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Press Release

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Highlands Council supports Ballot Question #3

Chester, NJ - The Highlands Council once more displayed its support for funding for land preservation in the Highlands by unanimously expressing supporting Ballot Question #3. On November 6, 2007, New Jersey voters will be asked to approve the Green Acres, Farmland, Blue Acres and Historic Preservation Bond Act of 2007. By authorizing State to issue \$200 million in general obligation bonds, the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund will provide much-needed funds to continue New Jersey's open space, parks, farmland and historic preservation programs through the Trust Fund. Executive Director Eileen Swan noted that "the Trust Fund is critical in preserving New Jersey's open space and is of vital importance in protecting water quality and quantity in the Highlands Region." Passage of Ballot Question #3 will provide funding to continue these programs for the immediate future as the Governor and Legislature work to develop a long term strategy to fund these programs.

The Garden State Preservation Trust Fund will also need to be reauthorized before June 30, 2009, when it expires. The Highlands Council has voiced the need to reauthorize the Trust Fund and also extend the dual appraisal methodology currently used in Trust Fund's preservation programs. The Trust Act currently requires that appraisals both for the Green Acres Program and the Farmland Preservation Program be calculated using two values including pre-Highlands Act (January 1, 2004) values and present day values. The higher of these two appraisals is to be utilized as the basis for negotiation. However, by the terms of the Trust Act, this appraisal methodology expires on June 30, 2009. This method of determining an appraisal is a key land preservation tool in maintaining a landowner's equity in their property and should be extended in order to encourage Highlands landowners to participate in the preservation process.

In recent years, the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund has served as the main source of funding for land preservation in New Jersey providing matching funds for many preservation opportunities in the Highlands Region.

- The Federal government has funded open space acquisition in the Highlands Region through the Forest Legacy Program, administered by the USDA Forest Service. Since 1995, this program has invested over \$21,624,000 totaling over 18,000 acres in the Highlands Region.

- The National Park Service's Land, Water & Conservation Fund program also provides matching grants to states and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities.
- Two-thirds of the Highlands municipalities, 60 out of 88, and all seven counties in the Highlands Region have created dedicated sources of funds or trusts to purchase open space for natural and cultural protection, agricultural easements to preserve farmland, and to develop recreation facilities. Total funds collected by Highlands Region municipalities in 2005 were \$19,611,000. The total funds collected by the Highlands Region county open space programs in 2006 are \$92,023,000, up from \$80,215,000 the year before. These funds are all based on dedicated funds from property taxes.
- Approximately 275,000 acres of the nearly 860,000 acres in the Highlands Region are preserved open space or preserved farmland in a combination of federal, State, county, municipal, nonprofit and private ownership.

Highlands Council Chair John Weingart noted that the Legislature included a mandate in the Highlands Act for a "strong and significant commitment by the State." "If voters pass Question #3 on November 6th," Weingart said, "it will be one more important step towards protecting and conserving the Highlands Region."

In August 2004, the New Jersey Legislature enacted the Highland Water Protection and Planning Act in order to protect nearly 860,000 acres which supply drinking water for more than sixty-five percent of New Jersey's residents. The Highlands Act created the Highlands Council as a regional planning entity charged with protecting the water resources and natural beauty of the New Jersey Highlands while allowing for planned, sustainable development and redevelopment of the region. The Council members include a broad and representative range of elected officials from Highlands municipalities and counties, as well as individuals with diverse backgrounds and area perspectives.

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