

Boonton Reservoir, Town of Boonton



Highlands Council Meeting

Thursday, July 16, 2026

Chairman's Report



Executive Director's Report

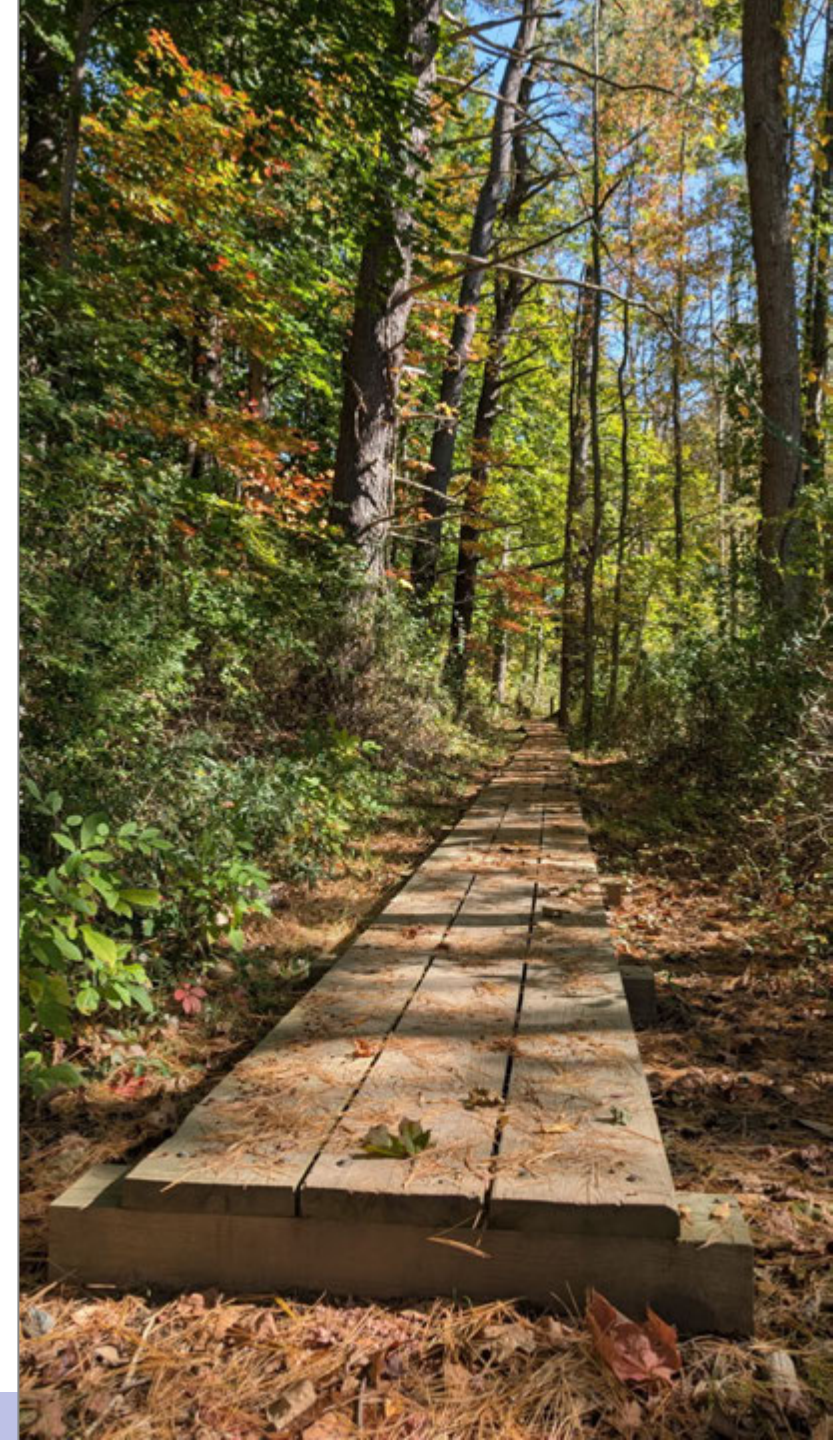


Highlands Region Open Space & Recreation Plan Report



Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan

- **Purpose.** Create a more proactive approach to land preservation in the Highlands. Identify and prioritize properties for conservation, open space, and farmland preservation in the region.
- **Funding.** USFWS Capacity Building Grant, \$172,000.
- **Consultant.** Trust for Public Land (TPL) and TwentyTwenty Public Affairs.
- **Timeline.** Launched 2024.



