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Highlands plan needs everyone's input

By Julia Somers

Quietly and almost seamlessly, 73 municipalities are aligning themselves with a regional master plan that will permanently protect the natural and cultural resources of the New Jersey Highlands, and assure a clean and plentiful water supply for 5.4 million residents.

Since the adoption of the Highlands Regional Master Plan seven months ago, 82 percent of the region's towns have begun the process of "Conformance" to a regional plan that utilizes the most up-to-date and cutting edge science and planning available.

Regional planning works.

We have seen it in the Pinelands. Some 30 years after the adoption of the Pinelands Comprehensive Master Plan, the largest single aquifer on the east coast has been protected. Land values inside of the Pinelands are greater than immediately outside and property tax rates are lower.

The Highlands Council offers grants of \$50,000 or more to cover the costs of municipal planning, engineering and outside professional costs to help municipalities through conformance. To further assist, the council has been conducting training sessions on the phased modules that will lead to conformance. If, during the process, additional grant money is shown to be needed, the council may provide further assistance.

The modules of Highlands Plan Conformance do not differ much from the process a town would go through in developing or updating its local master plan.

First, all of the parcels on the town's tax records are reviewed to see what properties are currently developed and what properties may have future development or redevelopment potential.

Drinking water and wastewater capacity issues are considered. An environmental resource inventory is written, or updated.

However, in partnering with the Highlands Council, towns will be working toward solving our region's ongoing environmental threats and challenges.

All New Jersey towns in order to receive certification from the Council on Affordable Housing must file their third round fair share plans. Highlands towns that choose conformance will have their plans based on the build-out numbers developed in coordination with the council's resource protection goals.

The Highlands plan is "capacity based."

That means that it considers the availability of water and the ability to process wastewater in assessing the region's ultimate growth, or "build-out." It is essential that the public and elected officials be informed. They should insist that they also, not just the professionals, have seats at the table.

Although the conformance process is complex and professional planning expertise is necessary, it is essential to have all stakeholders involved.

Ultimately, towns will be determining what the future of their community will look like.

The public is a town's eyes and ears on the ground and must be included in this process to help set this course.
