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N.J. environmental groups hold rally on 7th anniversary of Highlands Act's passage

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By Ben Horowitz/The Star-Ledger

CHESTER — A coalition of environmental groups gathered outside the Highlands Council's offices in Chester yesterday to hail the work of the sometimes-criticized panel.

Key speakers for the rally, which attracted about 25 people on the seventh anniversary of the Highlands Act's passage, were two of its co-sponsors — Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex) and Assemblyman John McKeon (D-Essex).

"We have to be vigilant," said McKeon. "We must make sure that the most important piece of environmental legislation of this generation is carried out to a T."

The act severely restricts development in an 859,000-acre, seven-county region in North Jersey that supplies water to 5.4 million state residents. But the act has been criticized for not fairly compensating landowners whose properties lost value because of the restrictions.

Elliott Ruga of the nonprofit Highlands Coalition, an organizer of the rally, said a similar regional planning group in the Pinelands area has brought great success in preserving South Jersey's water supply and in keeping "property values high and taxes low. Developers know what can be developed, and where."

The coalition describes itself as an alliance of nearly 200 nonprofit, municipal, state and federal organizations working to protect natural resources in the Highlands of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.

"What's working in the Pinelands is working in the Highlands," Ruga said, urging towns to continue submitting plans that conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The environmentalists' high spirits did not carry over after the rally to the regular meeting of the Highlands Council, which implements provisions of the act. Several opponents of the act were angrier than usual in public comments denouncing the legislation and the political leaders who had spoken at the rally.

After one council member, Passaic County Freeholder Bruce James, said farms sometimes leave pesticides in the ground, Highlands Act opponent Hal Danielson, formerly of Summit and once a farmer, became so incensed and belligerent in his comments that police arrested him for disrupting a public meeting. Danielson didn't threaten anyone, but refused to stop talking after police asked him to do so.

The council approved Hackettstown's Highlands plan in a 9-2 vote. At the last meeting, the plan failed despite a 7-4 vote in favor, falling short of the eight votes needed. There are supposed to be 15 council members but it presently has vacancies.

Municipal plans are to conform to development restrictions of the Highlands master plan and can provide for environmentally sensitive growth.

The Hackettstown plan had been amended to include a feasibility study of creating a downtown "receiving" zone, in which retail establishments could be added under the Transfer of Development Rights program, which allows compensation of landowners.

Council member Kurt Alstede, who at the previous meeting led opposition to Hackettstown's plan because it did not include a receiving zone, continued to oppose it. He questioned whether the town had added it at the last minute just to gain council approval.

Another council member, Hunterdon County Freeholder Robert Walton, also opposed it and questioned the \$25,000 cost for the feasibility study. In a time of high unemployment, "We're handing out these grants like candy," he said.

But the new council chairman, Roxbury Mayor Jim Rilee, reversed himself and supported the plan.

Rilee said at the earlier meeting, he "didn't know enough" about the plan, but has learned of "the municipal resources that went into the plan."