Message from the Executive Director

Not even the historic blizzards of this winter could slow down the Coalition as we continue to advocate for strong Highlands protections. Troubled by the newly elected Governor Christie’s transition team’s reports and subsequent funding cuts for the Highlands Council, the Coalition reached out to leaders around the state to ensure the Council receives the funding needed for continued success and important environmental planning. We testified at Assembly and Senate hearings and we let Governor Christie know our concerns.

The Governor emptied the Highlands Protection Fund of more than $18 million. This Fund provided grants to municipalities so they could plan to implement the Regional Master Plan, complete their master plans, create water use and conservation management and stream restoration plans, study the feasibility of participating in the transfer of development rights program, and many other planning elements that are required of Conformance. Then the Governor put a little money back with $4.4 million in funding for municipal conformance in his proposed State budget. We are working to ensure that this money remains available to municipalities pursuing conformance to the Regional Master Plan.

We are also strongly encouraging the Governor to appoint qualified individuals to fill the 10 vacant and holdover seats on the Council—appointees selected because of their ability to effectively implement the Plan, and their commitment to protecting the water and other natural resources of the Highlands.

We recently launched a Facebook page that will keep you up to date on all the issues we are tackling. Please join us by becoming a fan.

Warmest regards,

Saeger Pond & Hill, Holland Township

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We are inspired by the Coalition’s grassroots organizations who remind us how effective efforts to preserve the Highlands can be when citizens play an active role in their communities.

Elliott Ruga, newsletter editor

Coalition News

In our continuing battles to preserve the Highlands, what has been particularly buoying these last few months are the successes of our grassroots member organizations.

Finding out about a proposed trucking hub and warehousing operation—larger in size than Disney’s Magic Kingdom, located in the heart of a rural farm community and several hundred feet from the wild and scenic designated Musconetcong River—a group of Franklin Township residents quickly rallied. Opposition lawn signs propagated like rabbits throughout Franklin and neighboring towns, getting people to their information-rich website and alarming town officials who were thirsty for a ratable.

People had to be turned away from the first public hearing on the matter after the local school’s auditorium reached its 300 person capacity. Local news media came out in force and the newly formed Skylands Preservation Alliance responded intelligently about stormwater, road and bridge carrying capacities, safety impacts, among other legitimate concerns.

Within months of SPAs forming,
Coalition News cont’d
the developer, his cadre of attorneys, planners, engineers fled town.

In Tewskbury, citizens pressured reluctant town officials to conform both its Preservation and Planning Areas to the Regional Master Plan. They also convinced officials to join in the opposition to JCP&L’s proposed substation within a historic district. Holland Township citizens also urged their initially unenthusiastic town officials towards full conformance.

Active citizens in Clinton Township showed up in force recently to convince officials against settling with a developer—which the town was preparing to do—to build an office building on the banks of Spruce Run Reservoir.

Working with groups small, large and huge in opposing formidable developments such as PSE&G’s 147 mile Susquehanna to Roseland 500Kv transmission line, we are inspired by the Coalition’s grassroots organizations who remind us how effective efforts to preserve the Highlands can be when citizens play an active role in their communities.

This is the reason the Coalition remains committed to developing and helping to grow grassroots organizations. We recognize the symbiosis—we provide support, guidance and experience. They are our eyes and ears in Highlands communities.

Bats, White Nose Syndrome and How You Can Help
Stefanie Rutkowski

The Hibernia Mine in Rockaway is not only important to the history of the New Jersey Highlands, but it is recognized as an important winter home for many bat populations in the area. It provides shelter to nine species of bats, including the federally protected Indiana Bat. This year the Division of Fish and Wildlife discovered only 750 bats at the Hibernia Mine location. The cause of this decline has been attributed to white-nose syndrome (WNS).

Since its discovery in 2006, WNS has been responsible for the deaths of over 500,000 bats throughout the Northeast. This fungal disease causes the infected bat to awaken from hibernation early, thus using up reserve fat stores, resulting in emaciation and death. The infected bats’ behavior can also cause healthy bats in the same den to be roused. Not enough is understood about the syndrome at this time.

Biologists are concerned about the possibility of extinction. Citizens are left to wonder what they can do to help. Melissa Craddock of New Jersey Audubon Society suggests erecting bat boxes in your yard, specifically ones from Bat Conservation International.

The organization’s website www.batcon.org offers all the information you need to purchase, or build and install, a bat house, and tips for attracting new residents. Several of the affected species in the Highlands are known to be users of bat houses including the little brown myotis, the species sustaining the highest losses. The little brown myotis species is known to catch up to 1,200 mosquitoes in an hour.

There has never been a case of anyone contracting rabies from this species, although precautions should always be taken when coming in direct contact with any bat, or if a bat is found inside the home—a rare occurrence. In such instances, you are advised to contact the local health department.

