

Highlands Council Monthly Report

January 2023

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Stone House Brook, Butler Borough, Morris County

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Highlands Council Monthly Report

Summary of Activities | January 1-31, 2023

Executive Director Priority Highlights

- **Warehouse Siting.** At its January meeting the Highlands Council approved a [resolution](#) to fund 10 grants to help Highlands municipalities examine local zoning to see where they may be vulnerable to inappropriate development, specifically warehouse siting. Interest in [these grants](#) is already strong as noted further down in this report. In addition, the council is working to develop Highlands-specific guidance that will augment the [guidance](#) released by the State Planning Commission in 2022. The Highlands Council's goal is to ensure our municipalities have the tools they need to make good planning decisions that support the Regional Master Plan (RMP) as well as local community goals.
- **Affordable Housing in the Highlands.** In January the Council released a [Request for Qualifications](#) (RFQ) seeking a team of experts in affordable housing, planning and environmental regulation to help ensure Highlands municipalities are prepared with the best possible information to address 4th round affordable housing obligations coming in 2025. Regional Planning is integral to good affordable housing decisions and the Highlands RMP must guide affordable housing plans in the region. This did not happen in the third round, as was directed by the Highlands Act and Executive Order 114, 2008 (EO114). The anticipated result of this project is Highlands-specific guidance that will ensure implementation of the RMP in compliance with the Fair Housing Act, affordable housing obligations, and the provisions of EO114.
- **Land Preservation Funding.** The Highlands Council passed a [resolution](#) at its January meeting authorizing the Executive Director to request a portion of the Corporation Business Tax (CBT) be directly allocated to the Highlands Council for preservation efforts. Although the Council's primary focus is on natural resource protection through regional planning, land preservation is an essential tool, and Highlands Council land preservation programs fill a unique need, since parcels of any size may qualify and applications for land that is forested, agricultural and/or mixed use are all considered. A dedicated source of funding is essential to continue this work. We are providing a copy of the adopted resolution to all members of the state legislature and pertinent state agencies.
- **Climate Resilience.** More than 80 individuals attended a webinar in January to learn more about the [Highlands Municipal Climate Resilience Guidance project](#). While much of the discussion about climate change in New Jersey tends to focus on the shore, it is imperative that we fully understand the potential impacts in this region and ensure our municipal partners have what they need to prepare for those impacts. Not only to meet regulatory requirements, but for the long-term health and safety of the entire state. We expect this project to be complete before the end of this year, with continued stakeholder input throughout the process.

Municipal and County RMP Implementation

Progress on Highlands Council-funded projects.

- **Alpha Borough, Warren County**
 - Amended Petition for Plan Conformance seeking to expand the Borough's designated Highlands Center is [posted for public comment](#) through February 11.
 - The Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA) expressed formal support for the amended petition on January 18. As a result of the State Planning Commission's endorsement of the Regional Master Plan (RMP), OPA's approval of the petition means that if it is approved by the Council, the Highlands Center will also qualify as a State Planning Center, and be eligible for any state agency benefits available to communities that have received State Plan Endorsement.
- **Bethlehem Township, Hunterdon County**
 - Staff approved a Scope of Work for a portion of an Historic Preservation Plan.
- **Chester Borough, Morris County**
 - Submitted a Scope of Work (SOW) to complete a sanitary sewer line inventory and inspection. Highlands Council staff reviewed and approved the SOW as part of a larger Alternative Wastewater Evaluation Planning effort.
- **Green Township, Warren County**
 - Staff approved a Scope of Work for a Farmland Preservation Plan Update.
- **Hopatcong Borough, Sussex County**
 - Completed a Detailed Mapping and Preliminary Resource Analysis Report as part of a municipal redevelopment plan. Deliverables were reviewed by staff and found to meet the requirements of the Scope of Work.
- **Jefferson Township, Morris County**
 - Completed a component of the Township's Sewer Feasibility Study. Supporting documentation was reviewed and approved by staff.
- **Montville Township, Morris County**
 - Staff approved a Scope of Work for a Floodplain Reconnection and Groundwater Recharge Demonstration Project.
- **Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County**
 - Submitted a Scope of Work to complete an Initial Assessment Report.
- **Rockaway Township, Morris County**
 - Completed a Lake Management Plan. Deliverables were reviewed by staff and found to meet the requirements of the Scope of Work. The Township intends to apply for a grant from the NJDEP for a targeted water quality improvement project based on recommendations in the plan.
- **Roxbury Township, Morris County**
 - Submitted a grant application to complete engineering design plans to update stormwater management at the Shore Hills Beach Club. Highlands Council staff is reviewing.

