

Group says Christie's cuts threaten drinking water

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CHESTER TWP. – A large environmental coalition said millions of dollars in cuts ordered by Gov. Chris Christie would have a major negative impact on efforts to protect drinking water for millions of people.

The largest environmental group in the Highlands region has asked Christie to restore more than \$18.4 million in funds designed to help towns in the region conform to the Highlands Council Regional Master Plan.

It's the latest reaction in a hailstorm of fallout from cuts announced by Christie on Feb. 11, which stripped about \$32 million from the preservation efforts in the Highlands.

In a letter written on behalf of its 44 member organizations, N.J. Highlands Coalition Executive Director Julia Somers said Christie's silence on full support for the Highlands threatens to damage years of work and investment made to protect the state's water supply from the region.

"Gov. Christie is sending very mixed messages to everyone, including Highlands communities," said Somers. "On one hand he says he understands the importance of protecting the state's water supply, but then on the other he strips the council of funds towns need to plan to protect Highlands waters."

Cogger Comments

Chester Township Mayor William Cogger joined the call to restore funding. He said grants already given to many communities won't pay for the final work needed to conform to the master plan, a requirement for communities in the Highlands preservation area.

"It will probably cost most towns \$100,000 to \$150,000. The grants we have already received were for preparation, not for the final work," said Cogger.

Christie's cuts also came under heavy fire from David Peifer, Highlands project director of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC), based in Mendham and one of the Highlands Coalition member organizations.

"In these tight economic times, these funds are the only way towns can afford to plan," Peifer said. "The Governor is essentially aborting efforts to make preservation of this crucial region affordable and possible."

The cuts also would jeopardize protection of drinking water for 5.4 million people in the Highlands region, said William Kibler, executive director of the South Branch Watershed Association, another coalition member.

Another \$13.2 million in funds set aside for municipal tax relief through the N.J. Highlands Municipal Property Tax Stabilization Board was also cut by Christie, leaving the organization without funding

"Frankly I don't know where this leaves us," said John Eskilson, Sussex County administrator, who is the chairman of the tax stabilization board. "When the Highlands Act was established by the Legislature, people expected a massive run on the money. But it didn't happen."

One of the stipulations of the tax stabilization funds act was that eligible communities must first have met conformance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan. The tax stabilization act wasn't approved until August 2008 and none of the 88 towns in the region have yet met all the qualifications for conformance.

"Up until recently, conformance was a moot issue," said Eskilson.

The board has approved \$328,000 in stabilization funds to six communities, including approximately \$22,000 to Roxbury Township and another \$8,000 to Mount Olive Township.

Eskilson said all of the prior approvals were contingent on the communities meeting conformance requirements.

The coalition's letter to Christie also asked for restoration of \$88,000 in the Highlands Council annual budget and appointment of council members to fill vacancies and terms that have expired. Only five of the 15 council seats are currently occupied by members.

Cogger said he expected the courts will decide if Christie can cut the funds which were legally set aside for the Highlands Council and Tax Stabilization Board.

As to the day-to-day operation of the Highlands Council, of which he is a member, Cogger said the task of the council remains.

"I don't know what will change," Cogger said. "The council still has to go forward, that will continue. Things just have to shake out."