



A New Vision for the Highlands

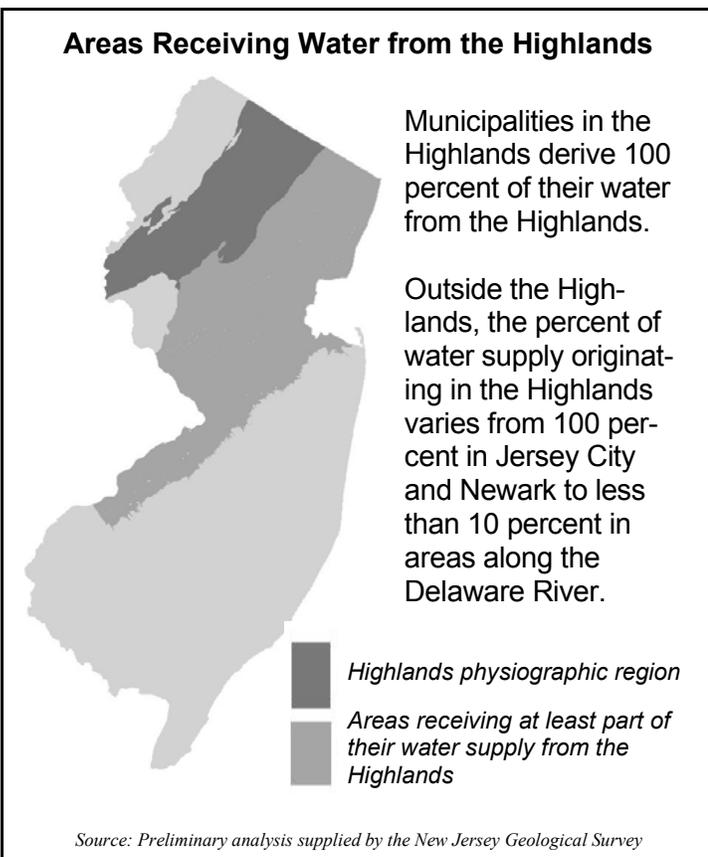
Smart Growth Recommendations from New Jersey Future

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Why a Regional Vision for the Highlands?

More than half of all New Jerseyans get their drinking water from the Highlands, an 800,000-acre swath of largely open land stretching across the northwestern portion of the state.

These water supplies are threatened by today's fragmented approach to managing a rapid regional population growth that is increasing at a rate nearly 50 percent faster than the statewide rate. The Highlands' natural resources are largely controlled by thousands of private landowners and some 90 local governments with a limited land-use planning and regulatory capacity. As owner of the drinking water supply, the state of New Jersey has a strong interest in managing these resources more carefully.



In mid-March 2004, a task force appointed by the governor is scheduled to offer its recommendations for watershed protection. Centerpiece recommendations will likely include preserving critical open lands by both land purchase and regulation. Successful preservation of the water quality and the quality of life of Highlands residents will take more.

A regional vision of *where* and *how* the Highlands is to grow is essential to ensuring the protection of water supplies from more sprawling development. Lessons learned from other regional models in New Jersey, in the Pinelands and Meadowlands, show clearly that achieving the full benefits of regional planning requires equal attention to preservation *and* growth.

There is an opportunity to do better in the Highlands.

Highlands Recommendations in Brief

New Jersey Future calls on the Highlands Task Force, the governor and the legislature to protect the Highlands' environmental and economic resources through a regionwide, coordinated program of land acquisition, regulation and comprehensive planning. Safeguarding the water and ensuring that the Highlands continues to offer a high quality of life requires the following:

1. Create a regional planning council to protect natural resources by identifying where and how the Highlands is to grow.
2. Adopt a regional land use plan and supportive regulations that match this vision.
3. Achieve municipal conformance to the regional plan.
4. Provide state resources for local governments that conform to the regional plan.
5. Authorize a regional Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program.
6. Ensure consistency with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan.

Why Our Current System is Failing the Highlands

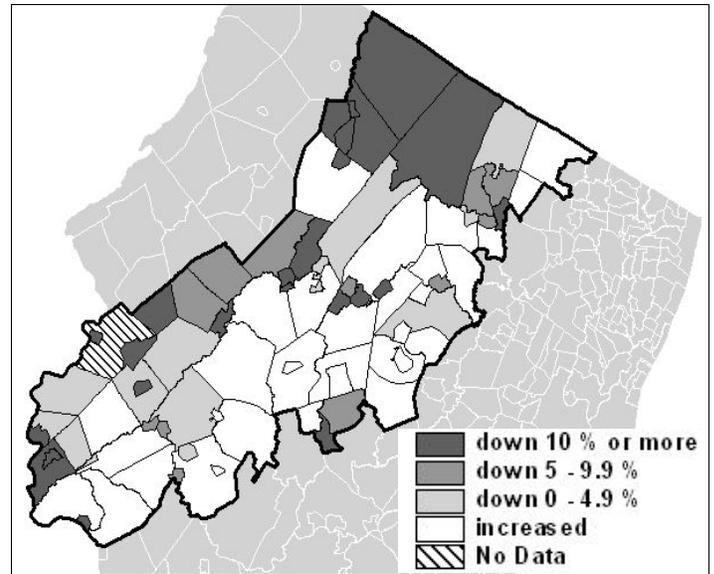
Nearly 70 percent of the Highlands has been mapped as “environmentally sensitive.” Yet less than a quarter of the region is permanently protected from development. Sprawling development has hurt the region, both environmentally and economically:

