

Letter: Good thoughtful planning is the solution

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To the editor:

Freeholder Smith's pinning the whole of Warren County's economic woes on the Highlands Act is plain hogwash ('Highlands Act' is 10-years-old: 'Highlands' water is still unprotected, Jan. 14). If there are economic disparities between communities in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley and those in western Warren County, a sure way to never improve things on this side of the Delaware River is to find an easy scapegoat to rail against rather than tackling issues that might be complex and by making decisions that may prove unpopular—not easy tasks for an elected official.

Approximately 25% of the land of Warren County is within the development-restrictive Highlands Preservation Area. More than half of that land is preserved open space or preserved farmland. If “tens of millions of dollars in lost jobs, business activity, and tax revenues over the past 10 years” are because the State of New Jersey “protects” the remaining 10-15%, privately held forested and farm lands from becoming sprawling suburban developments, where are the shining examples of vibrant growth in the majority of Warren County that is free from the onerous restrictions of the Highlands Act?

Knowlton, Blairstown and Hardwick are Warren County municipalities entirely outside of the Highlands region. Hope, Frelinghuysen, Belvidere, Alpha, Phillipsburg and Washington Borough are in the Highlands region, but they have no lands in the Preservation Area. If the Highlands Act's Preservation Area was responsible for the chilling economic impact that Freeholder Smith claims, all these communities must be basking in that Lehigh Valley glow compared to the 13 municipalities saddled with Preservation Area land restrictions. But that's not the case.

In fact, six Warren County towns are working with the Highlands Council to voluntarily conform their Planning Area with the Highlands Regional Master Plan. Why? Because it is good planning. It is a proactive, thoughtful way to balance a community's growth with natural resource protection---you know, those things that most people cherish about their communities, that make them want to stay. Of course you can always opt to allow your town to grow per the whim of every property owner. But who the heck is going to want to live there? Bashing the Highlands Act is easy, but it isn't solving any community's economic problems. It's ignoring them. Good, thoughtful planning is the solution.

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NJ Highlands Coalition