

Highlands meetings now open

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The future of the Highlands Region, which provides drinking water to 5.4 million people, is no longer being considered behind closed doors.

The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has changed its mind about holding private stakeholders' meetings to discuss the Highlands' future and now feels it's important for the general public to be heard. The Highlands region of 893,000 acres, including much of the Suburban Trends area, is severely restricted from development at present to protect drinking water supplies.

As originally planned, the meetings were going to exclude both the press and the general public, drawing comments instead from a wide variety of stakeholders – everyone from farmers and fishermen to environmentalists and business owners.

But amidst criticism for this policy, the DEP has scheduled at least two open meetings – the next to gather landowners' views in a June 29 session that any citizen can attend. Attendees must first contact Marybeth Brenner at the DEP at Marybeth_brenner@dep.state.nj.us.

DEP Spokesman Larry Ragonese explained the change of heart: "Several weeks ago, we decided to make that change and open it up to everyone. There were a lot of people who wanted to have their say."

The goal of the meetings is to listen to the people, he said, before crafting possible changes to Highlands rules and regulations. The most recent meeting was held on June 15 at Morris County Community College, where numerous environmental groups and citizens pronounced their views on the preservation of the Highlands Region.

"Most who came on Tuesday (June 15) had supported the Highlands Act and are for the regulations now in place," said Jeff Tittel, New Jersey Sierra Club director.

"I think it was good for the DEP to hear support (for the plan). These are steps in the right direction," said Tittel, estimating that of close to 50 speakers, three-quarters favored preserving the Highlands Act.

Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, said that it's crucial for the DEP to take an open approach to these stakeholders' meetings and not just gather the viewpoints that it wants to hear.

"DEP representatives insist they are not going to try and repeal the Highlands Act but every indication is they are going to try to take the heart of out the Highlands Act and we're going to fight that," she said.

Dr. Lynn Siebert of Morris Township, speaking on June 15, called for wise stewardship of the land.

Because "streams don't know borders," a regional approach to land care is warranted and that's what the state Highlands Act provides, said Siebert, who is president of one of the state's oldest homeowners' associations.

"I think the protections should remain strong," she said, and if anything, be made stronger. She also differs with the view of some landowners that the Highlands Act may hurt their property values.

Because the next meeting will focus on the views of landowners, some are calling for another meeting to gather the views of drinking water users.

But Ragonese thinks that the latter of the meetings is not likely. "Everybody's a drinking water user so we've been dealing with that issue," he said.

Meetings will be announced on the DEP website, www.state.nj.us/dep/.