



Byram close to winning Highlands plan OK

By COLLEEN O'DEA • STAFF WRITER • September 9, 2010

Byram is set to become the first municipality to conform to the state's Highlands regional master plan.

The township's plan petition has been released for public comment and is scheduled to be considered at the [New Jersey Highlands Council's](#) meeting later this month.

"This will be a huge milestone for the Highlands as implementation of the Highlands regional master plan is through plan conformance," said Eileen Swan, the council's executive director.

The 2004 law creating the 860,000-acre Highlands region, which includes most of Morris County, requires municipalities with land in that half of the region specified as the preservation area to make their zoning agree with that of the regional plan.

While some communities balked at conforming with the 464-page document, which was completed two years ago, all the towns required to follow the plan have notified the council of their intent to do so.

Byram, nearly all of which is in the preservation area, is the first one to work closely with council staff to near plan conformance.

Councilman Scott Olson said conforming will allow the township to move forward with plans for developing a township center while still preserving environmentally sensitive land.

"The end result is that we now have perhaps the most valuable piece of property along Route 206 in Sussex County available for development, while protecting the sensitive environmental [resources](#) of the town," he said. "Had we not conformed to the (regional master plan) ... renewal of our state-designated center would have been difficult, if not impossible."

According to the town's petition, the 60-acre village center is a planned mixed-use development that would include public parks, [shops](#), townhouses and 26 low- and moderate-income units.

Olson said the township was able to use the council's data and resources, and grants it provided, rather than tax dollars to complete the planning work.

"The result was a revised village center plan that meets both the town's needs for economic [growth](#) and affordable housing, and also satisfied requirements of the (regional master plan)," he said. "By choosing to re-designate our center through Highlands conformance, we received staff assistance from the Highlands Council, and were able to [fund](#) the entire process through Highlands grants. It is a win-win for everyone."

Julia Somers, executive director of the [New Jersey Highlands Coalition](#), said the center plan agreed to by Byram and the council is "much better" than the township's original concept.

"This is a great example of how regional planning can work," she said. "It sets a really good model for other communities."

Swan said that if the plan is approved, Byram then needs to adopt [certain](#) regulations and amend its wastewater plan. Once it does so, "they will then have wastewater to serve the village core of their center," she said.

People may comment on the township's petition through Sept. 16. The council is scheduled to consider the plan at its 4 p.m. meeting on Sept. 23.

So far, Swan said, the council's staff has completed reviews and prepared draft consistency reports for 28 municipalities. Eleven have received and are reviewing these documents, including Chester Township, Mount Olive and Rockaway Township.

Colleen O'Dea: 973-428-6655, codea@gannett.com.