OSRP Key Steps & Highlights

- Public survey posted Summer 2025 to engage users and better understand outdoor recreation habits in the Highlands.
- Key stakeholder interviews to gain insight into Land Preservation practices and challenges.
- GIS analysis of metrics and ranking of parcels (over 9,000 parcels received “high” scores).
- Acquisition and Funding Plan
- Workflows and guidance for partners.



Next Steps

- Release final plan in August/September.
- Work closely with nonprofit land trusts, municipal, county, and state partners to implement.
- Continue work on Outdoor Recreation, Conservation, and Farmland Preservation priorities in the Highlands.





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NJ Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan

July 16, 2026



Overview of OSRP Planning Process

Why now? Meeting organizational need 20 years into Highlands Act – new and innovative approaches to open space planning

1 – Engaged Consultants

2 - Identified Steering Committee and Subcommittee Members

3 – Stakeholder Outreach

4 – Goal Setting

5 – GIS Analyses

6 – Identify Funding and Acquisition Resources

7 – Developed Resources for Land Trusts and Planners

Highlands Region OSRP Table of Contents



- Executive Summary
- *Chapter 1* – Introduction
- *Chapter 2* – Public Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement
- *Chapter 3* – Highlands Region at a Glance: History, Land Use, Demographics, and Climate
- *Chapter 4* – Goals for Open Space, Outdoor Recreation, and Farmland Preservation in the Highlands
- *Chapter 5* – Analyzing the Highlands Region for Land Preservation
- *Chapter 6* – Acquisition and Funding for the Highlands Region
- *Chapter 7* – Conclusion
- *Appendices: References; Outdoor Recreation User Survey Results; GIS Matrix, NJ Open Space Tax Law and Definitions; Approved Ballot Measures in NJ; Highlands Acquisition Outreach Toolkit*

