



Highlands Council failing to deliver

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Written by Elliott Ruga

At the Feb. 21 Highlands Council meeting, Council Member Tracy Carluccio suggested that the Council take a position on the proposed open space bills that are currently working through the state Legislature, bills that will determine how to fund the now depleted Garden State Preservation Trust. Her suggestion was soundly dismissed by Chairman Rilee, who claimed “they” already know exactly how we feel.

Council member Francis agreed, stating he wasn’t interested in what the Legislature was doing unless it was a water tax that went directly to the Highlands. Vice-Chairman Alstede was non-committal, not wanting the Council to support or oppose any bill until the Council knows the governor’s position.

What? Did they really say that? The state is at a crossroads, determining how it will fund, or not fund, open space, farmland and historic preservation programs, for how long, by what mechanism, and to whom the money will go. It is holding public hearings on the matter. And the Highlands Council determines not to bother?

What? Isn’t this the “new” Highlands Council, ushered in specifically to correct the lack of attention to landowner compensation that is claimed to have plagued the former Council? Isn’t this the “new” Highlands Council that at the same meeting unveiled a revisited Highlands TDR Program, that with no designated Receiving Areas and a continuing downturned property market, admittedly remains a long way from providing meaningful compensation?

And Council member Alstede isn’t doing anything until he gets his marching orders from the governor? What if, Mr. Alstede, the governor has other things on his plate and forgets to call you? But let’s say he does make it a point to direct your thinking; aren’t you a member of an independent authority that is supposed to be insulated from political vagaries, appointed to leverage your expertise in carrying out the goals of the Highlands Act?

To journey to Trenton with the intent of engaging legislators might mean, if successful, no longer easily blaming Trenton for all that’s wrong in the Highlands. It also might mean having to

answer some difficult questions.

Here's one for example: Between 2000 and 2012, of the acres purchased as public open space or as preserved farmland, land preserved in the Highlands accounted for 46 percent of the total acreage preserved in the state, although the Highlands represents only 17 percent of the state's land. And since 2004, a decidedly generous valuation was provided, basing the appraised value at pre-Highlands Act zoning and pre-2004 environmental regulations. So how can anyone say the state is not committed to compensating Highlands landowners? What would you say to everyone else, those living outside of the Highlands, who've been footing the bill? Keep your darned money?

The Highlands Act was passed in 2004 by an overwhelming and bipartisan majority. It boldly laid out a framework for the difficult but necessary task of balancing economic growth and natural resource protection to maintain a clean and affordable water supply for 5.4 million people and the water-dependent industries in this most densely populated state.

Succeeding at this task, if it is ever assured, is still a long way off. Yet much has been accomplished — the Highlands has an adopted Regional Master Plan; and more and more municipalities are opting into the plan. But unless the Highlands Council renews its commitment to the Act's goals, it will atrophy into an irrelevant and unnecessary layer of state bureaucracy, accomplishing nothing and placing our water supply and economic stability at risk.

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