

Observer-Tribune

New Highlands Council chairman starts on contentious note

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CHESTER TWP. - It was definitely not business as usual on Thursday, June 16, as James Rilee, the newly-appointed Highlands Council chairman and, mayor of Roxbury Township, led the vote to defeat Hackettstown's petition for conformance.

The rejection of Hackettstown's plan to conform to the Highlands regional master plan marked the first time a municipality has been rejected in a process that has seen 23 other Highlands communities qualify.

Rilee and three others voted against the Hackettstown plan, leaving only seven in favor, one short of the minimum support of eight council members.

Rilee was named to chair the regional water protection and planning council by Gov. Chris Christie on Tuesday, June 14. **He said he didn't have a chance to meet with Christie before the appointment was announced.**

"We haven't talked but from what I know of his positions, I think we have a lot in common," said Rilee.

His appointment brought immediate criticism from the New Jersey Sierra Club and later, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

Members of the N.J. Highlands Coalition, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) welcomed Rilee during public comments. The coalition later criticized Rilee's actions.

"I want to take this opportunity to thank Gov. (Chris) Christie for designating me chairman," said Rilee. "We all understand the importance of protecting our water supply."

Opening Thursday's meeting, Rilee said he would review the previous work of the Highlands Council, "to make sure we are working within the law."

The rejection of the Hackettstown plan hinged on the town's lack of commitment to be a receiving zone for Transfer Development Rights (TDR) credits.

Both Kurt Alstede, of Chester Township, and Michael Francis of Hopatcong, joined new members Rilee and Robert Walton of Hunterdon County to oppose the Hackettstown petition for plan performance.

"If towns like Hackettstown don't accept some reasonable growth, the whole TDR component is thrown out the window," said Alstede.

Under the TDR concept, development rights from environmentally sensitive land can be transferred to receiving zones in or out of the Highlands Region.

“I think the new members and one old one should have known better than to obstruct the approval of the Hackettstown petition,” said Vice Chairman Jack Schrier. “The question raised by Kurt (Alstede) was a red herring. I find it regrettable. We’re there to help our municipalities achieve their goals.”

Rilee said his opposition had nothing to do with the TDR issue.

“I just didn’t think I had enough information or knowledge to vote in favor of it,” he said.

Hackettstown’s planner Paul Sterbenz said it would be up to the mayor and council to decide how to react to the rejection.

“Our petition had built in a number of planning incentives,” said Sterbenz.

Among the components were a Highlands Center designation, a redevelopment zone centered around the old Bergen Tool site, and a sustainable economic growth plan.

The Sierra Club charged on Wednesday that Rilee’s appointment was part of a strategy that Christie is using to circumvent the Highlands Act.

Jeff Tittel, director of the state Sierra Club, said six of the ten appointees made by Christie will take the side of developers and corporate polluters over the protection of the state’s drinking water.

“The appointment of Jim Rilee as chair is the governor’s opening salvo in rolling back Highlands protections,” Tittel said.

On Friday, June 17, the club charged that any pressure applied to a municipality such as Hackettstown violated the Highlands Act, which prohibited any growth pressure from the Highlands Council.

Rilee brings a background of land use experience to the council, including stints as chair of the Morris County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, as a member of the Lake Hopatcong Regional Planning Board and as a member of his municipal Planning Board.

“I very much look forward to working with my fellow council members to address the numerous challenging aspects of the Highlands Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan,” Rilee said Wednesday.

Other newly-appointed council members who took their seats for the first time on Thursday, June 16 included Morristown Mayor Timothy Dougherty, Hunterdon County Freeholder Robert G. Walton and James Mengucci, a Lopatcong Township councilman.

All but Dressler took their seats on Thursday.

The most recent five appointees are elected officials. The Council is made up of eight elected officials and seven public members.

Rilee thanked Acting Chairman Jack Schrier of Mendham Township for his service. Schrier remains on the council awaiting a replacement appointment from Trenton. He served as vice chairman on Thursday, a position to which he was elected previously before he took the role as acting chairman.

“I have a feeling that the new members view the council and staff as “bad boys” and think we need to be spanked,” said Schrier.

The announcement of Rilee’s appointment took a rather circuitous route. Christie contacted a number of former council members on Monday, then deferred responsibility for the official announcement to Highlands Council executive director Eileen Swan.

The Sierra Club opposition to Rilee is based in part upon his opposition to the Highlands Act in his hometown.

Roxbury Township is still in the process of completing its required application for master plan conformance in its Preservation Area, where conformance is required.

With four more municipalities added on Thursday, June 16, 23 towns have conformed to the regional master plan.

Two counties have also completed the process.

Roxbury Township has 4,303 acres in the Preservation Area and 9,738 acres in the Planning Area, where conformance is optional.

In other actions taken by the Council Thursday, Robert Holtaway of Bedminster Township was named treasurer. Plan conformance petitions from Bloomsbury Borough in Hunterdon County and Bloomingdale Borough in Passaic County were approved, although Rilee and Walton opposed the Bloomingdale petition.

The council tabled a request by member Tracy Carluccio to have a second vote on the defeated Hackettstown petition.

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