Greetings, and welcome to the “new normal.” At the Coalition we continue to work remotely, adapting activities and projects to online forums. These days we do almost everything virtually; our regular Committee Meetings, the Coalition’s Annual Meeting, even organizing the 2nd Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference using a digital conferencing platform.

Of course there is another side to living virtually. Precautions against COVID-19 have meant many consumers are shopping more online, spurring proposals for warehouses to meet demand of online purchases. Coinciding with the rise of online retailers in the last decade, warehouse proposals are increasing, and now they are moving into the western New Jersey Highlands. So while the slow process of planning, approving and building warehouses goes on, we caution planners in both business and government to ensure their town or region is prepared for when such proposals come to their door. There are appropriate places for this type of development—even in the Highlands, but we must be prepared to push back when a proposal threatens a community, or critical natural resources.

On a brighter note, 2020 has been the year of “staycations,” when many people chose to explore their backyard in the Highlands instead of going on vacation. And it is on this note that I would like to give thanks for the beauty, inspiration, and opportunity to recreate that the Highlands provide to all of us.

Wishing you all safe, relaxing, and happy Holidays!

Elliott Ruga, Policy & Communications Director

Happy Holidays from the NJ HC

WE ARE COMING UP TO YEAR’S END

We are coming up to year’s end and Bill Kibler and Wynnie Hinds are still being held back by their respective Senators from taking their seats on the Highlands Council and replacing those incumbents who continue to impede the work of the Highlands Council. For example, at the October Highlands Council meeting, Council Member Vohden stated that he objected to Parsippany’s conformance, and that he will continue to vote against all Conformance Petitions in the future. But before he would elaborate as to why, he had to quiz the Highlands Council staff on the difference between the rules that a property owner would be subject to in the conformed Planning Area, and the rules that would pertain in the Preservation Area. Granted, the shared jurisdiction in the Highlands between the Highlands Council and DEP has led to much confusion. But Council Member Vohden has been a member of the Highlands Council for eight years now, voting on important issues before the Highlands Council. For him to still not understand the difference between the Planning Area and the Preservation Area reveals a disturbing ignorance of the implications of the Council’s actions and the impact of his persistent votes against Planning Area conformance. He is not only doing the Council a disservice, but also a disservice to all the municipalities in the Highlands that are subject to his actions on the Council.

The Governor really must move on his appointments immediately and negotiate directly with the Senators who are blocking his nominees to the Highlands Council. Enough is enough!

Speaking of year end frustrations, DEP and the Highlands Council con-

Continued on page 2
Policy Update cont’d

Environmental Justice and our Forest

Elliott Ruga, Editor

Many of the foundations that support the non-profit environmental/conservation community in New Jersey are placing an emphasis on environmental justice and in a better representation of BIPOC communities within our leadership and staffs. This could not have come at a better time for the NJ Highlands Coalition because it provides us with much deeper and programmatic access to potential constituents in New Jersey’s northeastern cities—those who depend on Highlands water as the carrying capacity contributing to their growth and development. And Newark, which owns five reservoirs in the Highlands buffered by 35,000 acres of the most ecologically vibrant and most intact forest in the State, has their investment in the water resources of the Highlands very much in alignment with the goals and objectives of the Highlands Act. This is one of the reasons why having Wynnie Hinds appointed to the Highlands Council is such a high priority for us. Think of it, Newark is the largest landowner in the Highlands, yet they have never had a voice on the Highlands Council.

We also share a common goal that needs better acknowledgement. If we continue the focus of New Jersey’s development on the remaining natural landscapes of the Highlands, we will permanently extinguish the natural resource values that New Jersey’s sustainable future is dependent upon and we will fail at redeveloping our cities, to them vibrant and affordable.

To better build relationships with potential partners in the cities we have participated in foundation supported programs recently, such as the Annual Newark Call to Collaboration, where we hosted a session on increasing awareness of the recreational, cultural and educational resources of the Newark Watershed property by the Newark community. It was very well attended and led to an invitation to give a presentation at Newark’s CivicStory Forum in mid-November.

We have also recently applied for a Six Mosaic Grant, which supports certain environmental justice principles, to work with Newark citizens to form a friends of/watchdog group associated with the Newark Watershed property.

By combining our voices we can amplify the strength of our advocacy.

“The Earth is a fine place and worth fighting for.” -E. Hemingway
(Kittatinny State Park, Ashley F.)

Recognizing our Members

Julia Somers, Executive Director

We could not let this issue of the Highlands Lookout go without acknowledging those outstanding individuals recognized at our October Annual Meeting.

Sandy Batty was awarded the Candace McKee Ashmun Capstone Award for her leadership of the Coalition as President of the Board for many years.

Leslie Sauer was also awarded the Candace McKee Ashmun Capstone Award for her dedication to protecting the Highland’s forests.

Warren County Freeholder James Kern received the 2020 Vision & Leadership Award. Tracey Heisler, Tom Bodolsky and Theresa Chapman were given the Wilma Frey Highlands Volunteer Award.
50 Years of Environmentalism in NJ
Ashley Fallone & George Stafford,

The year 2020 marks an important anniversary for mainstream environmentalism in the United States, and environmental protection in New Jersey. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Earth Day are each celebrating 50 years!

Starting with Earth Day, back in 1969 when Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson heard the news of nearly 100,000 barrels of oil spilling from an oilrig offshore from Santa Barbara, California killing sea life and destroying habitat, he was distraught. Recognizing that environmental degradation was occurring throughout the US he decided to use his influence to raise awareness among Americans about what was at stake.

Along with Congressman Pete McCloskey and activist Denis Hayes, Senator Nelson formed a coalition of activists across the US to elevate environmental protection in the public conscience through organized teach-ins on college campuses.

On April 22, 1970, what would be the first official Earth Day, over 20 million Americans protested in unity against the ignorance that was compromising the natural environment across the country. This Earth Day protest would go on to inspire many important laws; including the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the Endangered Species Act (1973). But perhaps one of the most significant impacts of Earth Day was the formation of a national Environmental Protection Agency.

In July of 1970, President Richard Nixon proposed organizing oversight of various environmental concerns into one federal agency. The EPA’s primary responsibility is to set federal standards for air and water quality, limit pollution, and protect human and environmental health.

Meanwhile closer to home in the mid 1960s, New York City was engulfed in dangerously high levels of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, smoke, and haze. The New York City skyline was hidden in smog. The Hudson, Hackensack, and Passaic rivers were open sewers. New Jersey was in rotten environmental shape when finally on April 22, 1970 – America’s first Earth Day, New Jersey’s DEP was created and charged with managing the state’s natural resources, including land and water use, protecting air quality, and controlling waste disposal.

Years later Senator Nelson said about Earth Day, “The objective was to get a nationwide demonstration of concern for the environment so large that it would shake the political establishment [and] force this issue permanently onto the national political agenda.”

Today the legacy of that first Earth Day is evident; environmental protection and the principles of sustainable development are widely accepted. Just this month Governor Murphy signed into law the strictest single-use plastics rules in the country.

However, there is still work to be done. Climate change poses a bigger threat than any one government or agency can tackle. It is up to each of us to use our voice, and keep the pressure on our elected officials to move us toward a safe and prosperous future.
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Membership Contribution:
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(Your email will allow us to inform you of upcoming events.)

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