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Highlands Council Allocates \$1.5 Million in Local Grant Funds

Monies Will Assist Municipalities And Counties With Regional Master Plan Conformance

CHESTER, N.J. – The New Jersey Highlands Council today allocated \$1.5 million in grants to provide municipalities and counties in the Highlands Region with financial and technical assistance as they take steps to address conformance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The Plan Conformance Grant Program will be available to all municipalities and counties with lands in the Highlands Region to examine the implications of conformance with the Regional Master Plan (RMP). These funds will allow municipalities and counties to initiate the Plan Conformance process and assess the benefits of Plan Conformance. These grants will be available after the adoption of the RMP.

“As the Highlands Council moves to adopt the Regional Master Plan, local officials are seeking more information about how the Plan will affect their communities, as well as what costs will be associated with conforming to the Plan,” said John Weingart, Chairman of the Highlands Council. “The Legislature, in creating the Highlands Act, set aside substantial grant funds for municipalities and counties to help pay for the advanced planning required by the Act.”

Of the 88 municipalities in the Highlands Region, 52 have land within the Preservation Area and all seven Highlands counties have land in the Preservation Area. Grants will also be made available to the 36 municipalities located entirely in the Planning Area. While Plan Conformance is optional for these municipalities, these grants will assist them in evaluating the benefits and costs associated with the process and allow them to make an informed decision.

The Highlands Council has set aside a total of \$1,500,000 for the Plan Conformance Grant Program to be distributed in grants up to \$15,000. These funds will allow for the initial review of local master plans and ordinances and environmental resource inventories, with an eye towards bringing plans

and ordinances into conformance with the RMP, as well as establishing the next steps in the Plan Conformance process. These grants also will fund the preparation of reports to determine the benefits of Plan Conformance and any recommended RMP updates and map adjustments to the Highlands Council to ensure municipal information is accurate and up-to-date.

“Municipalities in the Planning Area have a decision to make, and these grants are designed for them to work with their professionals to arrive at that decision,” said Eileen Swan, Executive Director of the Highlands Council. “We hope that municipalities in the Planning Area will look to the incentives we offer, including the grants, technical assistance, and legal protection, and strongly consider Plan Conformance with the Highlands RMP.”

To date, the Highlands Council has approved more than \$3.6 million in grant funds for Municipal Partnership Pilot Projects, COAH Planning, County Zoning and Parcel Analysis, County Digital Elevation Analysis, County Wastewater Capacity Analysis, County Approved Project Analysis, Sustainable Agriculture and Transfer of Development Rights Feasibility.

In addition to grant funds, the Highlands Act offers a number of incentives to encourage municipalities in the Planning Area to join the Council’s mission to protect the natural resources and foster a strong economy for this Region. Conformance to the RMP includes a strong legal shield – one of the strongest levels of legal protection in the state. The Highlands Act provides a, “strong presumption of validity,” to master plans, land use ordinances and local decisions by municipalities and counties that conform to the RMP. Legal representation is also included in certain instances.

Plan Conformance also includes automatic qualifications for State aid, planning and technical assistance for smart growth policies offered by the state Office of Smart Growth. It provides priority funding opportunities under Green Acres and State Farmland Preservation for municipalities that have adopted Transfer of Development Rights ordinances.

The Highlands Council will be preparing guidelines for the Plan Conformance Grant Program and once completed will be sending grant applications to all municipalities and counties in the Highlands Region.

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