

Dear Gov. Murphy, you need to appoint new people to the Highland Council, members say



The New Jersey Highlands is an ecologically sensitive area in seven counties in the Northern and Central part of the state, which supplies water to more than 5 million residents. Above is a view of Lake Hopatcong, which is in the Highlands. (Robert Sciarrino NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

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By [Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

By Elliott Ruga

The 2004 Highlands Act established the Highlands Council as a 15-member body, with members serving five-year terms. Currently, only 13 members serve on the council, and all on expired terms. Three members, appointed by Gov. Chris Christie, continue to actively represent Christie's anti-Highlands Act agenda. If Gov. Phil Murphy ever wishes to follow through on his environmental platform, he must make appropriate appointments to the Highlands Council, as he recently did for the Pinelands Commission. An urgent case for the governor to act was made perfectly clear at the May 16 Highlands Council meeting.

Unmanaged, or poorly managed stormwater runoff, and the flooding and water quality impairments caused by it, pose huge problems throughout New Jersey. The staff of the Highlands Council proposed to contract with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Water Resource Program to draft a

regional stormwater management plan for 24 municipalities in the Raritan River watershed portion of the Highlands, to assess their stormwater problems and to propose green infrastructure responses.



Former West Milford Mayor Carl Richko has been named chair of the N.J. Highlands Council

Dr. Chris Obropta, who runs the Rutgers program, is a recognized innovator in managing stormwater. He and his team have implemented many successful projects in the Highlands and throughout New Jersey. The proposed plan would be financed by already allocated funds available to the Highlands Council. A new state law recently authorized the establishment of municipal or regional stormwater utilities, to fund meaningful responses to the flooding and water quality impairments caused by stormwater. The implementation of the plan could be funded by such a regional stormwater utility.

This was an ambitious, forward thinking, and achievable plan, addressing a major quality-of-life issue in New Jersey. The plan was reviewed by the Highlands Council’s Budget & Finance Committee, which recommended that the council support it. However, when it went before the full Highlands Council, it failed to pass by one vote. The only no votes came from Christie holdovers on the Highlands Council, who provided no explanation why they opposed it.

When Governor Murphy took office he did the right thing by designating a new chairperson of the Highlands Council. And he supported the right person to be hired as the new executive director. With a new leadership team in place, the Highlands Council is in a position to undo the steps taken by the Christie administration to undermine the Highlands Council, and to propose meaningful initiatives to protect the water resources of the Highlands, such as the regional stormwater management plan.



Christie ally quits Highlands Council before Murphy could kick him out. Jim Rilee led the N.J. Highlands Council since 2011.

But until Governor Murphy appoints new Highlands Council members, giving the council leadership members they can work with, the hand of Governor Christie will remain in play, continuing to undermine the work of the Highlands Council.

To his credit, Governor Murphy has enacted some of the strongest environmental policy measures in decades, including returning New Jersey to the

Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, proposing to upgrade 749 miles of stream segments to Category One, and supporting a ban on fracking in the Delaware River Basin.

However, If the Highlands Council is ever to fulfill its mission of implementing the goals of the Highlands Act by promoting municipal participation in a regional master plan that balances compatible growth with water resource protection, the governor must replace the Highlands Council members who were put in place to undermine this mission. The governor already has a bullpen of competent, qualified and knowledgeable individuals who are willing to serve on the Highlands Council and have been vetted by the Governor's staff. Appoint them!

Elliott Ruga is the policy & communications director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.