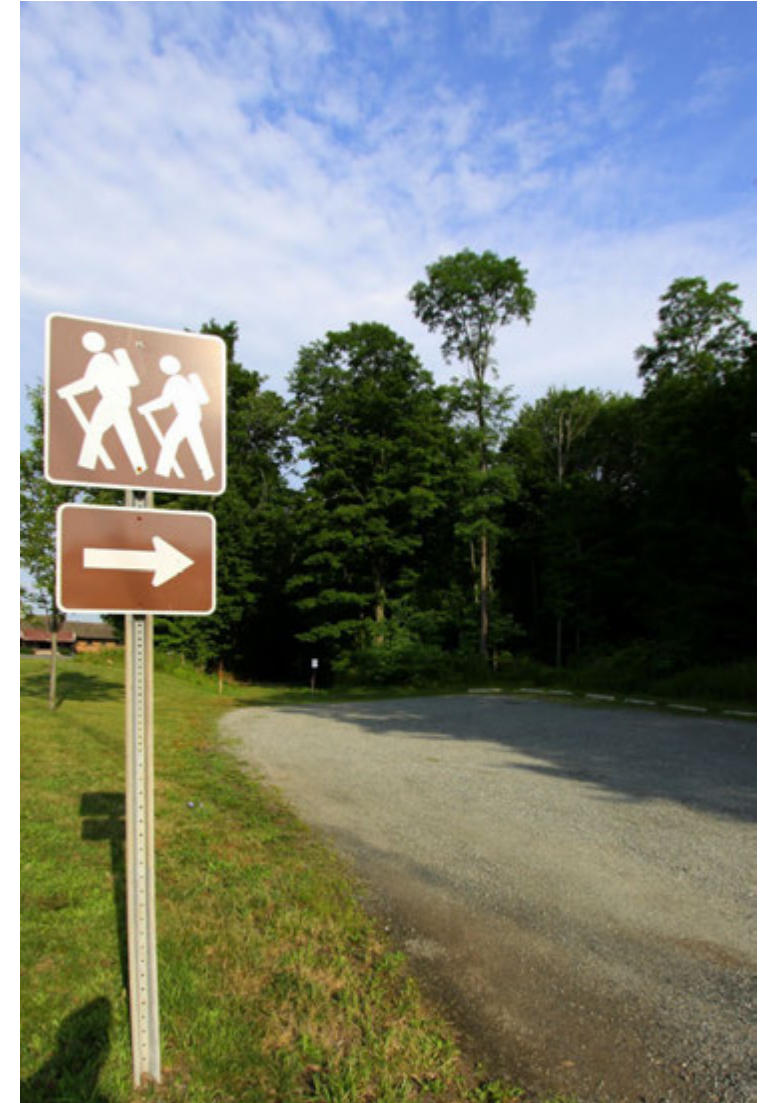
Chapter 1 - Introduction

Plan Statement of Purpose

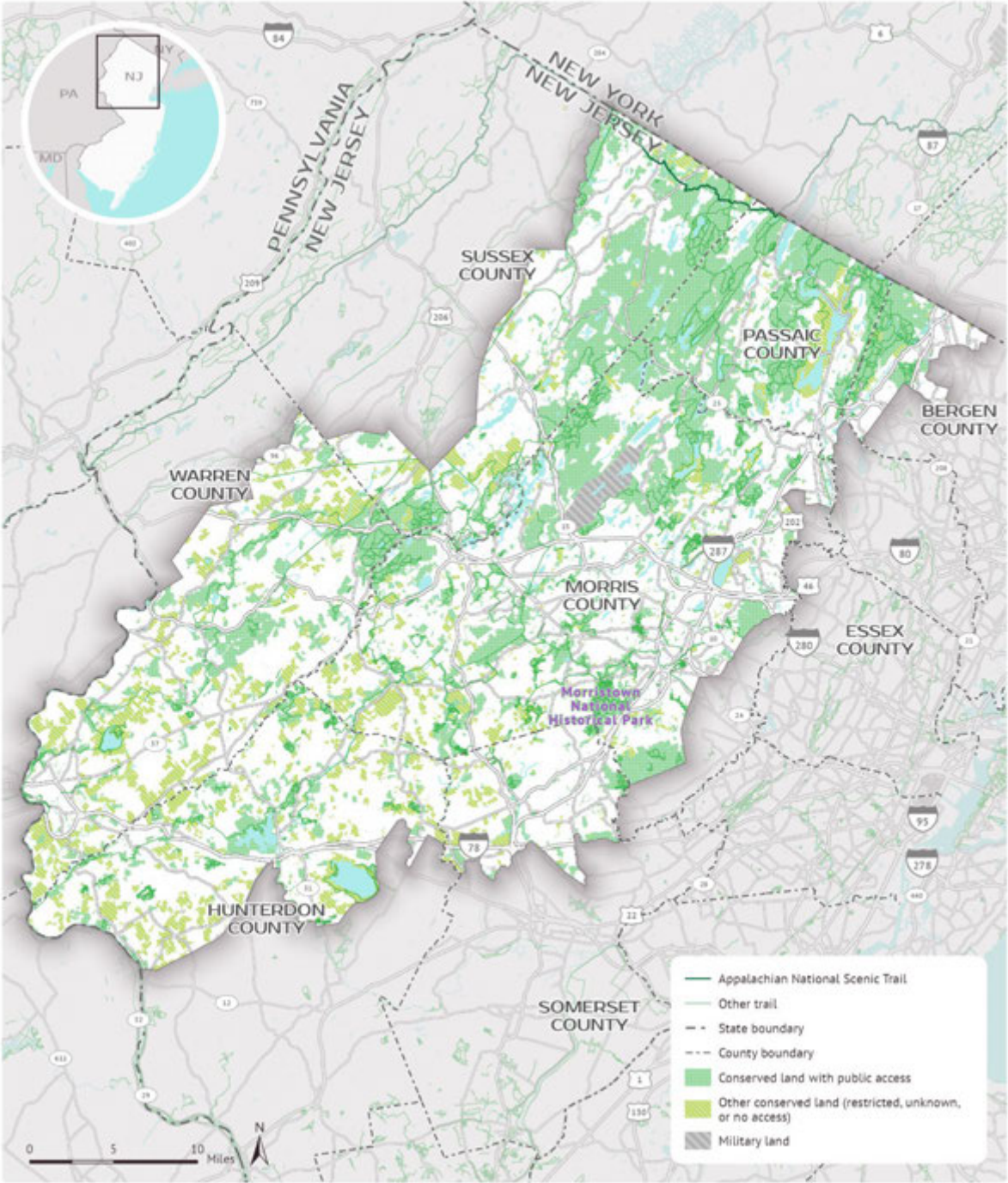
The Highlands Region Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is a planning document that presents a comprehensive approach to support and identify preservation opportunities in the Highlands region.

