

Pitching the plan

Wednesday, February 10, 2010

BY DAVID JIMENEZ

Neighbor News (Dover Edition)

STAFF WRITER

Municipalities in the Planning Area of the Highlands are deciding whether to conform to the guidelines of the Highlands Council's Regional Master Plan. This a proposal is designed to prevent further build-out in an area northwest of the state that is considered environmentally sensitive and increasingly at risk of being overdeveloped.

Last week a large turnout of Denville residents met at the invitation of Mayor Ted Hussa to hear **Highland Coalition executives Julia Somers and Kate Millsaps**, along with Dave Peifer of the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC), explain how conformance in the Planning Area of the Highlands Regional Master Plan will affect property, the community and the region.

The main theme throughout the night's discussion focused on the conservation of the state's water resources, the preservation of land and the protection of outdoor recreation opportunities.

By way of background, Somers said that the need for water management was important since more than half of the state's water needs is served by the area.

"The Highland region provides drinking water to 5.4 million people, which is approximately 64 percent of the state's population," she said.

Though the advocacy group can be accused of fostering a no-growth policy, Somers, putting a positive spin on the issue, said that residents, under the council's plan of controlled growth, would see "an increase of property value and stabilization in the municipal tax rate by stopping the ratable chase that results as more pressure is placed on schools, police and other municipal services."

Continuing, she said that "municipalities who have opted into the plan would receive priority access to Open Space acquisition funding, and qualify for a reduction in their COAH Fair Share obligation."

COAH, standing for Council on Affordable Housing, is a controversial program managed by the state that determines the number of affordable housing units required in each municipality.

Contributing to nearly a full house of attendees at last week's Highlands seminar were Denville's municipal Council and officials from Denville's Planning Board, Environmental Commission and Open Space Committee.

The Highlands area is located in the northwest part of the state, extending from Phillipsburg to Oakland, within portions of seven counties: Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex and Warren.

According to the Highlands Coalition Web Site, the Highlands Act divides the nearly 860,000-acre Highlands Region into two parts, the Preservation Area and the Planning Area. The difference is that the Preservation Area conformance is required, while the Planning Area conformance is voluntary.

E-mail: jimenezd@northjersey.com