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## Another Busy Year Ahead for Highlands Council

CHESTER, N.J. – Last year began with Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council receiving public comments on a draft version of the Regional Master Plan; it ended with more than five dozen municipalities filing Notices of Intent to conform. Along the way, the Highlands Council adopted the final version of the Regional Master Plan, Governor Corzine signed an executive order concerning Highlands protection, the Council entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Council on Affordable Housing, the constitutionality of the Highlands Act was unanimously upheld by the state Supreme Court, and the Council approved and distributed more than \$700,000 in planning grants.

“The Council accomplished a tremendous amount in 2008,” Highlands Council Chairman John Weingart said, “setting the stage for the next phase of working closely with local governments and interested organizations and individuals to help ensure municipal conformance with the new Regional Master Plan.”

Next year promises to be an even busier one as the 52 municipalities with lands in the Preservation Area must bring those lands into conformance with the Regional Master Plan by December 8, 2009. The Highlands Council last month approved a new Plan Conformance Grants Program, with \$7.5 million available, to assist communities with expenses related to Plan Conformance. More information about the Plan Conformance program (including a January 2, 2009 mailing to all Highlands municipalities) can be found on the Highlands Council website at <http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/stake/municipalities.html>.

As of today, 67 municipalities have filed a Notice of Intent to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan. (The full list of all the municipalities, plus a map, can be found on the Highlands Council website at [http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/images/noi\\_big.jpg](http://www.highlands.state.nj.us/njhighlands/images/noi_big.jpg).) In addition, 49 municipalities applied for Initial Assessment Grants, which typically cover up to \$15,000 each for planning-related expenses. The total grant amount awarded in 2008 under this program was nearly \$735,000.

Many of the Highlands municipalities were also granted an extension on the deadline to submit a Fair Share Housing Plan to the Council on Affordable Housing if they also adopted a resolution saying they would submit the plan to COAH by December 8, 2009.

“The year began with municipalities saying two state agencies, the Highlands Council and the Council on Affordable Housing, were pulling them in opposite directions,” Highlands Council Executive Director Eileen Swan said. “With Executive Order 114, Governor Jon S. Corzine gave the Highlands municipalities a clear path to meet the obligation of providing affordable housing while simultaneously protecting the environment.”

The Highlands Council staff is preparing a municipal-level build-out analysis process that municipalities can use to determine how much development can be sustained under the guidelines of the Regional Master Plan. Using this build-out, the Highlands Council will then determine that municipality’s affordable housing share, provided the municipality conforms to the Plan.

Municipalities with lands in the Preservation Area, where conformance to the Regional Master Plan is mandatory, have until February 2009 to file a Notice of Intent to conform to the Plan, and until December 8, 2009, to bring their municipal rules and regulations into conformance. For lands in the Planning Area, where conformance is voluntary, municipalities can pursue Plan Conformance at any time.