- **Vernon Township, Sussex County**
 - Submitted a Scope of Work to develop a Watershed Assessment of several lakes in the Township. The project plan was shared with the Highlands Council Budget and Finance Committee and referred to the Highlands Council for approval of funding not to exceed \$149,000 to complete the work. The [resolution](#) was approved at the Council’s January public meeting.
 - Staff approved two additional Scopes of Work including a Housing Element and Fair Share Plan Update and a Marketing/Branding Plan.
- **Washington Borough, Warren County**
 - Completed a Master Plan Reexamination Report and Municipal Redevelopment Plan. The corresponding deliverables were reviewed by staff and found consistent with the approved Scopes of Work.
 - Staff approved a scope of work for a Sustainable Economic Development Plan.
- **West Milford, Passaic County**
 - Staff approved a scope of work for the completion of a comprehensive Master Plan Update. The project aims to address deficiencies in the 35-year-old plan and to satisfy the requirements set under the Municipal Land Use Law.
 - The Township continues to make progress on the development of a Township-wide Watershed Management Study.
- **“Local Zoning, Local Control” grant**
 - Sent information to municipal and county officials as well as planning professionals in the region regarding a grant opportunity to examine local zoning to see where they may be vulnerable to inappropriate development, specifically warehouse siting. Funding up to \$5,000 per municipality is available.
 - Based on interest in the program, the Highlands Council approved a [resolution](#) at its January public meeting budgeting for 10 of the awards in the coming months.
 - Hope Township is the first municipality to express interest in the grant and has submitted a letter to the Council requesting funding to complete a Municipal Zoning Analysis.

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 Regional Master Plan (RMP).

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment Review: Iron Mountain Road, Mine Hill Township, Morris County.** An amendment to the Northeast WQMP was proposed in association with the development of warehousing, offices, loading docks, access drives, parking area, stormwater basins, and supporting utilities. The site is located within the Protection Zone of the Planning Area and, although it is currently vacant, the site has a history of disturbance that includes mining, the placement of fill, and building demolition. Applicant has submitted a Site-

Specific Water Deficit Mitigation Plan that outlines the water mitigation and conservation measures the applicant will implement. In addition, applicant incorporated several recommendations from the Highlands Council into final plans.

Highlands Council staff review finding: consistent with the RMP.

- **Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) Amendment Review: Diamond Chip Logistics Park, Sparta Township, Sussex County.** An amendment to the Sussex County WQMP was proposed in relation to the development of warehousing and offices. The 70.9-acre site is an existing quarry operated by Sparta Sand and Gravel Inc. The site is provided with freight rail access and is located in the Economic Development Zone of Sparta Township. The proposed project will redevelop the extensively disturbed quarry into two warehouses totaling 860,480 square feet as well as a 20,000 square foot office space.

Highlands Council staff review finding: consistent with the RMP.

- **Highlands Preservation Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #11/ Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD) (w/NJDEP): Sherwood Village, Washington Township, Morris County.** The proposed project seeks to replace a contaminated well and associated equipment at a mobile home community. Existing and proposed water use remain the same.

Highlands Council staff review finding: consistent with the goals and purposes of the Highlands Act.

- **Highlands Preservation Area Exemption Determination, Exemption #9/ Highlands Applicability Determination (HAD) (w/NJDEP): Otterhole Road Culvert Replacement, West Milford, Passaic County.** Proposed replacement of the existing culvert over Post Brook to ensure efficiency and safety. The existing culvert and asphalt carrying Otterhole Road over Post Brook is significantly aged and weathered.

Highlands Council staff review for consistency with the Highlands Act and RMP: pending.

- **Planning Area Consistency Review: 240 Littleton Road, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Morris County.** Proposed construction of a 7,892 SF, 3-story, multi-family apartment building with 31 parking stalls, driveways, landscaped areas, utility improvements, and a stormwater conveyance system.

Highlands Council staff review finding: consistent with the RMP with conditions.

- **Planning Area Consistency Review: Ramsey Soccer Field, Mahwah, Bergen County.** Proposed construction of a 39-stall pervious pavement parking lot to service the existing Ramsey Borough Soccer Field located in Mahwah on North Central Avenue directly adjacent to the Borough Line. The 8.6-acre site is within the Mahwah Industrial Park IP-120 Zone.

