

The Express-Times

Environmentalists join New Jersey official in seeking restoration of funding for Highlands municipalities

Wednesday, March 03, 2010

By **BILL WICHERT**
The Express-Times

CLINTON TWP. | When he considers how the state is cutting millions of dollars in funding to help municipalities conform to Highlands regulations, township resident Greg Nelson says he's scared.

Enforcing those regulations, aimed at protecting water supplies, becomes difficult without money to support the effort, Nelson said.

Having lived with pollution in the eastern part of New Jersey, Nelson said he knows what damage can be done to the state's natural resources.

"We need to prevent it from happening here," Nelson, chairman of the South Highlands Group of the New Jersey Sierra Club, told fellow environmental activists this week.

From Trenton to Clinton Township, environmentalists expressed their fears at two meetings Monday about Gov. Chris Christie's plans to cut more than \$30 million from the Highlands Protection Fund.

It's one of Christie's cost-cutting measures aimed at plugging a more than \$2 billion budget deficit.

Of that reduction, nearly \$18.5 million would have supported planning grants to municipalities as they prepare to conform to the Highlands regional master plan.

About \$13.2 million is being cut in tax stabilization aid, which reimburses conforming municipalities with empty lots depreciating in value.

Restrictions on development in the Highlands region are designed to protect water resources that serve more than 5 million residents. The region stretches for more than 800,000 acres across seven counties, including Warren and Hunterdon. Regulations are mandatory in nearly half of the region and voluntary in the remaining areas.

No money to do the work

Without money, municipalities can't do the necessary work, Eileen Swan, executive director of the Highlands Council, said Tuesday. The loss of the nearly \$18.5 million means there is no funding for new planning grants, Swan said.

Swan testified Monday before the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, asking state legislators to maintain the Highlands Protection Fund.

"This is an issue about the state of New Jersey. This is an issue about water for the state of New Jersey,"

Swan told committee members.

"To risk the resources of the entire state is not good government, and failure to protect the Highlands will commit future generations to pay the costs."

Several hours after Swan testified, the nonprofit New Jersey Highlands Coalition held an informational meeting in Clinton Township. Coalition member Elliott Ruga encouraged Sierra Club members to write the governor and state legislators and tell them to restore the Highlands funds.

Ruga questioned the message that cutting the funding sends to municipalities working on conforming to Highlands regulations.

"It is the vehicle that allows municipalities to move forward and what would happen if it stops we're not sure," said Ruga, a campaign and grass-roots coordinator for the Morris County-based organization.

Cuts not being revisited

Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak said Tuesday the funding cuts are a reflection of the state's fiscal emergency and not a sign that the governor has sacrificed his dedication to protecting water and other natural resources.

"I'm afraid this is not something that can be reconsidered at this time," said Drewniak, adding that every budget line item was scoured in the process. "This is what we confronted and had to fix in short order."

State Sen. Michael Doherty, R-Warren/Hunterdon, said he is pleased the Highlands funding was cut.

The Highlands Act has damaged the economic climate throughout New Jersey, particularly in the northwestern region, and the Highlands Council represents too much government, Doherty said.

Programs like the Highlands will need to be jettisoned for the state to stay afloat financially, he said.

"This is outrageous that these environmentalists never stop. It's enough already. We need jobs," Doherty said.

"This thing needs to go. This is a good first step, and my goal is to see the Highlands Act abolished."

Reporter Bill Wichert can be reached at 610-258-7171, ext. 3570, or bwichert@express-times.com. Talk about issues in your town at lehighvalleylive.com/forums.

