



# State of New Jersey

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## HIGHLANDS REGIONAL MASTER PLAN MONITORING PROGRAM STAKEHOLDER PUBLIC WORKSHOPS

### WORKSHOPS

As part of the Highlands Regional Master Plan monitoring program, three workshops were held between December 2014 and January 2015 in the northern, central and southern sub-regions of the Highlands region. This document is a processed summary of all of the public feedback received during these workshops.

Municipal Central December 15, 2014 7:00-9:00PM County College of Morris 214 Center Grove Road Randolph, NJ	Municipal North January 12, 2015 7:00-9:00PM Sussex County VoTech 102 N Church Road Sparta, NJ	Municipal South January 14, 2015 7:00-9:00PM Oldwick Fire Co Social Hall 163 Oldwick Road Oldwick, NJ
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### PARTICIPANTS

Participants included members of the general public, elected officials, Highlands Council members and staff, and project team members. The central workshop had 23 participants; the north workshop had 48, and the south workshop had 38.

### PURPOSE

To provide an overview of the Highlands Regional Master Plan Monitoring Program and process, receive feedback on draft indicator topics, and collect other general feedback as it relates to the Highlands program areas.

### ACTIVITIES

Participants were invited to visit topic-area stations, facilitated by Highlands Council staff, to vote on indicator topics and respond to targeted questions. For indicators, participants were asked to use up to three dots per topic area to vote on the indicator topic(s) most important for monitoring. Participants were also asked to respond to open-ended questions using post-it notes. Those with any general comments or questions were invited to speak with any member of the Highlands Council staff. Topic areas/stations included:

- Introduction: Learn about the Highlands Act, the Highlands Regional Master Plan and the monitoring program.
- Land Owner Equity

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- Resident and Business Owner Concerns
- Agriculture & Forest Sustainability
- Land Use
- Water Resources & Lake Management
- Water & Sewer Infrastructure
- Economic Development
- Transportation, Transit & Air Quality
- Conformance
- General Questions & Comment

Participants were encouraged to submit additional comments on the online web comment portal.

## FEEDBACK ON INDICATORS

By category, the top three indicator topics participants prioritized for analysis included:

- Economic development, historical, cultural and tourism resources:
  1. Property value
  2. Preserved open space
  3. Business
- Water resources and lake management:
  1. Aquifers
  2. Water quality
  3. Septic density
- Water and sewer:
  1. Wastewater treatment
  2. Tie: Septic management and water supply
  3. Wellhead protection areas
- Land use:
  1. Land use capacity
  2. Redevelopment
  3. Centers
- Agriculture and forest:
  1. Forests
  2. Agricultural business
  3. Tie: critical habitat and conservation lands
- Transportation:
  1. Transit options
  2. Health impacts
  3. Tie: commuting patterns and air quality

Additional indicator-related comments were provided for the water and sewer station, conveying the need to reevaluate the nitrate dilution model and septic density standards, improve septic systems and promote good septic system maintenance, maintain groundwater recharge, monitor downstream water use, and protect wellhead protection areas.

**FEEDBACK ON OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS**

***How can the Highlands Council improve outreach, planning and education to help attract and retain business in the region?***

Comments conveyed the need for greater outreach and education to business owners, including creating an easier and more transparent permitting process. Further, several comments conveyed that pending oil pipeline projects may not necessarily provide long-term economic benefits to the Highlands region. Participants also recommended attracting businesses that focus on alternative energy practices; measuring change in economic growth since 2004; and communicating with Highlands water users about the potential adverse impacts of the Highlands Act.

***How can the Highlands Council assist in the expansion and promotion of tourism in the region?***

Comments indicate that participants largely recognize the importance of tourism in the Highlands region. Strategies to enhance tourism included supporting public access to state parks and forests via trails, promoting trails and biking opportunities, supporting agritourism through pamphlets, drawing connections to historical resources, and allowing greater development of hotels and accommodations. Participants also offered a number of economic development-related comments, including enabling organic farming, green infrastructure and other sustainable practices; and supporting entrepreneurship and building expansion.

***What steps can the Highlands Council take to support water quality improvements in the Highlands region?***

Multiple, similar comments offered support for the following actions: consolidating water quality initiatives across the state and collaborate across state lines, reevaluating the nitrate dilution model, and opposing pending oil pipeline projects to protect against their potential adverse impacts to water quality. Other feedback included encouraging inter-basin transfers where appropriate, prioritizing stormwater management, updating research to account for more intense storms that may result from climate change, banning pesticides in critical areas to prevent runoff into the water supply, providing land owner compensation, protecting natural resources such as forests and wetlands, increasing setbacks near water sources, and enhancing education and outreach to highlight the relationship between healthy ecosystems and positive quality of life.

***What steps can the Highlands Council take to support lake management in the Highlands region?***

Relatively few comments were submitted. Regarding lake management, participants suggested that the Highlands Council attack non-point pollution sources, such as runoff from roadways, encourage septic upgrades and inter-basin transfers, enhance education to highlight the importance of septic system maintenance, and protect forests as groundwater recharge areas. Additionally, there was a question about the determination of the lake management zone boundary line.

