

Keep "wolves" off the Highlands Council

December 6, 2010

By MICHELE S. BYERS

In stark contrast to the natural beauty of New Jersey's Highlands region is the needless tension between conservation of its critical water supply and natural resources, and plans for local economic development. Recent successes of municipalities that have chosen to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan prove this to be a false paradox indeed.

For example, Byram Township in Sussex County was approved by the Highlands Council both for a desired brand new town center and the protection of hundreds of acres of forests and lakes. Little Hampton Borough in Hunterdon County succeeded in securing protection for its quality of life through conformance to the Highlands Plan.

But Gov. Chris Christie's recent nominations to the Highlands Council would place wolves in charge of guarding the hen house — our Highlands region — and threaten the progress and momentum envisioned by the Highlands Act. The 860,000 acres of New Jersey Highlands contains vital resources this state we're in needs right now, and will need perhaps even more in the future: drinking water for more than half its residents; miles of open space in forests, wetlands and grasslands; hundreds of rare, threatened and endangered wildlife and plant species; historic structures and villages, archaeological heritage sites; fertile farmland; and recreation areas with miles of scenic trails.

In the face of dramatically increasing pressure from suburban sprawl, New Jersey enacted the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in 2004. The act created a Highlands Council tasked with developing a Regional Master Plan and encouraging conformance with the plan by municipalities. The 15-member council includes eight local elected officials of Highlands governments, and seven members of the public with applicable expertise.

The Highlands Act boundary covers 88 towns in seven counties (Bergen, Passaic, Morris, Sussex, Warren, Hunterdon and Somerset). Although reaction to the Highlands Act by the towns and counties was initially mixed, after several years of hard work by the Highlands Council and local officials, the progress today is palpable.

An increasing number of towns are bringing their plans to the Highlands Council for approval. Several towns are ready to move forward this December, with others in line for January. Most have chosen to conform their entire town to the Highlands Plan, recognizing the benefits of sound planning to their communities' future.

In contrast to the groundswell of support for sound planning and water protection, Christie has proposed a slate of nominees to the council that includes several avowed opponents of the Highlands Act. For example, at least one nominee has opposed the act from its inception. One had displayed a "Highlands Bill NO" sign on the side of his barn. Others have consistently questioned the act's constitutionality, which has been validated by a series of challenges in New Jersey courts. One of the nominees sued over the act.

These wolves aren't even in sheep's clothing. The Highlands plan is based on more than 20 technical reports and was created over a period of four years by skilled professionals. With three drafts and extensive public input, the final plan represents balance and consensus from the Highlands community. At least three of Christie's proposed nominees are likely to undermine or wipe out this balance that has been achieved in the Highlands.

It's time to take action to prevent Highlands Act opponents from becoming council members. Please contact leaders of the Senate Judiciary Committee and ask them to oppose these nominations.

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