To dispose of a dead bat, use rubber gloves and pick it up with a plastic bag over your hand. Place both the bat and the bag into a second plastic bag, and add 1-part bleach to 9-parts water solution to the bag. Close it securely and gently shake the contents so the bleach coats the bat, and dispose of it with your garbage. The bat should not be touched with bare hands and clothes that come into contact should be thoroughly washed afterwards.

This epidemic could have serious implications on the ecological balance of the Highlands if steps are not taken to reverse the decimation of this top pest predator. Putting up bat boxes to provide alternatives to mass hibernation in abandoned mines, and properly disposing of dead bats, will help prevent the spread of the fungus, so these magnificent twilight flyers might survive for future generations.
Highlands History and Recreation: The Morris Canal

The Morris Canal stretched 102 miles from Phillipsburg to Jersey City (80 miles through the Highlands). The canal carried coal, iron and timber from western NJ and PA to markets in NY and beyond. In its heyday, people made trips to stroll along its towpaths or cruise its waters.

The Canal was the brainchild of Morristown businessman George P. Macculloch. He was searching for an alternative to shipping goods by rounding Cape May to access the ports of the NY area. While fishing at Great Pond (now Lake Hopatcong), Macculloch was impressed by the volume of water flowing from the lake. He saw that if the water could be channeled into a canal running east-west, it could carry freight much more quickly across the state.

Construction began in September 1825 and the first trip from Phillipsburg to Newark was completed on November 4, 1831. Mule drawn barges took five days to complete the journey. Locks were used to lift and lower the barges. Where the rise was greater than 20', an inclined plane hauled the barges on iron rails. Boats climbed 760' to the summit at Lake Hopatcong and then descended 914' on the way to Newark (the Jersey City terminus was added later). Remnants of the canal bed and its 34 locks and 23 planes can still be seen today.

Building the canal was hard labor. Earth was dug, rock was dynamited, stone walls were laid in place. Once built, however, the canal required constant maintenance. Muskrats burrowing through the banks often caused floods.

Port Murray, Pequannock, Pompton Plains, Boonton and Rockaway developed as canal towns, providing food, shelter and other necessities to the barge operators.

The railroad eventually replaced the canal. Traffic steadily declined from the 1880’s. Canal operations ceased entirely in 1924, when the state diverted waters feeding the canal to establish the Wanaque and other Highlands reservoirs. Water impoundments that were created to serve the canal—Lake Musconetcong, Cranberry Lake, Bear Pond, Saxton Falls, and Greenwood Lake remain for public use today.

The Lake Hopatcong Historical Museum is located in a former lock tender’s house. Here you can see a working model of an inclined plane.

You can walk the tow paths and explore remaining canal features along the Morris Canal Greenway, a joint project of the Division of Parks and Forestry, the Canal Society of New Jersey, Friends of the Morris Canal, Waterloo Village, and Warren County. Towns along the canal have been restoring sections, creating linear parks and interpretative trails.

To find out more about the Canal’s history and places to visit, check out the Canal Society of New Jersey at www.canalsocietynj.org.

Member Spotlight: Skylands Preservation Alliance

Ann Ferrero, Chair, SPA

Late in 2009, residents of Franklin Township in Warren County discovered that a trucking facility was being proposed for their bucolic community. Its scale was staggering: 1.44 million square feet of warehouse space, operating 24x7, drawing an estimated 1000 container trucks per day from Ports Newark and Elizabeth into a sensitive watershed area.

Residents formed a non-profit organization, The Skylands Preservation Alliance (SPA), and launched a publicity and fundraising campaign.

SPA coordinated with local communities to generate opposition; as the controversy heightened, ubiquitous “No Truck Depot” signs were staked on lawns, capturing the attention of local and nearby residents and the news media. The group hired an attorney and a professional planner, in part funded by an emergency grant from the Coalition. The combined efforts paid off. More than 300 citizens crowded into the first Public Hearing. Mere days later, in a stunning turn of events, the developer withdrew the application.

“SPA is deeply grateful to the NJ Highlands Coalition,” said Sudha Kantor, SPA Vice Chair. “Their spot-on guidance in those early weeks was critical to our success, not to mention their generous grant which enabled us to build a legal defense.” SPA Chair Ann Ferrero concurred, stating, “We were also able to leverage Coalition Member Organizations like the Musconetcong Watershed Association, the Sierra Club, and Trout Unlimited, who lent their expertise and rallied their own memberships to the cause. This turned out higher than expected numbers at the Public Hearing, a ‘show of force’ that we believe led directly to the project’s demise.”

Please visit the SPA website at www.skylandspreservation.org to learn more about its ongoing commitment to protect the Skylands region.
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