

## Hunterdon Review

### Marking the anniversary of the New Jersey Highlands Act

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EDITOR:

Aug. 10 was the eighth anniversary of passage of one of New Jersey's most important environmental regulations, the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

Why is this important and why should anyone care? Sixty-four percent of New Jersey's residents and much of its economy receive some or all of their water from New Jersey's Highlands, no doubt why the act was approved with overwhelming, bipartisan support of the State Legislature.

The Highlands Council, established by the act, was given the responsibility to protect the public trust resources present in the Highlands, such as our water supply, on behalf of all of us. Are they doing a good job? This anniversary is a good time to ask this question, and question if the act is being implemented.

Since passage of the act, the Highlands Council has approved and begun implementation of a Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) that's not perfect and in which many compromises were made. Primarily though, the RMP will succeed when all Preservation Area municipalities and at least a majority of Planning Area municipalities conform their master plans to the RMP. At this time, 60 (68 percent) municipalities out of the 88 in the Highlands are now involved in conforming part or all of their community to the RMP, representing 98 percent of the land in the Preservation Area and 33 percent of the Planning Area. The remaining 27 communities are (with the exception of one) Planning Area only communities, where conformance is optional.

However, recent heavy-handed actions from Trenton have caused great alarm. Nine of the 15 council members are new, including the chairman, an avowed former opponent of the Highlands Act, leaving among members on the council little institutional history or familiarity with the Act or RMP. Executive Director Eileen Swan was removed from her position by the Governor for purely political reasons and Deputy Executive Director Tom Borden resigned immediately in protest.

Within less than three months of losing Ms. Swan and Mr. Borden, Director of Planning and Science Dr. Dan Van Abs retired, but luckily, the council was able to promote a qualified professional from within. Now, with all this upheaval, the Council's senior GIS technician has moved on to private industry.

New Chairman Jim Rilee and new Director Gene Feyl have both publicly committed to fulfilling the requirements of the act, and implementing the plan, yet conformance activities to the plan by municipalities appears to have completely stopped as the council chooses to focus on other priorities.

Protecting our water supply is all-important - just ask the majority of the country now suffering through one of the worst droughts on record. This council will be judged by its success with conformance and its commitment to the Highlands Act. That must be their focus now.

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