundwork for a comprehensive regional plan to protect drinking water while providing for sustainable planning and development in the Highlands. Nearly six years of work and scientific data collection to date have shown, among other things, that of the 183 watersheds in the Highlands, 114 suffer from water shortages.

The report suggests that elimination of the Council would leave environmental protections still "in place, enforced just as they are in every other part of the state." If the authors had bothered to read the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, perhaps they would have considered the Legislature's findings that "the New Jersey Highlands,

because of its proximity to rapidly expanding suburban areas, is at serious risk of being fragmented and consumed by unplanned development; and that the existing land use and environmental regulation system cannot protect the water and natural resources of the New Jersey Highlands against the environmental impacts of sprawl development...That the protection of the New Jersey Highlands, because of its vital link to the future of the State's drinking water supplies and other key natural resources, is an issue of State level importance that cannot be left to the uncoordinated land use decisions of 88 municipalities, seven counties, and a myriad of private landowners; ..." The Legislature found that the State's supply of drinking water was put at risk by the same protections available "in every other part of the state."

The report alleges, "The lack of ability for any ratable growth in most of the Highlands burdens the municipalities and chains their citizens to increasingly higher taxes to support school and local government contractual obligations, as well as inflationary increases of their operating costs." Haven't they read the studies which show that towns with the most ratables have the highest property taxes? Towns engaged in a "ratables chase" are doing their residents no favors. Many towns understand this relationship and with the RMP will grow in ways that consider the long term impacts of planning decisions.

The report goes on to complain, "At a bare minimum, changes should be brought to the representation on the Council. Right now, there is too little voice given to the counties and constituents most affected by their actions, owners, business owners, or farmers ..." If the authors had done their research, they would have seen that freeholders and mayors have always been the large majority of council members, and there have always been representatives of the business, farming and land-owning communities.

With a threadbare staff of 23 employees, the Council is the model for an efficiently run, highly productive and responsive agency. The Council's science and GIS staffs have provided the most up to date analysis of land, water and other environmental features, growth patterns and land use capabilities. A cursory look at the Council's website would reveal the high level of effective technologies incorporated in the Council's operations. Most importantly, applicants receive responses from the Council in a matter of weeks, not months.

The authorities transition team authors did not interview a single member of the Highlands Council, its executive director or any of its staff. The authors did not ask for input from Highlands stakeholders. Had they done so, the report might have been a little more useful to the Governor. Instead, it is a waste of time and an opportunity has been missed.

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