

The Star-Ledger

Highlands Council, Pinelands Commission help protect environment, economy

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By **Star-Ledger Guest Columnist**

By **Tom Kean, Brendan Byrne, James Florio and Christine Todd Whitman**

Protecting natural resources such as clean water and forest lands is an important priority, especially for New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the nation.

When you're a governor, though, it's not feasible to operate with just a single agenda item. The job typically involves a tortuous process of balancing conflicting interests and objectives. So it is with the environment and our natural resources, which are challenged regularly by groups seeking to extend commercial and industrial zones and gain clearances for housing developments. Both are



Steve Klaver/The Star-Ledger Round Valley reservoir in Clinton Township, within the Highlands tract. The northern Highlands provide some of the state's most scenic vistas, but the region also contains half its water supply.

important to the well-being and prosperity of a state — we need growth to help drive the economy and create and sustain jobs, but we also need to protect our resources and ensure clean water supplies for the long-term health of the state and its citizens.

So how does a state achieve a healthy and constructive balance between growth and conservation?

New Jersey is fortunate to have created two effective organizations — the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council, and the Pinelands Commission — that work to guide and coordinate regional planning in the northern and southern areas of our state, respectively. By controlling where development occurs, they preserve the forests essential to protecting their water supply.

The Highlands Council was formed in 2004 and charged with creating a regional plan to protect its water supply, which includes most of New Jersey's reservoir systems and four largest reservoirs, and to protect and enhance the region's natural, agricultural and cultural resources. The Highlands covers a broad geographic swath from south of Phillipsburg to the state's northern border with New York. Its 860,000 acres supply drinking water to 5.4 million people, about 65 percent of the state's population.

The Pinelands Commission has been in place for nearly 30 years, fulfilling a regional growth and conservation mandate under the Pinelands Protection Act of 1978. A key resource within its purview is the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer system, which supplies drinking water to more than 1 million people in South Jersey and contains an estimated 17 trillion gallons of **pure water**. The aquifer also feeds the region's streams, rivers and wetlands, which support the Pinelands' unique native plant and animal communities.

The great value that these groups have been able to impart stems from two sources. The first is the critical importance of their primary purpose: ensuring that clean plentiful water continues to flow from the state's major water resource areas. The second is their regional approach, which means going beyond local city limits to exert an intelligent and far-sighted influence to protect natural resources while supporting sustainable economic growth.



What is remarkable about the track record of these two organizations is not just their success in helping protect these resources, but the extent to which their efforts have been complementary to the state's economic growth and business development. Protecting the environment by encouraging growth to occur in existing communities and designated areas has helped support municipal infrastructures, deliver fiscal benefits for ratepayers and minimize commercial sprawl, which can inflate infrastructure costs, while providing tangible benefits to local businesses.

The Pinelands offers a telling example. In its 30 years of oversight, more than 90 percent of development has taken place where it was intended to — in areas designated for development. Some of the economic benefits in Pinelands municipalities include lower **unemployment rates**, lower average residential property tax rates and the creation of more **new businesses**.

We encourage the citizens of our state to learn more about the Highlands Council and Pinelands Commission, as well as their respective nonprofit advocacy groups, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition and the Pinelands Preservation Alliance. We further urge New Jersey's legislators and administration to provide greater support for these very worthy organizations and their goals.

Tom Kean, Brendan Byrne, James Florio and Christine Todd Whitman served as governor of New Jersey.