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Highlands Council Releases Final Draft of Regional Master Plan

Water conservation, a new map series and increased acres of environmentally sensitive land are among the new plan's features

CHESTER, N.J. – The Highlands Council today voted to release of the final draft of its Regional Master Plan for the Highlands Region. The Plan includes an emphasis promoting water conservation and classifies nearly three-quarters of the land in the Highlands Region as environmentally sensitive.

The Highlands Draft Regional Master Plan includes sections regarding the vision for the Highlands Region, the Goals, Policies and Objectives of the Regional Master Plan, numerous Regional Master Plan Programs, and a new Land Use Capability Map series. A series of technical reports examine lake management areas, water availability, clustering, transportation, and more.

“The people of the Highlands Region have spoken, and we have listened,” said John Weingart, Chairman of the Highlands Council. “We used the input from our constituents to make a more comprehensive plan that responds on the regional and local levels. We have followed the mandates outlined in the Highlands Act to protect, restore and enhance the critical resources of the region. This Regional Master Plan will make sure that the preservation of those resources will not be compromised.”

After the release of the initial Regional Master Plan draft in November 2006, the Highlands Council staff received more than 3,600 comments from more than 1,000 commentors during a comment period that lasted for 160 days.

The New Jersey Highlands Region spans 859,358 acres divided into two areas: the Preservation Area and the Planning Area. The Preservation Area consists of 414,965 acres, and the Planning Area consists of 444,394 acres. Through the development of the Land Use Analysis Decision Support model – or LANDS – and the classification of new sub-zones in the Planning Area, 643,037 acres in total have been designated as environmentally sensitive.

Of the 88 total municipalities in the Highlands Region, five are entirely in the Preservation Area, and 47 municipalities that have land in both the Preservation and Planning area. There are 36 municipalities that have land only in the Planning Area. Municipalities with land in the Preservation Area must conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan for that portion of their municipality, as stated in the Highlands Act.

The Land Use Capability Map series, which incorporates information from research and studies conducted by the Highlands staff, consists of the Zone Map, Water Availability Map, Public Community Water Systems Map, Domestic Sewerage Facilities Map, and the Septic System Yield Map. The Zone Map will guide land use and conservation efforts in the Region by identifying the location of the primary overlay zones – the Protection Zone, the Conservation Zone and the Existing Community Zone. The Zone Map also includes three new sub-zones within the Existing Community Zone and Conservation Zones: Existing Community – Environmental Constrained Sub-Zone, Lake Community Sub-Zone, and Conservation Zone – Environmental Constrained Sub-Zone.

In the 2007 draft, 74.83 percent of land in the Highlands Region – nearly three quarters -- is environmentally constrained, an increase from 64.87 percent of the land in the 2006 plan. The 2007 draft classifies 643,037 acres as environmental constrained, up from the 557,507 acres that were environmentally constrained in 2006.

“Our new Land Use Capability Map Series allowed us to capture more accurately what really exists on the ground in order to protect the natural resources of the Highlands,” said Highlands Council Executive Director Eileen Swan. “LANDS also gave us the ability to really examine the issues of water availability, sewerage facilities and septic systems to see how much capacity is available in the Highlands. This is a very complete plan, and it compiles the highest-level data available about this Region in one place.”

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act mandates the Highlands Council to develop a Regional Master Plan to protect, restore, enhance and protect the abundant and critical resources of the Highlands Region. Goals of the plan include protecting natural and scenic resources; preserving farmland and historic sites and resources; promoting brownfield remediation and redevelopment; protecting and maintaining the character of the Highlands environment; encouraging outdoor recreational activities; encouraging appropriate residential, commercial and industrial development, redevelopment and economic growth consistent with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan and Smart Growth strategies; and promoting a balanced transportation system.

There will be a 90-day public comment period on the Regional Master Plan. Three public hearings will be scheduled during that time. The final draft of the Regional Master Plan will be available on the Highlands Council web site at www.highlands.state.nj.us.

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