



State of New Jersey

Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council
100 North Road (Route 513)
Chester, New Jersey 07930-2322
(908) 879-6737
(908) 879-4205 (fax)
www.nj.gov/njhighlands



PHILIP D. MURPHY
Governor

SHEILA Y. OLIVER
Lt. Governor

CARL J. RICHKO
Chair

LISA J. PLEVIN
Executive Director

Contact:

Carole Ann Dicton, Manager of Communications
(908) 879-6737 ext. 105 or caroleann.dicton@highlands.nj.gov

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Highlands Council preservation project helps nonprofit connect kids with nature

CHESTER, N.J. — The Highlands Council has announced the preservation of more than 36 acres in Passaic County, on the property of Camp Vacamas. Camp Vacamas is the home of a nonprofit organization, Hands In 4 Youth (HI4Y), which provides summer camp experiences for young people from diverse backgrounds. The organization was founded in 1924 and has been at the West Milford location since 1955.

“This is a unique opportunity to protect natural resources and help support valuable environmental education programs for children,” explains Highlands Council Executive Director Lisa Plevin. “The Camp Vacamas property contains some exceptional forests and wildlife habitat, and is adjacent to several other preserved lands, so we were very happy to work with the owners to protect it from future development.”

A significant portion of the land being preserved is wooded and connects to a larger contiguous forested area made up of state and nonprofit lands, adding to a 10-mile corridor that stretches beyond the New York state border. The property provides habitat for numerous state and federal rare threatened and endangered species such as the golden winged warbler, timber rattlesnake, Indiana bat and Northern Goshawk.

HI4Y provides students ages 6 to 17 with summer camp and afterschool programs designed to empower children to pursue their dreams. At the core of the organization’s mission is the belief that immersion in the natural world fosters social and emotional growth and teaches children skills that will benefit them for a lifetime.

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Multiple lots within the camp boundary will be preserved through a conservation easement that will limit future development. The parcels being preserved are located in areas of the camp designated for hiking, nature walks and other activities that provide opportunities for campers to connect with nature. The camp currently serves between 250 and 300 campers each season, but has served as many as 1,200 per season in the past. HI4Y intends to use funding from the preservation project to address maintenance needs on the property, which have prevented it from operating at capacity.

All of the lots being preserved are mapped by the Highlands Council as “Special Environmental Zone” and located within “Preservation Priority” areas. This means the resources on the property are some of the most sensitive in the region and should be protected from future development.

“The goal of the Highlands Act is to protect the water resources of the region. One of the ways we do that is through preservation projects,” says Highlands Council Chairman Carl Richko. “It’s particularly satisfying to work with a property owner who understands the value of the natural resources in the Highlands and shares our commitment to protecting them.”

The Highlands Council is a regional planning agency, established in 2004 with the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, and is charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands.

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