***How can the Highlands Council better assist communities that wish to promote infill development and redevelopment?***

To promote infill development and redevelopment in the Highlands region, participants suggested that the Highlands Council advance the TDR program by identifying appropriate centers (such as those approved by the State Planning Commission), incentivize redevelopment as an alternative to

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greenfield development, simplify infrastructure approvals to be less expensive and time-consuming, liberalize sewer permits, and discount sanitary flows that may be transferred out of the basin. With regard to building design and construction, comments conveyed support for attractive development and redevelopment, as well as incentives for renewable energy and net zero buildings. Additional, more general feedback included the desire to reconcile affordable housing obligations with available resources, enhance support for capacity-based planning, expansion of the RMP to include resiliency strategies, and repeal of the Highlands Act.

## ***What steps can the Highlands Council take to better support and promote the agriculture industry in the Highlands?***

Responses to this question were unique and offered a range of suggestions to better support the agriculture industry, including reinstating farming in certain communities, encouraging conforming towns to view farms as economic engines, implementing an operational TDR program, funding agriculture loans based on business planning, developing policy guidelines for renewable energy generation, fostering greater interaction between farmers and the food industry, supporting agritourism, and promoting the market for organic, non-GMO and locally-produced crops.

## ***What steps can the Highlands Council take to better protect large contiguous forests in the Highlands?***

A number of participants expressed support for landowner equity mechanisms to support forest preservation, including a functional and well-funded TDR program, as well as development of a forest easement purchase program. Several comments also indicated opposition to gas pipeline and other linear energy infrastructure development through protected forest areas. Some participants conveyed that the Highlands Council should underscore the connection between forest preservation and water quality by managing forests for water quality and supply, undertaking an assessment that evaluates the effect of contiguous forest preservation on water quality, and implementing the Council's forest stewardship recommendations. Participants also suggested that the Council should assess forest health in addition to forest size, encourage public access via hiking trails, and that the Council should not play a role in contiguous forest preservation.

## ***What public transportation improvements would you like to see in the Highlands in the near and long term?***

Regarding development, several comments highlighted opportunities to encourage transit-friendly, node-based development to support enhanced public transportation options. In addition, participants also expressed support for multi-modal options, particularly around promoting carpools, facilitating more shuttles and community-based transit at train stations, and implementing complete streets. There were a number of comments regarding health and air quality, including more aggressively monitoring health impacts, and ensuring that good air quality is maintained. Regarding highways, participants shared suggestions about congestion pricing, conversion of Route 15 to a three-lane highway, and addition of solar canopies. Participants offered conflicting viewpoints on oil pipelines, with some stating that pipelines should be banned, and others stating that pipelines help to safely move oil.

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## ***How could communication between the Highlands Council, and residents and business owners be improved?***

A number of participants recommended that the Highlands Council better educate members of the public on the economic value of natural resources, particularly clean water. Multiple participants also conveyed the need to relax regulations within the Highlands region, particularly around exemptions, and eliminate excessive bureaucracy. With regard to the agriculture industry, participants shared that the Highlands Council should support the industry through strategies such as developing an agriculture advisory committee, supporting large-scale operations, and recognizing tree farms. Other comments included: linking various business groups, developing an email newsletter, implementing TDR, allowing expansion of sewer service areas, and reevaluating the Highlands region boundaries.

## ***What would you change about the Highlands landowner equity policies?***

Comments largely communicated the need for land owner equity. Strategies offered to support land owner equity included implementation of a functional TDR program, return of development rights to land owners, development of an easement purchase program for forest landowners, reduction or elimination of property taxes, greater outreach around farmland preservation programs, and direct compensation. Participants also conveyed dissatisfaction with Highlands exemptions and the inability to subdivide lots.

## ***Has plan conformance been a positive or negative experience in your municipality? Please explain.***

Feedback was mixed. Those who indicated that conformance has been a positive experience, conveyed satisfaction with the Act and RMP's support for natural resource protection. Those who indicated that conformance has been a negative process, conveyed that the process is too long and difficult and further, has not resolved land owner equity issues. In terms of the checklist ordinance, one participant commented that the approach leaves the entire region in limbo.

## ***Do you have any suggestions to improve the plan conformance process?***

Several participants indicated dissatisfaction with the checklist ordinance, while others expressed that the plan conformance process is somewhat confusing and that they would prefer to see a more definitive land use ordinance. Regarding Highlands development credits (HDC), one participant expressed that the HDCs are undervalued and that the process is too lengthy. In terms of development, comments conveyed support for development near already developed areas and away from forests and farmland, while others conveyed support for development regardless of location. Other comments included building upon the State Plan, advancing TDR, and implementing tax stabilization.

## ***General Comments & Questions***

Most comments generally fit into five overarching topic areas: greater support for economic development, satisfaction with the Act and Highlands Council's water resource protection efforts, the need to implement just land owner compensation, potential reevaluation of the science behind the Act – including the nitrate dilution model and the Planning and Preservation Area boundaries – and opposition to oil pipeline construction. Several participants also offered comments generally about the monitoring program process. Participants also provided feedback on the workshop activities, and requested that comments be made available to the public.