



Nordstrom named executive director of N.J. Highlands Council by 11-1 vote

By [Ben Horowitz / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

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CHESTER — By an 11-1 vote, the New Jersey Highlands Council on Thursday evening appointed Margaret Nordstrom, its deputy director, as its new executive director.

There was little of the rancor or emotion that marked the 2012 [firing of one-time executive director Eileen Swan](#) and the [hiring of her successor, Gene Feyl](#), who stepped down in March of this year.

Nordstrom — a former Morris County freeholder and Washington Township committeewoman — was named deputy director two years ago by the council's new majority, appointees of Gov. Chris Christie.

Yet although environmentalists have accused the Christie-appointed council of trying to weaken the Highlands Act's rules — which are aimed at protecting the water supply — most spoke favorably of Nordstrom.

"Her ability to act in the best interests of the people she serves has always been of the highest caliber," said Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, an environmental advocacy group.

Ruga said Nordstrom has a "proven track record in certain areas," including historical preservation and open space preservation.

In Washington Township, Nordstrom is credited with helping preserve the 800-acre Scott farm during her time on the committee.

The one council member voting against Nordstrom was Tracy Carluccio, deputy director of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, who said she was "disappointed" that the council didn't conduct a national search for a new director and appeared to limit its search to local candidates.

Of the 16 applicants who submitted resumes, "many obviously were not qualified," Carluccio said.

"It could have been a better field," she said, but added, "Margaret Nordstrom is qualified, there is no question."

Council Chairman Jim Rilee, who nominated Nordstrom, said the council's personnel committee conducted two interviews and reviewed all the resumes.

"One person stood out head and shoulders from above the rest — Margaret Nordstrom," he said. "We can point to the job she's done here over seven months" as acting director.

Under Nordstrom, the board has been conducting its six-year review of its Regional Master Plan, which sets guidelines for how the Highlands Act is to be enforced, and that has been "going extremely well," Rilee said.

When the new majority on the board terminated Swan, it drew severe criticisms from environmentalists, who cited her record in getting towns to conform their master plans to the Highlands Act.

The acts sets development restrictions on an 860,000-acre, 88-town area straddling seven northern New Jersey counties that supplies water to more than 5 million people. In the region's preservation area — the 415,000 of those acres considered the most environmentally critical — development is limited to one house per lot, no matter the size.

The appointment of Feyl, also a Morris County freeholder, as Swan's replacement, drew criticism from environmentalists who said it was a political move and was not based on his qualifications.

The attacks grew stronger two years later when Feyl, 68, retired from the \$116,000-a-year position after increasing his pension to \$63,622 annually. Had Feyl not taken the position, his pension would have been based on his final salary as freeholder — \$25,000.

Nordstrom is 66, the same age Feyl was when he took the position, and she is earning the same \$116,000 salary. But no one predicted she would quit after increasing her pension.

"She's not like the last director, she's not going to sit here for two years to get a pension," said council member Timothy Dougherty, the mayor of Morristown.

Nordstrom told the council, "I plan on working here as long as you'll have me ... I love the work

here. I love working with this staff. They make me look good every single day."

In an interview later, Nordstrom pointed out that in her role as executive director, she is mainly charged with implementing the council's policies.

But, she pointed out, she would like to improve the public's understanding of the role played by a regional planning agency.

"A lot of people have different conceptions," she said, citing the council's role as "coordinating between municipalities."

"We're not the regulatory agency and we're not the evil empire," Nordstrom said.

Nordstrom's appointment did draw criticism from two farmers who said she and others associated with the council have not done enough to compensate landowners whose properties lost value as a result of the development restrictions.

No towns have yet signed up for the Transfer of Development Rights program intended to provide relief to landowners in exchange for development approvals in high-density areas.

Deborah Post, whose farm in Chester Township is located in the preservation area, said that when Nordstrom was a freeholder, "she pledged support for property rights" but her "subsequent acts were a direct contradiction."

She accused Nordstrom of being the type of "politician" who says one thing but does another.

Two council members were absent for the vote on Thursday — Bruce James, a Passaic County freeholder, and Kurt Alstede, a Chester Township farmer. Alstede's tourist farm was the scene of a fatal accident on Sunday when a 2-year-old girl was pinned between two shuttle buses.

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