

# New Jersey Herald

## Highlands panel touts key 2014 initiatives

*Posted: Apr 02, 2015 12:01 AM EST Updated: Apr 02, 2015 9:08 AM EST*

By ROB JENNINGS

[rjennings@njherald.com](mailto:rjennings@njherald.com)

The New Jersey Highlands Council released an annual report characterizing 2014 as “a year of significant achievement in several key areas.”

Released Tuesday, the 32-page report offered an update on the council's role in implementing the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

Council Chair Jim Rilee and Executive Director Margaret Nordstrom, in a letter accompanying the report, recapped several key initiatives — from landowner compensation efforts to the ongoing review of the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

Nordstrom, asked about the master plan on Wednesday, said the council may vote in the fall on both a monitoring program recommendation report and a fiscal impact assessment.

As described in her joint letter with Rilee, the report and assessment may guide any changes or amendments to the 2008 master plan.

Nordstrom, who oversees 19 full-time and two part-time employees, said, “The regional master plan is occupying most of my time.”

The 2004 Highlands Act established additional limits on development on parts of seven counties, including Sussex. It split the 860,000-acre Highlands Region between an ecologically sensitive preservation area, where relatively little building has occurred and the law's restrictions are mandatory, and a more heavily populated planning area where compliance with the law is optional.

The Highlands Act remains controversial, especially among Republicans — with Gov. Chris Christie the law's most prominent critic.

Asked about the report, Elliott Ruga, senior policy analyst and campaign coordinator for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, an environmental group, offered a mixed review.

Ruga praised the council's staff and cited, as an example, the preservation of 192 acres in West Milford in July.

However, he expressed disappointment that about half of the municipalities with land in the planning area had not submitted conformance plans.

“Yes, it's optional, but it needs to be sold a little more, because it's good planning,” said Ruga, whose group supports the Highlands Act.

Ruga also questioned the viability of the council's landowner compensation efforts.

“They've assigned staff and resources to it, but where are they going to find money for something they don't have?” Ruga said.

In response, Rilee said the council is taking the right approach with the planning area process.

“The law is written just that way. It's voluntary. It's not the Highlands Council's job to go out there and force towns with a stick, as may have been done in the past,” said Rilee, the Republican mayor of Roxbury.

On landowner compensation, Rilee said that the council is working within the constraints of the law.

“I wish he'd be more aggressive in dealing with the Legislature,” he said of Ruga.

Nordstrom, in an interview Wednesday, sought to clarify the council's role.

“We're primarily a planning agency. We are not a regulatory agency. Our goal, when we work with the towns, is to assist them in doing good planning, rather than dictating,” Nordstrom said in a telephone interview from her office in Chester.

The annual report highlighted Hopatcong, which in 2012 was designated as a “Highlands Center” in order to facilitate redevelopment in parts of the borough.

In 2014, construction began on a 20,432-square-foot building, for residential and commercial use, in the River Styx neighborhood.

The report excerpted a New Jersey League of Municipalities article written by Hopatcong Mayor Sylvia Petillo, a Republican, in which Petillo lauded the working relationship between the Highlands Council and the borough.

In 2014, the council approved plan conformance petitions from Jefferson and Oakland, a municipality in Bergen County. Oakland agreed to include land in the planning area, while Jefferson signed off only on incorporating the mandatory preservation area.

Nordstrom said, “Plan conformance — that's our bread and butter.”

To date, the Highlands Council has received petitions from 59 of the 88 municipalities in the Highlands Region. Through December, 47 had been approved.

Of the 10 Sussex County municipalities in the Highlands Region, the council has approved petitions from Byram, Green, Hardyston, Hopatcong, Ogdensburg, Sparta and Vernon.

Franklin, Hamburg and Stanhope have land only in the planning area, though Stanhope has submitted an application that remains under review.

Nordstrom recapped the council's establishment of a "landowner equity and land preservation committee" for property owners, including a matching program for open space grants.

The committee was discussed in 2014 and established in January in a 13-0 council vote, even though its chair, Hunterdon County Freeholder Robert Walton, publicly questioned whether the change would result in anything significant.

The report noted that two Sussex County municipalities, Newton and Vernon, are continuing to study the possibility of establishing "receiving zones" for additional development that would generate funds to aid preservation area landowners.

Both are in the third phase of a four-phase process, having received \$40,000 study grants from the council.

Nordstrom is a former Morris County freeholder. She was named executive director in October, six months after her predecessor, Gene Feyl, retired.

Feyl, like Nordstrom, is a former Republican freeholder from Morris. He chose Nordstrom as his deputy, with the council's approval, when he was hired in 2012.

Both are Republicans.

Nordstrom said she has not decided whether to fill the deputy's post, which remains vacant since her promotion.

The council is seeking a replacement to former Chief Counsel Andrew R. Davis, whose resignation was announced by Nordstrom last month.

Rob Jennings also can be contacted on Twitter: @RJenningsNJH or by phone: 973-383-1230.