



## The experience in the Pinelands has taught us that regional planning works

Published: Thursday, August 05, 2010, 5:48 AM

### Star-Ledger Guest Columnist



Steve Klaver/The Star-Ledger Round Valley reservoir in Clinton Township, within the Highlands tract. The northern Highlands provide some of the state's most scenic vistas, but also contain half its water supply.

**By Sandy Batty**

One tenth of the land mass of New Jersey is already either concrete or asphalt. We continue to pave over our landscape at a rate of 4,270 acres per year, according to new report on open space and urban growth by Rowan University and the Center for Remote Sensing and Spatial Analysis at Rutgers University.

The findings are startling: Between 1986 and 2007, 180 square miles of upland forest were lost, resulting in "significant ecological implications." In the same time period, one quarter of the Garden State's farmland disappeared.

Real estate development is not synonymous with economic development. Clearly, by continuing to sprawl in the wrong places at such rates, we will have destroyed the ecological and economic values of our core forests and imperiled our water supply by encroaching in our wetlands and paving over water supply areas. Traffic and congestion will increase, opportunities for outdoor recreation diminish, inner

cities will be abandoned, taxes will rise even further due to expanded needs for community services and schooling, and we will be burdened by the costs of new water filtration and sewerage facilities.

This scenario is not a stretch of the imagination if we consider the facts presented in the report:

- New Jersey has just completed its two most sprawling decades in history.
- As of 2007, New Jersey has more acres of subdivisions and shopping malls than it has of upland forests.
- The overall trend of urban development has remained robust while farmlands and forests continue to be lost at a rapid pace.
- In the last two decades, two-thirds of the acres developed into residential housing were the large-lot consumptive units that have encroached on rural landscapes throughout the state.
- Since 1986, 48 percent of land developed occurred outside of the state's smart-growth areas, and 41 percent of growth in New Jersey was characterized in the report as "sprawl."

Having lost the ecological services provided by forest and wetlands, the authors speculate that, "At current trends, future generations will likely be disappointed by the result of how today's policies shaped their landscape."

State Sen. Michael Doherty and a handful of other legislators recently met with the governor to present their case for dismantling the 2004 Highlands Act and overturning the federal rules that established the Pinelands National Preserve.

Yet, the Rowan/Rutgers report finds a sole glimmer of hope in the Highlands and Pinelands regional plans: "These two planning areas are likely to have development occur in a more prudent manner than the rest of the state," it says.

In fact, the experience in the Pinelands has taught us that regional planning works. After more than 30 years of land-use decisions determined by the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan, communities in the Pinelands enjoy higher property values and a lower tax rate compared with neighboring municipalities outside the region, as documented in the Pinelands Commission's 2009 economic report.

The point of having a regional plan in the Pinelands was to preserve the enormous water resources of the Cohansey and Kirkwood aquifers by targeting growth and development away from sensitive environmental resource lands. The Highlands Act has a similar mission — preserving the Highlands water supply that half of our citizens and its largest industries rely upon.

There remain thorny and lingering issues, but one has been resolved: The U.S. Supreme Court found that the Highlands Act did not result in a regulatory "taking." The Highlands and the Pinelands are our geese that lay golden eggs. It would be shortsighted and ultimately ruinous to slaughter them. The Rowan/Rutgers report offers a comprehensive analysis of what our uncoordinated land use decision-making has accomplished over the past 20 years. It then looks at the future if we continue to develop as we have been doing. They warn of a bleak future.

But with a commitment to sound land use planning that protects our natural systems and focuses growth, it doesn't have to be.

*Sandy Batty is executive director of ANJEC and president of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.*