

# Highlands Council Monthly Report

August 2023

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Frenches Pond, Byram Township, Sussex County (Traveling HAB Lab monitoring site).

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# Highlands Council Monthly Report

*Summary of Activities* | August 1-31, 2023

## Executive Director Priority Spotlight

### One-Year Reflection

August 15 marked the end of my first year as Executive Director of the Highlands Council. The year has gone by quickly in the context of all that has been accomplished. In the past year, the Highlands Council has strengthened and expanded its relationships with the municipalities, counties, and communities we serve. The staff and I have earned the trust and respect of many constituencies that were previously reluctant to work with the Council. We have made tremendous progress on important policy issues like warehouse development, forest stewardship, stormwater planning, affordable housing, watershed protection, sustainable economic development, and support for local agriculture. And yet this represents only a fraction of what we need to accomplish.

We will continue to push hard to ensure that we are doing our utmost to protect the important resources of the Highlands region, which helps secure a sustainable future for the State of New Jersey. We will also continue to push for the resources the Highlands Council needs to fulfill our mission. Among these are action on Highlands Council appointments to fill out the Council's membership; recognition of the critical role of the Highlands in the state's climate resilience and support for that role; increased staffing levels and budget levels to enable us to carry out critical functions; and access to funding for land preservation and forest resource protection.



- **Sustainable Agriculture Grants.** August 11 marked the deadline for applications to the Highlands Council's new [Sustainable Agriculture grant program](#). Designed to advance innovative sustainable agriculture projects in the Highlands, the idea for this grant program grew directly from conversations with the Council's Agricultural Advisory Committee members. The general consensus among members was that the best way to support the agricultural community in the Highlands was through grant funding for technical and practical assistance for value-added facilities, new farmer programs, sustainable land management practices, and other sustainable agriculture activity. The Council received six applications to the program and staff will be meeting with the committee in September to review the applications and insights gained during interviews with applicants. Projects will be funded on a three-year timeline, with annual checkpoints to ensure sustained progress. Approval of the grants will likely be on the Council's public meeting agenda in October.
- **Meeting with the Pinelands Commission.** Highlands Council staff were thrilled to host a meeting at our office in Chester with members of the Pinelands Commission staff along with representatives of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. The two agencies and the nonprofit advocacy groups that support their work engaged in

discussions and information sharing about matters of common interest including affordable housing, stormwater management, forestry, and warehousing.

- **Reviewing the Regional Master Plan (RMP).** Staff have begun working on a required review of the RMP, that will culminate in a Monitoring Program report released in the second half of 2024. A key component of this work will be an update to the Land Use Capability Zone map that was originally created during development of the RMP and has been a cornerstone of the Highlands Council's work. This review will coincide with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Highlands Act and will serve as an important point for measuring the successes and shortfalls of the Highlands Council to date and provide a means of ensuring that our work going forward can continue to adequately protect the region's resources. The review will also include updates to some of the indicators identified in the 2018 Report, and the adoption of amendments to the RMP that reflect important policies and programs that outline RMP implementation in specific areas such as climate change adaptation and mitigation, forestry, affordable housing, and warehousing in the region.
- **Maintaining water quality and quantity.** A recent *New York Times* [feature](#) explored groundwater depletion across the country highlighting a disturbing truth that many of us in the Highlands are all-too-familiar with: we are taking water out of the ground faster than nature can replace it. Highlands Council data indicates that the majority of subwatersheds in the region are in deficit of available water. Factors like climate change are intensifying the swings between drought and deluge, making it increasingly difficult to consistently maintain water quantity and quality. The majority of Highlands residents rely on groundwater from private wells for their drinking water and water purveyors, such as the Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority, withdraw groundwater for distribution through public water systems. Groundwater levels are also integral to the ecological health of the region by providing a constant year-round flow for the rivers and streams of the Highlands. The protection and management of Highlands aquifers must always be an important part of the work of the Highlands Council.
- **Find us on Facebook.** The Highlands Council recently transitioned a previously developed project-focused Facebook page to an overall Highlands Council page. You can find us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NJHighlandsCouncil](http://www.facebook.com/NJHighlandsCouncil). We'll be sharing news and information about the Council's work and related work throughout the region and beyond. In the coming months, we plan to make our presence known on Instagram as well. Stay tuned.

