

## **'Maintaining green infrastructure in our rural areas is essential to urban living'**

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*Written by Julia Somers / NJ Highlands Coalition*

New Jersey's environment is uniquely challenged. In its 300-year history, our small state has consistently been at the epicenter of the nation's growth and development. It is an air, land and sea transportation hub, a magnet for industry and its workforce, and a tourist draw for its rich history, natural areas and long coastline.

New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the Union, and its industrial past has brought it the distinction of having the greatest concentration of Superfund sites in the country, an indicator of the level of environmental care we must take if our state is to remain sustainable as a place to live, work and visit.

Over time, the state has developed three interdependent tools that work to deal with the challenges we face, particularly to protect our water supply: regional planning in the Meadowlands, the Pinelands and the Highlands to ensure that all land use decisions address both local and regional issues; open space acquisition, which is essential for maintaining a plentiful supply of clean water; and a regulatory framework to help remediate our toxic legacies, and to assure that land use decisions are made in the public's best interest. These tools are interdependent and none will succeed without the others.

I am not suggesting that New Jersey has been successful in making sure all our waters are "fishable, swimmable and drinkable," a key goal of the federal Clean Water Act. While the waters of the Highlands and Pinelands remain remarkably free of pollutants, "impaired waters" are increasing in number, according to the most recent EPA studies: In 2002, 10 percent of waterways qualified for all uses, but in 1996 15 percent qualified. Additional data also shows a rise in the number of waterways for which pollutant maximum loads (TMDLs) must be determined, with 63 percent of waterways threatened, either requiring a TMDL, or their uses limited due to pollution. These are troubling numbers.

What is being done about this today? Some things are working, but others are being weakened or eliminated. Something that works and has Governor Christie's support is New Jersey's Green Acres program. The scientific correlation between the importance of natural areas, particularly forested lands, and a clean and plentiful water supply is well-established and serves as a primary underpinning for the Meadowlands, Pinelands, and Highlands regional plans.

New Jersey residents agree. In the most recent referendum, urban residents voted "yes" in greater percentages than those living in more rural areas, supporting the use of their tax dollars to

preserve land that may be far from where they live. They know that maintaining green infrastructure in our rural areas is essential to urban living. In 2006, the Highlands Act passed the Legislature by a bipartisan vote of 103 to 12. New Jersey's Highlands are the source of some or all of the water supply for 64 percent of the state's residents, 5.4 million people.

Disturbingly, the Governor has made clear his opposition to regional planning and his antipathy for environmental regulations. Apparently, he believes short term fixes are needed, and regional planning and environmental regulations stand in the way of economic growth and development.

History does not support him. As an example, the Pinelands Act has been in place for more than 30 years. Today, Pinelands property values are higher and taxes are lower than in neighboring areas outside of the Pines. The number of businesses in the Pinelands has grown by nearly 10 percent while the number outside the region has shrunk. The Governor has vetoed environmental laws that would have protected the dying Barnegat Bay from polluted stormwater and the Highlands from damaging linear utility and road construction. His administration has proposed a rule that will permit NJDEP to grant waivers to any environmental regulations that present a "hardship" to a developer. His meaningless ban on fracking in New Jersey for just one year — the ultimate clean water threat — is extremely disappointing.

We have good tools that work in New Jersey to protect our water supplies — if environmental regulations are rigorous, regional planning is strong, and the open space acquisition program is always funded. With these in place, we should have a safer, cleaner state to leave future generations.

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