



State of New Jersey

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HIGHLANDS REGIONAL MASTER PLAN MONITORING PROGRAM COUNTY STAKEHOLDER MEETING

DATE: December 10, 2014

TIME: 10:00AM – 12:00PM

LOCATION: Highlands Council
Meeting Room
100 North Road
Chester, NJ

ATTENDEES:

First Name	Last Name	Organization
Adam	Bradford	Hunterdon County
Kathleen	Caren	Passaic County
David	Dech	Warren County
Sue	Dziamara	Hunterdon County
Tara	Kenyon	Somerset County
Christine	Marion	Morris County
Edward	Smith	Warren County
Eric	Snyder	Sussex County
Tony	Soriano	Morris County
Autumn	Sylvester	Sussex County
Corey	Tierney	Warren County
Richard	Vohden	Sussex County, NJ Highlands Council - Member
Margaret	Nordstrom	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Andy	Davis	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Chris	Danis	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Judy	Thornton	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Maryjude	Haddock-Weiler	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Corey	Piasecki	NJ Highlands Council - Staff
Courtenay	Mercer	Regional Plan Association
Janani	Shankaran	Regional Plan Association

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MEETING PURPOSE:

To provide an overview of the Highlands Regional Master Plan Monitoring Program and process; brainstorm topics and data availability for ongoing monitoring; identify potential technical advisory committee members; and discuss next steps.

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Overview of Monitoring Program Process
- 3) Discussion Items:
 - a) Identify current state of utilization and collaboration between agencies and the RMP.
 - b) Opportunities for improvements to the RMP.
 - c) How can outreach and education from the Highlands Council be improved?
 - d) What RMP topics/information are most appropriate for ongoing monitoring?
 - e) Do you have access to and/or relevant information about data that can be used for the ongoing monitoring of the RMP?
- 4) Identification of Potential TAC Members
- 5) Wrap up/Next Steps

MEETING SUMMARY:

The meeting opened with welcome remarks by Courtenay Mercer, NJ Director at Regional Plan Association (RPA), the project consultant. Attendees introduced themselves. Ms. Mercer gave a short PowerPoint presentation with background on the Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) Monitoring Program and process. Key points included:

- The RMP is continually updated as new factual information is made available, but the Monitoring Program evaluates progress toward achieving the goals of the RMP by identifying and measuring indicators and milestones.
- Stakeholder meetings are being conducted now to identify potential indicators and data sources that may not be readily available. Public outreach stakeholder meetings will be held in mid-December and January.
- Two series of technical advisory committee (TAC) meetings will take place, one in winter 2015 and the second after initial research and analysis has been completed.
- The process will result in the Monitoring Program Recommendations Report (MPRR) and a science and research agenda.
- A Fiscal Impact Assessment (FIA) will be conducted concurrently to measure the economic state of the Highlands region as well as provide comparisons to other regions.

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Participants then engaged in discussion, facilitated by Ms. Mercer, about opportunities for enhanced outreach by the Highlands Council as well as improvement within the Highlands RMP.

In response to a question about the structure and flexibility of the monitoring program, Council staff conveyed that the program is not dictated by statute and that stakeholders will help to shape the process.

Participants remarked that some of the parameters used to delineate geographic areas in the RMP should be revisited and redefined. For example, rules regarding nitrate dilution restrict development in Warren County. However, areas of the county impacted by these restrictions are located 20 to 30 miles away from water harvesting points and/or in watersheds that feed to the Delaware River, such that most areas of Warren County cannot contribute to substantial Highlands water degradation. Instead, these restrictions are adversely impacting development and ratables in the county. Council staff remarked that while some policies within the Highlands region are outside of the purview of the RMP, there are nevertheless opportunities to recommend changes.

In terms of conformance, participants conveyed that the RMP handles counties and municipalities in the same manner; when in fact, land use decision-making authority rests almost entirely with municipalities. The Highlands Council should develop an improved understanding of county limitations within the conformance process. Further, participants requested that Council staff provide more frequent updates to the counties regarding municipal interaction with the Highlands Council, including plan conformance and wastewater management plans.

Participants then discussed exemptions and exemption delegation. The Highlands Council does not issue exemptions in the preservation area; NJDEP exemptions typically take between three to six months to issue. County representatives conveyed that the prolonged process creates challenges at the local level. Council staff remarked that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with NJDEP allows conforming municipalities to issue exemptions in the preservation or planning area after training by the Highlands Council. Through this exemption delegation program, turnaround on applications could be days instead of months. However, smaller municipalities may be more apprehensive about undertaking exemption delegation. While the program targets training for municipal officials, participants remarked that there could be an opportunity for shared services: instead of municipalities appointing local officials to be trained, the counties could designate someone to be trained, and assist the municipalities.

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Participants discussed economic development within the Highlands region. In Warren County, a restrictive development framework has resulted in countless “stranded” industrial properties. Council staff replied that if a property meets the exemptions, it can expand to 125% of the original footprint. Further, municipalities are encouraged to take advantage of the redevelopment area designation. Participants conveyed that despite these opportunities, there is little optimism about what the Highlands region offers, borne from the stigma that development and business activity is too complicated to undertake in the Highlands.