## **Municipal and County Regional Master Plan (RMP) Implementation**

Updates related to Highlands Council-funded projects that help implement the RMP.

- **Byram Township, Sussex County.** Highlands Council staff approved a scope of work (SOW) for design and engineering activities related to the C.O. Johnson Park improvement plan. The plan includes upgrades to ballfields, onsite stormwater management, pedestrian trails, and the addition of a dog park.

- **Franklin Township, Warren County.** The Township recently completed a Farmland Preservation Plan update that was funded by the Council. The Plan was reviewed and approved by staff for payment.
- **High Bridge, Hunterdon County.** The Borough requested funding to complete the mapping of stormwater structures as part of its 2023 MS4 Permit compliance. High Bridge also submitted a request for funding to support a redevelopment plan for a specific property on the Borough's Main Street.
- **Hunterdon County.** The County submitted materials related to completion of a Digital Marketing Initiative that had been funded by the Council. The deliverables were reviewed by staff and approved for reimbursement.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County.** Staff received and is reviewing an updated draft of a sewer study being completed for the Township.
- **Morris County.** Staff received and is reviewing the results of a sediment oxygen demand (SOD) and phosphorus speciation analysis of Lake Hopatcong, conducted by consultants for the County. Staff is currently reviewing the deliverables against the approved SOW for the project.
- **West Milford Township, Passaic County.** Staff approved a SOW submitted by West Milford to complete several tasks related to the Township's MS4 Permit compliance.
- **Guidance for MS4 Compliance.** The Highlands Council has developed [guidance, including template SOWs](#), to help Highlands municipalities achieve compliance with the 2023-27 MS4 permit. The template scopes identify which components of the permit qualify for Highlands Council funding. Funding and assistance are available to any Highlands municipality regardless of conformance status.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Grants.** In August Highlands Council staff began reviewing applications and meeting with applicants to the [Highlands Sustainable Agriculture Grant](#) program. Awards are anticipated to be made at the October Highlands Council public meeting.

## Project Reviews

The Highlands Council does not issue permits but is statutorily required to review certain proposed projects in the region for consistency with the Highlands RMP. In some cases, the Highlands Council shares jurisdiction with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP).

- **Mill Ridge Lane Redevelopment, Chester Borough, Morris County.** Highlands Council staff has received and is reviewing stormwater management materials related to a proposed multi-family townhouse redevelopment at the site of the former Larison Turkey Farm in Chester Borough. In addition to reviewing for consistency with the RMP, staff are also reviewing these materials for consistency with the parameters of a [Highlands Center designation approved by the Highlands Council in 2020](#).  
*Highlands Council staff review is pending.*
- **Car Dealership, Mahwah Township, Bergen County.** Highlands Council staff completed its consistency review of a proposed project to construct a car dealership on a vacant parcel adjacent

to an existing car dealership. Staff review found the project consistent with the RMP, subject to conditions including submission of final site plans and other official documents, and updates to the Landscape Plan.

*Highlands Council staff finding: Consistent, with conditions.*

## Science Initiatives

- **Forestry in the Highlands.** Highlands Council staff met with representatives from the State Office of Forests and Natural Lands, Union County, Duke Farms, and private property owners to discuss forestry practices in the Highlands. These meetings were part of an ongoing outreach effort to explore and identify best management practices for forestry in the Highlands Region.
- **Montclair State University (MSU) Traveling HAB Lab Citizen Science project.** Highlands Council staff members continued water quality monitoring at two waterbodies in the Highlands as part of the [MSU Traveling HAB Lab Citizen Science](#) project. A total of five sampling events were conducted in the month of August. Each selected waterbody is monitored every other week. Water samples collected during each event are preserved and provided to MSU for further analysis and quality control purposes.

