

New Jersey Hills Media Group



HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS - The Highlands: Why we care

Julia Somers, *Published in New Jersey Hills Media on Jan. 11, 2021*

The New Jersey Highlands make up 16 percent of the landmass of our state, from which comes the water supply depended upon by 70 percent of our residents, a pretty eye-popping statistic.

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition works to promote and protect the extraordinary diversity of resources found there. This occasional column introduces you to the region

At the coalition, we are constantly providing information or batting down misinformation about the region.

Who can be surprised? When I Google “New Jersey Highlands,” my computer insists I am checking up on Highlands, New Jersey, “a borough in Monmouth County, New Jersey, United States.”

Or, when we speak with someone who shares they live in Morristown, or Dover, or Phillipsburg, or Montville, or Far Hills, not in the New Jersey Highlands, we have the opportunity to share they have the good fortune to indeed live in the Highlands of New Jersey.

So, where are our Highlands and why are they special? The New Jersey Highlands region is 88 towns, spread across parts of seven counties (Morris, Bergen, Passaic, Sussex, Warren, Hunterdon, and Somerset), 860,000 acres, from which 6.2 million of New Jersey’s residents derive some or all of their water supply.

The Highlands Water Protection & Planning Act, approved by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in August, 2004, created a Highlands Water Protection & Planning Council which spent several years developing a Highlands Regional Master Plan with implications for all 88 towns.

The act directed that the Regional Master Plan “shall protect and enhance the significant values of the resources” of the entire region. Those resources are myriad: mountains, the geologic remnants of massive peaks once higher than the Himalayas, headwaters of several major rivers, hundreds of lakes, streams, several of New Jersey’s largest reservoirs, some of the state’s most uninterrupted forests, many state, county and local parks, some including very rare and unusual habitats, extensive agriculture, recreation, history encompassing the founding of this country as well as the industrial revolution, urban centers and suburban neighborhoods. You can find all the information at the council’s excellent website.

Confusion arises over what it means to be in the Planning Area or the Preservation Area, because “conformance” to the Regional Master Plan is voluntary in a Planning Area and mandatory in a Preservation Area.

Some 52 towns are in the Preservation Area, 47 of them only partially to varying degrees, leaving 36 entirely in the Planning Area. Of the divided towns, as examples, Denville has six acres in the Preservation Area – the remainder of the town is in the Planning Area – or Lebanon Township has 11 acres in the Planning Area – the remainder in the Preservation Area.

A majority of towns in the Highlands are at some point on the continuum of conforming to the Regional Master Plan, but most have a lot of work remaining to complete the process, and a majority of exclusively Planning Area towns have not yet taken advantage of the benefits and opportunities offered by conformance such as more control over local zoning.

Maybe that’s about to change?

As we begin a new year, municipal and county budgets have been decimated by society’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Highlands Council has multiple grants available for the region’s towns pursuing conformance to the Regional Master Plan.

They can address many different planning objectives and can be tailored to each town’s needs as they work to protect the resources each prioritizes and defend their zoning and planning against unwanted change.

Changes in zoning because of possible development of warehouses in Warren County come to mind, for instance.

Further, on Nov. 4, 2020, the State Planning Commission endorsed the Highlands RMP, so now a conformed town will automatically be considered to be endorsed, unleashing all the benefits of endorsement to the State Plan, the cost of which will all have been covered through conformance by Highlands Council grants.

This column is the first of a regular series for Jersey Hills Media, written by me and my colleagues, addressing issues particular to the New Jersey Highlands.

At the NJ Highlands Coalition, we always welcome your queries or requests for guidance. Don't hesitate to reach out.

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