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News

Highlands Council to consider easing septic restrictions

By **Rob Jennings** New Jersey Herald

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A proposal that would increase allowable septic density in parts of the Highlands Region, and potentially boost development opportunities in Sussex County, will be discussed by the New Jersey Highlands Council on Thursday.

The state Department of Environmental Protection is considering a rule change that would lessen some of the tougher restrictions on septics in the preservation zone.

Under the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, which the council enforces, additional limits were imposed on a preservation zone that includes parts of seven counties, including Sussex. For example, in forested areas that are deemed especially sensitive, only one septic system is allowed per 88 acres -- effectively allowing only a single house, since sewers do not exist in such places.

Sussex County Freeholder Richard Vohden, one of two county residents on the 14-member Highlands Council, said he supports loosening the restrictions.

"It would be great for that 38 percent of Sussex County that is really affected by the septic rules. It still gives us full environmental protection, but with common sense," Vohden said.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, sees it differently.

"It's not based on any science," Tittel said, adding that potential environmental issues would include building roadways to reach any new homes.

Tittel said the impending discussion might be why the council has yet to release its annual report, typically issued at the end of March.

He said that the council, in the likelihood that a majority supports the change, still might be seeking ways to justify it.

Thursday's meeting will begin at 4 p.m. at the Highlands Council's headquarters, 100 North Road in Chester.

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