



State of New Jersey

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 18, 2023

Highlands Council will help towns plan for and address next round of affordable housing

Goal is to ensure affordable housing decisions protect Highlands resources

CHESTER, N.J. — At its most recent meeting, the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) awarded a contract to Colliers Engineering & Design to develop guidance that will help the Council and its 88 constituent municipalities prepare for the 4th round of affordable housing obligations set to begin in 2025. The key objective of the project will be to ensure that the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) guides decision making when it comes to affordable housing.

“Highlands municipalities have a constitutional obligation to provide affordable housing units,” explains Ben Spinelli, Executive Director of the Highlands Council. “They also have an equal, if not more imperative, obligation to protect the drinking water resources for 70% of the state’s residents. These are not mutually exclusive goals, but they do require careful and thoughtful attention. The number, location, and manner in which affordable units are built in the Highlands must be informed by the RMP and the overarching need to protect the region’s vital resources.”

Although the Fair Housing Act was passed along with the State Planning Act in an effort to ensure sound planning principles guided affordable housing decisions, with the dissolution of the Council on

Affordable Housing (COAH) those principles have not remained at the forefront. As the conclusion of the 3rd round draws near, 67 of the 88 Highlands municipalities have adopted Fair Share Plans or settlement agreements resulting in an obligation of more than 16,000 affordable units. Highlands Council data indicates this is far more than the resources of the region can handle.

“The need for affordable housing is just one of many continuing sources of development pressure in the Highlands. This project is designed to help ensure that the appropriate balance between development, including the creation of affordable units, and protection of the region’s important resources is achieved,” says Spinelli.

The Colliers team has extensive experience in the Highlands region working with Highlands municipalities and Council staff on the development of fair share plans and housing plan elements for municipal master plans. The team also includes Surenian, Edwards, Buzak & Nolan, one of the preeminent law firms in the state on matters of municipal compliance involving affordable housing policy and related litigation.

The contracted project – not to exceed \$100,000 and expected to be completed in 2024 – will involve technical analysis and the development of policy and program recommendations that will simultaneously ensure compliance with the Fair Housing Act and effective implementation of the Highlands RMP. Once completed, the project will be rolled out to Highlands municipalities and grant funding will be available to help towns prepare 4th round plans.

“The Highlands region was set aside for special protections because of its value to the entire state of New Jersey. This is a point that cannot be lost,” says Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko. “Most New Jersey residents get their drinking water from the Highlands. The region must be considered as a whole, and the approach to affordable housing here must be led with this state-wide significance in mind.”

Actions taken by the Council at this meeting will take effect following the Governor’s review and consideration of the meeting minutes, up to 10 business days from receipt of the minutes. Materials related to this meeting including resolutions, presentations, audio, and minutes will be posted at: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calend/index.html (click on May 18 meeting).

The Highlands Council is a regional planning agency established in 2004 with the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands. Actions taken by the Council will take effect following the Governor's review and consideration of meeting minutes, up to 10 business days from receipt of meeting minutes.

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