

MONVILLE PATCH

Supporters Rally: Keep Highlands Act Alive

Environmentalists and bill sponsors rally for continued support before the New Jersey Highlands Council meets.

By Colleen O'Dea

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The main sponsors of Highlands law that regulates development through much of northern New Jersey joined environmentalists Wednesday, marking the law's seventh anniversary and opposing what they say are the Christie's administration's attempts to neuter it.

A steady rain did not deter about 20 people from gathering on the grounds of the Highlands Council office in Chester. There, they rallied to encourage the council to follow the Highlands Act, and the regional master plan the council itself created. They applauded the law for creating an 860,000-acre region stretching from Mahwah in Bergen County to the Delaware River in Hunterdon County, and imposing strict development restrictions in about half of it.

The law and regional plan are meant to protect resources that provide drinking water to more than half the state's population. But Gov. Chris Christie has nominated members to the Highlands Council that environmentalists fear oppose the act a basic level, and will seek to undermine its mission. Christie himself said at a Hopatcong town hall meeting earlier this year that the act was "based on a lie" the state could ever compensate affected property owners.

Elliot Ruga of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition said the Highlands law is like a "large Brita water filter that never needs replacing," negating the need for the state to pay \$50 billion to treat the water used by 5.4 million people.

"Gov. Christie is unfortunately blind to the fact that regional planning works for New Jersey," he said.

Kate Milsaps of the New Jersey Sierra Club said environmentalists have many reasons for concern.

"Across the board, Christie is attacking water quality and the biggest bull's eye is on the Highlands Council," she said.

Milsaps cited several statements Christie has made that are critical of the law. And the June Highlands meeting marked the first at which council members did not approve a municipal conformance plan.

Thursday, with more members present, the council approved Hackettstown's petition for

approval. And it approved a grant for Hackettstown to study the impact of accepting development that's no longer allowed in other areas, under a process known as a TDR, or transfer of development rights. It was the question of why Hackettstown had not offered to accept TDRs that killed the town's application six weeks ago.

James Rilee, who was Christie's choice to chair the council and who took that position in June, clarified his vote against Hackettstown's application, saying it was because, "I didn't know enough about the regional master plan."

Prior to Thursday's meeting, the council had approved the conformance plans of 23 municipalities—among them Kinnelon, Mahwah and Washington Township—and the counties of Passaic and Somerset. Thus far, 60 municipalities and 5 counties have submitted plans for approval.

Thursday's session wasn't without interruption. Chester Township police arrested Hunterdon County landowner Harold Danielson, who was lead out of the meeting after yelling and refusing to leave.

In addressing the soggy crowd, Sen. Robert Smith, D-Middlesex and a prime sponsor of the law, said the fears opponents brought up when the law was first being considered have not materialized.

"Highlands property owners are not being treated as second-class citizens," he said. "They have everything New Jersey wants. ... They have some of the most pristine and beautiful countryside in America that will continue to be there."

"This is a vital protection and we need to be vigilant because there is much in the way of wiggle room," said Assemblyman John McKeon, D-Essex and the other prime sponsor. "We will be vigilant that the intention of the most important environmental law in a generation is carried out to a T."

Following the rally, the Highlands supporters headed to the council's meeting. Several land owners who have opposed the law for the last seven years also turned out, making it a standing-only crowd.

Despite the comments by Smith and McKeon and the environmentalists, many landowners are still unhappy with the law and its ramifications.

"'Save the water' is such a cover-up for the biggest land grab ever," said Hank Klumpp, a farmer who owns 150 acres in Tewksbury in the preservation area of the Highlands. "Devaluing land by as much as 90 percent makes the Highlands Act a legal theft."