Preliminary analysis revealed the presence of several types of algae as well as cyanobacteria cells in some of the samples collected indicating one of the lakes may be experiencing a bloom, although not necessarily a harmful algal bloom (HAB) since not all cyanobacteria produce toxins. Per program protocols, the elevated cell counts were reported to the NJDEP for further investigation. [NJDEP sampling and testing](#) indicated no HAB was present.

During the month of August, team members discovered that one of the instruments used during testing was not functioning properly. The issue is affecting only one of many data points being collected. MSU is aware and is ordering a new instrument. Also in August, all data collected during the July sampling events was submitted to MSU.

The purpose of the MSU Traveling HAB Lab is to increase understanding and awareness of the environmental and health impacts of HABs in New Jersey. The citizen science project engages members of the public in HAB research and monitoring. A [data dashboard summarizing all info collected by the Traveling HAB Lab](#) is available online and will continue to be updated. (At the data dashboard, the sites being monitored by Highlands Council staff are DP1, DP2 and FP1.)

## Land Preservation Program Updates

- **Department of the Interior Petition.** The Highlands Council submitted a petition to the U.S. Department of the Interior requesting use of the Dual Appraisal methodology for land preservation projects in the New Jersey Highlands region being submitted for consideration of grant funding in the federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) grant program. Current federal regulations for the HCA grant program require Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisition (UASFLA or “Yellow Book”), which typically result in significantly lower property

valuations, making it difficult for New Jersey to participate in this grant program. The HCA grant program is administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which falls within the Department of the Interior. Highlands Council staff also met with local representatives to gain support for this petition.

## Outreach & Education

- **Upcoming Event: Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference.** Executive Director Ben Spinelli will be facilitating the plenary and the Highlands Council will have an informational table at the [Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference](#) taking place on Saturday, September 30 at the Lackland Center at Centenary University in Hackettstown.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 28 inquiries from constituents in August.

## Municipal & County Coordination

Highlands Council staff frequently meets with our constituent municipalities and counties to discuss their priorities and how they intersect with implementation of the Highlands RMP.

- In August, the Highlands Council met with High Bridge Borough (MS4 funding); Chester Borough (Water Use and Conservation Management Planning (WUCMP) and a Highlands Council weather station); Morris Township (RMP Implementation); Harding Township (WUCMP); Parsippany-Troy Hills (redevelopment planning); Ringwood Borough (affordable housing).
- The Highlands Region **Economic Sustainability County Coalition** met in August.
- **Support for The Greenway Trail Plan.** The Highlands Council provided a letter of support for Hunterdon County to secure assistance from North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) in the development of a study to support The Greenway Trail Plan. The purpose of the study is to conduct an analysis of Hunterdon County's population centers, county park properties, and opportunities for connectivity between them via a trail network. This study would be scheduled to kick off in the summer of 2024 and conclude no later than June 30, 2026.
- **Support for High Bridge Transit Village Designation.** The Highlands Council provided a letter of support for High Bridge's application to New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) for a Transit Village designation. High Bridge is a compact, walkable town, with a train station that serves the larger Hunterdon County area. With easy access to an extensive trail system that runs throughout the Highlands Region, the Borough is also a very popular destination for tourism in the area. Maximizing the benefits of transit service for the sustainable and appropriate development of the Borough is consistent with the Highlands RMP.

## Agency & Organization Collaboration

- **Inter-Agency Coordination.** In August, Highlands Council staff met with:
  - Members of the Pinelands Commission staff along with representatives of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance and the Highlands Coalition to discuss matters of common interest;
  - The State Agriculture Development Committee and the US Department of Agriculture to discuss support for agriculture in the Highlands;
  - The NJDEP as part of our regular coordination; and

- US Fish and Wildlife service as part of several committee meetings related to the reauthorization of the federal Highlands Conservation Act.

## Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The September Highlands Council public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 21. The October public meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 19. All meetings are held at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council office in Chester, NJ. Complete details are available on the [calendar page](#) of the Highlands Council website.

