



## Highlands Act supporters rally

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Written by Alyana Alfaro | Staff Writer

**CHESTER TWP.** — Environmentalists staged a rally to support the Highlands Act on Wednesday — its seventh anniversary — and oppose what they see as Gov. Chris Christie’s rebuke of the law aimed at protecting drinking water.

**“We want to let the Highlands Council know that we continue to stand behind them in the municipal conformance process and that the municipalities in the Highlands will eventually find that it is in their benefit, that conformance is a very positive thing,”** said Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

About 25 people, including original sponsors of the bill, gathered at the offices of the New Jersey Highlands Council for the rally.

**Ruga said an attempt to “slow the conformance process” was demonstrated at the June 3 Highlands Council meeting, when Hackettstown’s bid was denied, marking the only time in the act’s seven-year history that a municipality’s effort to conform was rejected.**

**“Some of the most recent appointees to the Highlands Council have a history of opposing the Highlands Act,”** Ruga said, referring to Hunterdon County Freeholder Rob Walton and Roxbury Mayor Jim Rilee, who voted against the Hackettstown bid.

Kate Millsaps, a New Jersey Sierra Club spokeswoman, said Christie’s actions demonstrate he wants to repeal the Highlands Act and “pave over our Highlands,” jeopardizing the drinking water of the more than 5 million New Jersey residents and businesses who draw from its aquifers.

“Given the governor’s policies and statements on the Highlands, people should be alarmed about the future of their water supply,” Millsaps said, referring to Christie’s statement at a Hopatcong town hall meeting that the act was “based on a lie.”

“This is a time to recommit to the fight to save the Highlands instead of a celebration of the act’s anniversary,” she said.

The Sierra Club called on the state to conduct a water analysis to determine how much water is in the Highlands, to determine no-build areas for preservation and to establish a stable source of funding for open space to compensate Highlands landowners, possibly through a water-user surcharge.

Christie has said there needs to be funding to compensate affected property owners, but citing the economic slowdown, said some development might be allowed to occur in the Highlands.

Assemblyman Jay Webber, R-Morris, criticized the rally, saying “New Jersey’s worst governmental land grab against innocent citizens and communities should be no cause for celebration. The anniversary of the Highlands Act just highlights how long its fundamental unfairness has been perpetrated.”

Participants at the rally, many of which hailed from towns within the Highlands region, held up signs reading “Our water, our lives,” and “Protect the Highlands!” and donned stickers reading “Support conformance” and “protect our water.”

Under the 2004 Highlands Act, all municipalities in the 800,000-acre Highlands region — including all of Morris County — are required to draft plans that ensure the region is protected from overdevelopment that would impact the state’s water supply.

So far, 23 of the 88 have achieved conformance, including Chester Township, Denville, Kinnelon, Mount Olive, Rockaway Township and Washington Township in Morris. Others, including Montville and Pequannock, are drafting a plan. Wharton’s conformance was up for review at a Highlands Council meeting after the rally.

Original supporters of the act Sen. Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, and Assemblyman John F. McKeon, D-Essex, attended.

Smith said, in a prepared statement, to demonstrate their belief that the Highlands Act is “just as relevant today as it was seven years ago” and that Highlands residents “need to be vigilant because this is an ongoing battle.”

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