- Half of the region’s watersheds are expected to suffer water quality decline in the next few decades. ¹
- Ground water withdrawals are likely to exceed local supply in many Highlands watersheds. ¹
- Property values are dropping in many older communities as they lose investment to sprawling development – in some cases, the decline exceeds 10 percent in the past decade.

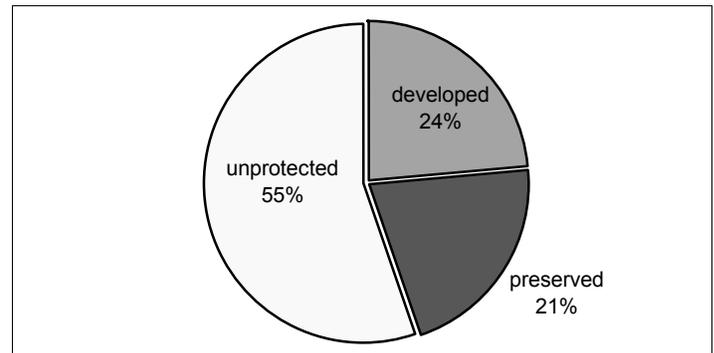
There is potential for even greater harm:

- Towns and individual property owners dependent on wells could see them become contaminated under unbridled development. The costs of importing water or building water treatment facilities could well prove cost-prohibitive for smaller communities.
- The costs of acquiring open land to protect water supplies have doubled in the last five years in this region, jumping to more than \$7,000 per acre. Preservation alone can’t protect water supplies.
- Current zoning in many communities will contribute to further sprawl, including “large-lot sprawl” and the degradation of natural resources.

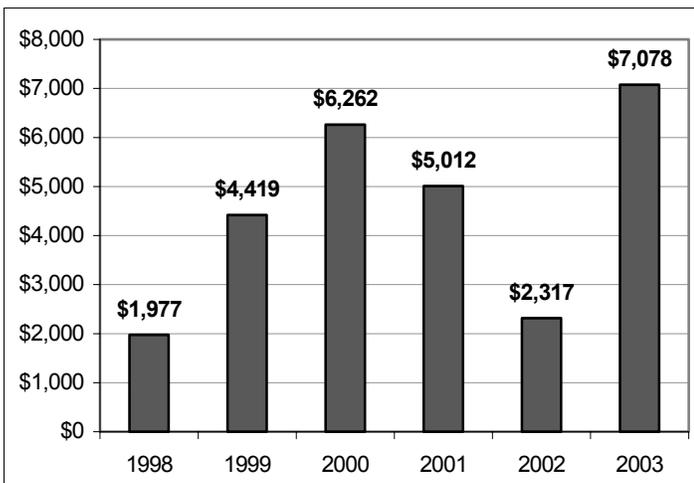
Change in Average Residential Value for Highlands Municipalities, 1990-2000 (Inflation-Adjusted)



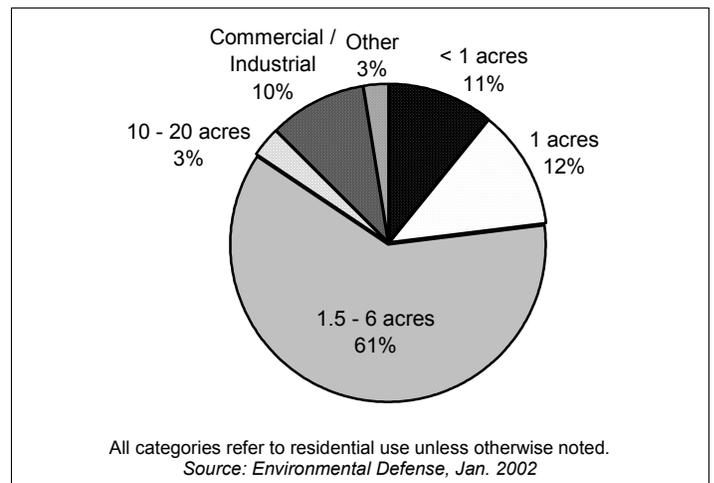
Highlands Development & Preservation, 2000



Green Acres Acquisitions in the Highlands: Average Cost per Acre (spent by state)



Zoning of Unprotected & Undeveloped Highlands Land, 2001



How Regional Planning Can Help the Highlands

We've seen the best individual communities can achieve on their own in managing growth. A new approach to planning is needed to safeguard water for all residents, and ensure a high quality of life for the region.