Highlands Council staff review for consistency with the RMP: pending.

GIS Updates

- Weston Strubert joined the GIS team in January. Weston has a background in biology and GIS and joins the staff most recently from the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

Contract Projects

- **Highlands Municipal Climate Resilience Guidance.** The NJ Future project team led a webinar on Thursday, January 26 for municipal leaders and planning experts to discuss the guidance being developed and seek practitioners' input. Hosted by Highlands Council staff, the event was attended by 88 individuals representing municipalities across the Highlands Region. Attendees responded meaningfully to polling questions and the Q&A period at the end was robust. All have been invited to continue their involvement in the project as it moves forward. Additional information about this project, including a copy of the presentation and a recording of the session, is available on the [project website](#).
- **Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan Request for Proposals (RFP).** The Highlands Council is [seeking proposals](#) from a multi-disciplinary team to develop or update Watershed Restoration and Protection Plans for one or more subwatershed(s) within the Highlands Region. Proposals are being accepted through 4:00 p.m. on Friday, March 17, 2023.
- **Affordable Housing Request for Qualifications (RFQ).** The Highlands Council is [seeking proposals](#) from consultants or consulting teams to advise and assist the Highlands Council in providing 4th round affordable housing guidance to the 88 municipalities of the Highlands region. Proposals are being accepted through 4:00 p.m. on February 24, 2023.
- **Sustainable Agricultural Practices.** Highlands Council staff will be drafting an RFP or RFQ to develop a program that will engage the region's farmers on implementing sustainable agricultural practices and fostering agricultural viability in the Highlands. The draft will be shared with Council Members for their input, review and recommendations.

Open Space and Highlands Development Credit (HDC) Program Updates

- **Open Space Funding.** At its January public meeting The Highlands Council passed a [resolution](#) authorizing a request for a portion of the Corporation Business Tax (CBT) for the purpose of funding the Highlands Open Space Preservation Programs.
- **HDC Site Inspections.** Highlands staff conducted two HDC site inspections. All properties were found to be in compliance with the terms of the easements.

Staffing and Staff Development

- **Open Positions/Recent Hires**
 - **Administrative Assistant.** Linda Acker, who previously served as part-time receptionist for the Highlands Council, was selected to fill the vacant full-time Administrative Assistant position.
 - **GIS Specialist 2.** Weston Strubert joined the Highlands Council GIS team in January.
 - **Environmental Scientist 2.** Sarah Friend accepted an offer and will be joining the Science staff on February 13, 2023.

- **Professional Development**

- In January, staff members attended the following educational sessions: Rutgers-Green Infrastructure Champions Program Webinar, Center for Watershed Protection Delaware Basin Virtual Training.

Outreach & Education

- **Municipal & County RMP Implementation Meetings.** The Highlands Council met with two towns and two counties in January: Chester Borough Morris County, Town of Clinton Hunterdon County, Somerset County and Hunterdon County (GIS needs).
- **Inter-Agency Coordination** In January, the Highlands Council met with the New Jersey Infrastructure Bank (Chester Borough), SADC (Farmland Soils), and NJDEP Division of Land Resource Protection.
- **Events/Sessions Attended.** Warren County Board of Agriculture Annual Meeting, NJDEP Inland Flooding Rule Proposal Hearing, NJDEP Water Supply Advisory Committee Meeting, NJDEP-NJ Statewide Water Supply Plan Stakeholder Meeting.
- **Constituent Assistance.** The Highlands Council received and responded to 13 inquiries from constituents in January.
- **National Wildlife Federation Funding Database.** In 2021, the Highlands Council partnered with the Rutgers Water Resources program to develop stormwater management assessments and reports for 24 Highlands municipalities in the North and South Branch Raritan River watershed. In January, Highlands Council staff shared information with those municipalities about a resource to potentially seek funding to help implement the measures outlined in the stormwater management plans. The [National Wildlife Federation \(NWF\) funding microsite](#) allows users to search and sort more than 70 types of federal grants that fund nature-based solutions, based on factors such as eligible recipients, project purpose, and the match required.

Committee Meetings

- The following Council committees met in January: Plan Conformance Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Budget & Finance Committee, Affordable Housing Committee.

Looking Ahead

- **Public Council Meetings.** The February Highlands Council meeting has been cancelled. The March Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 16. 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](#).



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