



# NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COALITION

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## **Municipal Conformance To the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP)**

### A Primer for Municipalities

The Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) was officially adopted in August, 2008. Within nine to fifteen months, towns within the Preservation Area must align their master plans and ordinances to the policies of the RMP. Planning assistance grants are available from the New Jersey Highlands Council to help them achieve conformance to the RMP.

#### **Preservation Area vs. Planning Area**

The 2004 Highlands Act established the boundaries of the Preservation and Planning Areas. Fifty-two municipalities have land either partially or wholly in the Preservation Area. Within the Preservation Area, municipalities are required to revise local land use regulations to conform to the Highlands RMP. In the Planning Area of the Highlands Region, conformance is optional. Thirty-six municipalities lie entirely within the Planning Area. Forty-seven Highlands municipalities are split between the Preservation and Planning Areas. For these “bifurcated” towns, conformance will be optional for their lands within the Planning Area and mandatory for that portion of their community within Preservation Area. To check the designation of your municipality, please consult the Highlands Regional Master Plan (pages 20-22), which is available on the Council’s website, [www.highlands.state.nj.us](http://www.highlands.state.nj.us).

#### **Initial Assessment Grants**

The Initial Assessment Grant program will fund preliminary municipal and county Plan Conformance activities within both the Preservation and Planning Areas. The grants, \$15,000 per municipality, allow local jurisdictions to assess the requirements and benefits of Plan Conformance, without obligation to conform.

Initial Assessment Grants may be used to:

- Assess existing planning for consistency with the Highlands RMP;
- Assess the accuracy of RMP maps, tables, and technical data by comparing the Highlands Council’s data against locally known conditions. RMP Updates may be requested to correct for factual changes to the maps;
- Evaluate extent of municipal planning changes necessary to achieve Basic and/or full Plan Conformance;
- Prepare any documents, inventories, maps, master plan and/or regulatory updates required to achieve Basic and/or full Plan Conformance; and
- Determine estimated cost to achieve Basic and/or full Plan Conformance.

**Initial Assessment Grants** allow municipalities and counties to assess the requirements and benefits of Plan Conformance, *without an obligation to conform.*

The 2008 Planning Assistance Grant application is presently available at the New Jersey Highlands Council website: [www.highlands.state.nj.us](http://www.highlands.state.nj.us).

## **Basic vs. Full Conformance**

Grant applicants should consider whether the municipality should start with Basic Plan Conformance or full Plan Conformance and tailor the application accordingly. Basic conformance is intended to assist Preservation Area municipalities, requiring only an intermediate level of conformance within the mandated 9-15 month period after RMP adoption. Basic conformance does not relieve a municipality from achieving full conformance, but reduces upfront requirements. A Planning Area municipality may complete Basic Conformance without a statutory deadline.

## **Conformance Requirements**

To achieve conformance, municipalities must address all applicable elements of the RMP including,

*Environmental/Infrastructure Capacity Analyses:* Municipalities will evaluate and update, as needed, a comprehensive Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). The municipality's capacity for future development and redevelopment will be examined using the Highlands Council's Local Build-Out Model, RMP maps, data, and technical information. The municipality may also examine capacity-building alternatives where originally found insufficient to support development/redevelopment areas.

*Planning Analyses:* Master Plans and land use ordinances must be evaluated in consideration of the results found in the Environmental/Infrastructure Capacity Analysis.

*Master Plan:* The municipal Master Plan should be amended to include all applicable policies of the RMP. If substantial changes are found necessary, community visioning session(s) are encouraged by the Council to confirm representative support within the community. In any case, public hearings will be required during the conformance process.

*Land Use Ordinances/Development Regulations:* A "Highlands Regulations" supplement must be adopted and attached to municipal Zoning/Land Use ordinances. This supplement will reference all adjustments to terminology, permitting and review processes based on the RMP.

*Municipal Self-Assessment and Implementation Schedule:* A Municipal Self-Assessment (MSA) and MSA Report, which discusses all anticipated changes to municipal planning programs and an implementation schedule, must be prepared by the municipality.

*Redevelopment Plans:* Municipality must provide any information regarding proposed redevelopment plans.

*Proposed Map Updates:* Municipalities should analyze the need for proposing factual updates to the RMP maps and data based on local conditions. The Highlands RMP provides an Update Program to improve the accuracy of the RMP with new, corrected, or updated factual maps, tables, and technical information.

*Proposed Map Adjustments:* A Map Adjustment allows limited changes to Land Use Capability Zone Map based on local planning factors, provided that changes:

- Comply with Highlands Act and RMP;
- Demonstrate resource protection and smart growth planning principles;
- Result in no net loss of Highlands resources or resource values;
- Maintain water and wastewater capacity; and
- Are not applicable through waivers, exemptions, or RMP Update program.

*Petition for Plan Conformance:* The municipality's last step in fact gathering and first step in becoming an important member of the family of communities participating in the Highlands Regional Master Plan.