A regional planning council of local and state interests must be created to develop a new vision for the Highlands, one that protects water supplies while rebuilding and creating vital communities. In addition to the preservation of critical watersheds by both land purchase and regulation, this council must protect the region's environmental and economic interests by ensuring that new growth:

- is located near existing development and infrastructure. This makes the most of limited public resources, and protects open lands from further development.
- offers a range of housing options absent from sprawling development.
- creates or enhances a mix of uses where places to

work, shop, live and play are integrated, and not auto-dependent.

- increases choices for getting around through links to existing public transit and the creation of new opportunities to walk and bike safely to shops, schools, offices, i.e. a "walkable" community.
- limits the development of open space, farmland and critical environmental areas.
- is respectful of existing community character and design.

Regional tax-sharing, used today in the Meadowlands, can ensure towns with critical environmental resources still benefit from economic development elsewhere in the region. A regional program for transferring development credits (Transfer of Development Rights) would help maintain farming as a vital state industry and increase funding for land conservation by allowing landowners to sell development rights to their land to developers for use in desired growth areas, permanently preserving farmland and open lands, in exchange.

Benefits of Regional Planning

A coordinated, regional approach to growth management offers many benefits:

For local officials and residents

- Assurance that neighboring towns won't allow development that undermines the community.
- Protection from skyrocketing property taxes caused by unbridled growth, and access to regional tax sharing.
- Enhanced state resources for managing growth, such as additional funding for public services, legal representation and indemnification, planning funds, enforcement assistance, and capital infrastructure grants.
- Partnership with a regional council empowered to protect the region's quality of life.

For builders

- Clearly defined locations for development where growth has public support and is prioritized for infrastructure investments.

For farmers and large landowners

- More opportunities to sell land or development rights through larger public-acquisition programs and a regional TDR program.
- Protection from encroaching development and right-to-farm conflicts.
- Increased likelihood of proximity to open space, which enhances land values.

For citizens statewide

- Clean, abundant and affordable water.
- Protection of natural habitat, plus new and expanded recreational opportunities.

Recommendations & Checklist for Protecting the Highlands' Environmental and Economic Resources

New Jersey Future calls on the Highlands Task Force, the governor and the legislature to protect the Highlands' environmental and economic resources through a regionwide, coordinated program of land acquisition, regulation and comprehensive planning. Safeguarding the water and ensuring that the Highlands continues to offer a high quality of life requires the following:

1. **Create a regional planning council to protect natural resources by identifying where and how the Highlands should grow.** The council must include both local and statewide representatives. The chair should be chosen from the public at-large members. A mayors' committee should be established to ensure local input. The council should be served by an independent and well-funded professional staff. The council's charge should be two-fold in creating a vision for the region:
 - a. **Identify the most critical water resource lands for permanent protection.** Adopt regulations to protect these core lands until they can be acquired. Require the regional plan to protect some 200,000 to 250,000 additional acres of environmentally sensitive forests and farmlands.
 - b. **Create opportunities for new housing and economic development,** within limits established by a regional land-and-water capacity analysis. Adopt guidelines for compact design and the locating of new growth near existing development.
2. **Adopt a regional land use plan and supportive regulations that match this vision.** Authorize the council to coordinate with other state regulatory agencies and give it the power to review (and deny) public capital expenditures.
3. **Achieve municipal conformance to the regional plan** through changes to municipal master plans, land use ordinances and capital improvement plans. This could be accomplished in two ways: 1) mandatory conformance by all towns, or 2) mandatory conformance in the preservation areas, with powerful incentives (and disincentives) offered for conformance elsewhere. There should also be required conformance to a smaller set of region-wide land-use regulations and performance standards that protect natural resources and ensure an effective TDR program (see #5 below). Authorize the council to review (and deny) any development application with an adverse regional impact.
4. **Provide state resources for local governments that conform to the regional plan.** This should include compensation for communities where growth is to be concentrated to help offset the additional expense of public services, particularly schools; legal representation and indemnification for towns that are sued as a result of implementing the regional plan; planning and enforcement resources; and financial tools such as regional property-tax sharing, municipal tax stabilization and infrastructure grants for growth areas.
5. **Authorize a regional Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program** to: 1) steer development away from natural resources and farmlands and into identified growth areas, and 2) generate private funds to complement public acquisition dollars to preserve land.
6. **Ensure consistency with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan.** Base the regional plan on State Plan principles, and the latest environmental data. Ensure that this regional planning guides the updating and direction of the State Plan.

Learn More About Smart Growth

- ☞ Two *Smart Growth Scorecards*, developed by New Jersey Future, help tell if a municipal plan or local project is "smart" by identifying smart growth strengths and weaknesses. Find the Scorecards at www.njfuture.org.
- ☞ The *Smart Growth Gateway*, a project of New Jersey Future, is a one-stop portal for citizens and professionals to find information and strategies that can be applied locally. It can be found at www.smartgrowthgateway.org.

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