

# The Star-Ledger

Star-Ledger Editorial Board

## Gov. Christie and the Highlands

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Gov. Chris Christie's seven appointments to the Highlands Council last week tip his hand about the direction he may take on preservation and development in the region, and it is troubling.

A few of the new council members have not only expressed their dislike for the law, but challenged its constitutionality. The council is charged with protecting the state's water supply and its natural landscape, and can halt development in its most environmentally sensitive areas. Or give it the green light.

The appointments give us pause. The council is charged with balancing the need for economic development against the need to protect this critical water supply in the face of immense pressures to build new homes and businesses. Its 15 members include local officials, environmentalists, scientists, landowners and other stakeholders.

Striking the right balance is tough. The council recently approved the construction of a 500,000-volt transmission line, part of a PSE&G upgrade, that will traverse part of the Highlands. Utility projects were allowed under the Highlands Act, but this was a typically tough call, one that the Sierra Club and other environmental groups opposed.

It took several years for the council to come up with a master plan for the region that would stop sprawl and encourage smart growth. Half of the Highlands, roughly 415,000 acres, are in the most sensitive preservation areas where restrictions are tightest — and the 52 towns that fall partly on wholly within it must come up with plans that respect those restrictions, with the help of small grants from the council.

It's within the preservation area that the council must tackle one of its thorniest issues: the lack of compensation for landowners whose properties lost value as a result of these tough regulations. Lawmakers estimated compensation could cost as much as \$1 billion, but that was six years ago, and they never came up with a way to raise money to cover landowners' losses anyway.

Over the summer Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin held meetings — most of which were by invitation only — to hear the good, the bad and the ugly about how the law is working out. A report based on the DEP meetings will be released next month, and will likely form the basis for a revised plan.

That's another troubling sign. The law specifically designates the Highlands Council with the responsibility of creating a plan and revising it, with full public participation. DEP and the governor should respect that process.

The Highlands are a precious resource and, like the Pinelands in South Jersey, cannot be left to the mercies of local zoning officials who often disregard the state's larger interests when ruling on local building projects. It falls to the Highlands Council to protect this resource. The governor should respect that role, and appoint council members who take the task seriously.