To encourage economic development, Ms. Mercer suggested a brownfields redevelopment inventory and map, paired with a strong education and marketing component. One participant added that the inventory should be explicit regarding development potential at sites. Further, the Council should work with the counties, municipalities, and other partners to develop a smart growth and economic development plan for the region.

Participants remarked that the monitoring process should gauge whether the Highlands Act resulted in outcomes that were not originally intended, such as restricting growth and economic development in areas with few environmental constraints. Council staff replied that if the data reflects that the Act resulted in unintended consequences, the Council would not be able to amend or change the Act as a result of this process, but could offer recommendations.

One participant conveyed that even without the Highlands Act, development in the more suburban and rural areas of the Highlands region would be drastically different than what was seen before 2004. Jobs and people are moving to urban places; 70% of the state’s households do not have children under the age of 18. These larger demographic trends will unquestionably impact suburban housing stock. Another participant conveyed that despite demographic trends working in an unfavorable direction, the Highlands region should still actively fight to retain jobs and people. Because of how the Highlands Act and RMP are currently implemented, the Highlands region is not on the same footing to tackle these challenges. Within the Act, sustainable economic development and environmental/resource protection have equal weight, yet few programs and policies have been implemented to promote sustainable economic development. The region should not plan to accommodate less growth, but should sustain and plan for more growth. One participant suggested that the recommendations report include an editorial to address the economic state of the Highlands region. Ms. Mercer commented that economic development and redevelopment efforts should be aligned across all levels of government, noting that

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municipal ordinances often do not support the type of redevelopment being discussed.

Participants explained that because economic development opportunities are more limited in the Highlands region, municipalities are unable to attract the necessary business and development to produce ratables. Coupled with the state's 2% property tax cap, municipalities are forced to provide fewer or lower quality public services. Yet, Highlands region residents should have access to the same quantity and quality of public services as residents in other areas of the state. Alternatively, if municipalities were not so heavily dependent on property taxes and could find tax revenue elsewhere, pressure for local development could be relieved.

In response to a question about whether the Council recommends zoning ordinance revisions to municipalities; Council staff stated that, in general, the Council does not instruct municipalities on what they should and should not be doing, but encourages good planning practice. The Council also provides municipal grant funding to complete planning projects; such as redevelopment studies, market studies, and sustainable economic development plans.

In Somerset, old and inefficient building stock has contributed to commercial vacancies. Highlands Council staff explained that the scope of work under the municipal grant program is fairly flexible and can be tailored to local needs – including an evaluation and a plan to address old building stock. For conforming counties, funding is available to study sustainable economic development.

Participants then discussed the implications of water use and management within the Highlands region. Growth and increasing development in Jersey City, Newark, and other urban areas will foster greater demand for Highlands water. In response, West Milford elected officials began a petition to implement a water user fee. In Passaic County, officials are beginning to explore more innovative solutions for sustainability. For example, the farmland preservation program is funding urban agriculture, and old mill buildings are being considered as places to grow food. One participant stated that the monitoring program should examine food resiliency within the region. The Foodshed Alliance produced a plan that could serve as a resource. Another participant discussed how aquaculture is also an important component of agriculture.

Overall, participants were in agreement that the state and region need strong plans that address water supply, wastewater management, and stormwater management, as counties do not necessarily have the resources to undertake such initiatives. The

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Delaware River Basin Commission produced a wastewater management plan for the basin.

Ms. Mercer then asked participants to provide feedback on draft indicators and potential data sources. Participants reiterated the importance of monitoring property taxes. One participant conveyed that energy is a key topic area missing from the set of draft indicator topics. Potential areas for monitoring include green energy, consumption, conservation, and infrastructure availability. Along the lines of energy, participants acknowledged the importance of fostering local employment to reduce long commutes, and ultimately decrease carbon footprints.

In terms of economic development; technology, fiber optics, and broadband accessibility should be monitored. However, as one participant remarked, this data can be difficult to obtain due to security issues. NJBPU provides general coverage area data in pdf form. NJDEP recently released a 2014 update for telecommunication areas, available in GIS form.

In terms of agriculture, participants emphasized the importance of measuring value added products. Further, as an important industry in the Highlands region, agriculture development and smart growth should be incentivized. Along these lines, food resiliency should also be monitored. Participants also conveyed that a state economic incentive plan should be created specific to the Highlands region. Council staff replied that planning area communities and designated centers may be eligible for NJ Economic Development Authority's Grow NJ program.

As the meeting concluded, Ms. Mercer remarked that participants are encouraged to send further feedback on indicators and data via email and through the online comment portal. Participants are also encouraged to identify potential TAC members. The TACs will meet in two series, the first set of meetings in January 2015 and the second pending release of NJDEP land use land cover data and associated project team analysis. Interested stakeholders should send resumes.

Over the next few weeks, Highlands Council staff and the project team will be meeting with municipal staff and holding public workshops.

Next Steps/Action Items

- Participants should submit via email: additional feedback on indicators, additional feedback on data sources, and TAC member suggestions.

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- The project team and Highlands Council staff will follow up with individual participants regarding indicators and data sources.