

The Record

Opinion: Preserve the highlands, protect our water supply

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 11, 2013, 5:01 PM
BY GEORGE STAFFORD
THE RECORD

George Stafford is outreach director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition.

WE THOUGHT we dodged a bullet this year. There had been no extreme weather events that threatened our enjoyment of the fall in New Jersey.

But we're in a bit of a drought. It's not the worst drought we've ever had, but it is severe and it doesn't look like it will end soon. But this weather event is nothing like the power outages and floods of the last two years. It could be worse. We're not having record droughts like the ones in 1963, 1965 and 2002. But there are a lot more of us now and we're using much more water per person than ever before.

We Jersey folk take water for granted. Water is everywhere. It heats us and cools us. We use it for fire suppression — drive down the street and on almost every block you see high pressure hydrants. We lavish water on the hundreds of thousands of acres of lawned landscapes. The commercial, industrial and recreational uses of water are virtually endless.

Historically, places like Jersey City and Newark looked west for fresh water and built reservoir systems in the Highlands. Now more than 5 million people in New Jersey depend on the Highlands for water, nearly 65 percent of our population. Water is almost free. We only pay for storage, delivery and treatment. The cost is so small that only three states have lower water rates than New Jersey. But water resources are finite.

Filling the reservoirs

We jeopardize the state's economy if we jeopardize Highlands water. It is the Highlands' groundwater that fills the rivers that fill the reservoirs that five million of our fellow New

Jerseyans depend upon. The Highlands and the rest of North Jersey are locked into a perpetual resource-based economic partnership.

It is for this reason that the New Jersey Highlands Coalition has launched its Uphold the Highlands Campaign. By reaching out to communities outside the Highlands that are dependent on Highlands water and by educating their elected officials, the coalition hopes to enlist support for the Highlands Act and the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

Critics of the Highlands Act have long protested the use of “their” water by downstream towns that they say “use it once then dump it in the ocean.” This narrow, inflammatory language would startle those in such water-dependent communities as Franklin Lakes, Millburn/Short Hills, Caldwell and Princeton, all of which have passed the coalition’s resolution.

Many community leaders inside and outside the Highlands have had reservations about the act because of its alleged devastating effects on real estate values in the Highlands.

The Highlands Coalition did a study on the impact on real estate values following the passage of the Highlands Act. The study used the county tax board records of the seven Highlands counties, factoring in the assessments in all 88 Highlands communities. It found that in the years immediately following passage of the act, real estate values in the Highlands, contrary to popular belief, increased dramatically. Then, beginning in 2008, values began to decline, again dramatically. When compared to similar figures for non-Highlands areas, and with markets across America, the results were nearly identical. The rapid rise and rapid fall of real estate pricing was the result of the real estate bubble followed by the banking crisis of 2008. The so-called “devastating” impact of the Highlands Act simply did not exist.

Misinformation

In an atmosphere rife with ideological-driven myths, misinformation and political shenanigans, the Highlands Coalition’s Uphold the Highlands program is an effort to clear the air. By presenting the facts to New Jersey’s 292 Highlands water-dependent communities, the coalition hopes to build support for what needs to be a regional approach to our finite water supply. The New Jersey Highlands Coalition intends to show that the interests of the Highlands communities and their “downstream” neighbors are in fact one and the same. This program is meant to demonstrate that the Highlands Act, if properly applied, will bring equal benefits to all northern New Jersey communities that by vastly different circumstances, geographies and natures have, surprisingly, an alliance of interest.