



Why the Highlands Act is good for our town

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Written by

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I am the mayor of West Milford, one of the five municipalities that fall entirely within the Highlands Preservation Area. By law, we are required to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan, a process we just completed. Our experience may be helpful for any town considering conformance.

West Milford is one of the largest municipalities in the state, spanning more than 80 square miles, with a population of approximately 28,000. We have pristine forests, mountainous slopes, expanses of preserved watershed lands, an abundance of lakes, rivers, streams and ponds, hiking and bridle trails and many farms. We offer a peaceful haven for our residents and for visitors, an escape from the stresses of life. Our natural areas provide a habitat for a variety of wildlife. Recreational activities, including fishing, swimming, boating, hiking and horseback riding are readily available.

Most of our residents seek to preserve and protect these treasured assets, which also helps to maintain our quality of life and the character of our community. Plan conformance will assist in these efforts.

In West Milford, we work hard to preserve our open spaces, natural resources and our precious water supply. We have a water protection ordinance, a septic maintenance ordinance and an ordinance that encourages agriculturally related business activities such as farmers markets. In 2009, the township council petitioned the Highlands Council for Plan Conformance.

Why are we enthusiastic about conforming to the Regional Master Plan? Conformance will provide West Milford with real protection from large-scale housing developments. The burden of a large number of new housing units in the township would place a significant strain on our limited infrastructure and require the expansion of our schools and municipal services.

The overall cost of these services would far exceed any new tax rates and would result in significantly increased property taxes. That tax burden would be unbearable for our residents. Plan Conformance reinforces our goals of remaining a tourism and recreation-based community.

If the Highlands Act is to successfully achieve its goals of natural resource protection in the long term, there needs to be two reasonable amendments to the Highlands Act. Specifically, the act needs to

provide for exemptions to allow necessary municipal projects. All towns should be able to offer the services their residents need and deserve. Currently, there are no exemptions for municipal projects such as libraries, emergency service facilities, municipal complexes, senior centers, community centers or recreational facilities. The act also needs to provide a mechanism for revenue generation in an effort to bring fairness and equity to the developmentally restricted Preservation Areas that have been mandated to protect New Jersey's drinking water. A nominal water surcharge imposed upon the end user would accomplish equity without placing a burden on any New Jersey resident or family.

Despite an abundance of surface water, West Milford has a real, documented shortage of groundwater, and many of our residents already experience shortages or complete outages. We need to continue to protect and preserve the quality and quantity of our reservoirs; they supply more than half of New Jersey with drinking water. Our open spaces can be enhanced through environmentally sound stewardship and the development of active and passive recreational opportunities.

At first, we mistrusted the Highlands Council and the additional layer of bureaucracy that was forced on us. Surprisingly, the process has been quite painless, due in large part to the professionalism and expertise of the members of the Highlands Council. West Milford has had numerous projects before the Council and, on each occasion, I have found the council to be reasonable and helpful. We have mutually shared and exchanged ideas on how to best to comply with the act while identifying opportunities that benefit our community.

In particular, Executive Director Eileen Swan has demonstrated a sincere desire to help municipalities achieve their goals. Swan was instrumental in getting the first redevelopment project in the Highlands Preservation Area approved, so that we may build a new municipal library and expand our municipal complex. The Highlands Council staff has shown us that conformance does not preclude sound development options. As a former mayor, Eileen Swan has an understanding of municipal needs. Her leadership has proven that with collaboration, multiple interests can find a common ground.

We had always seen the preservation of natural resources and economic development as conflicting goals. Through conformance we have found that both goals are achievable.