Following the guidelines of the Highlands Act and the goals of the Highlands RMP, the Highlands Region OSRP:

- catalogs existing open space and recreation lands;
- identifies additional parcels that may be appropriate for outdoor recreation, open space conservation, and farmland and historic resource preservation; and
- provides a stakeholder-driven framework for acquiring future open space and recreational opportunities.



Highlands Region Study Area

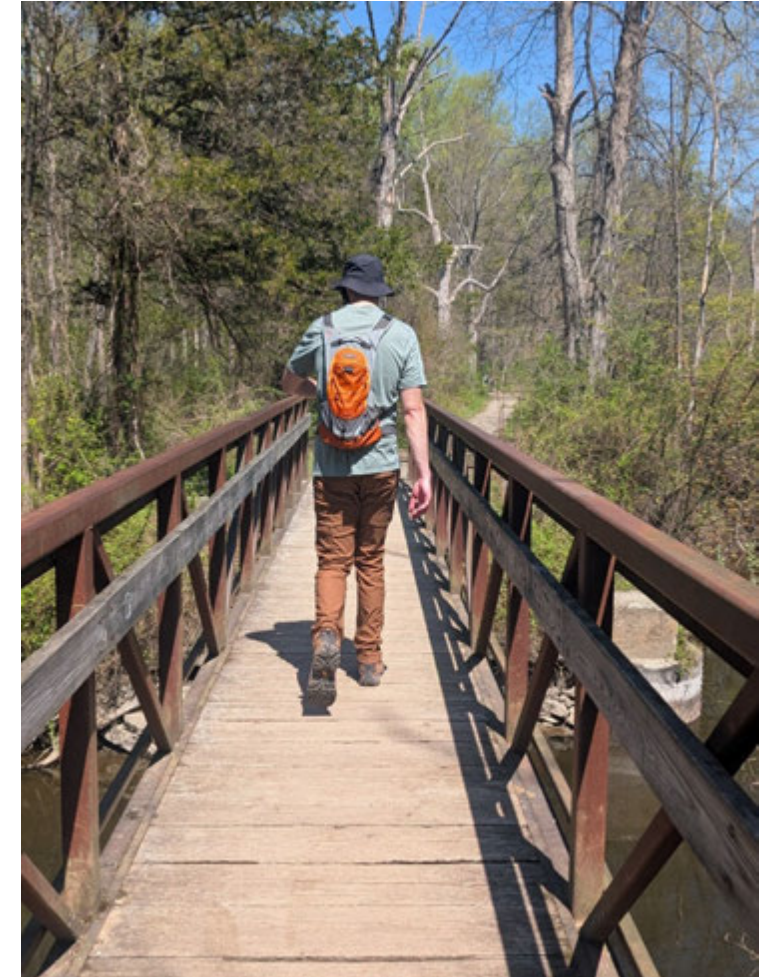
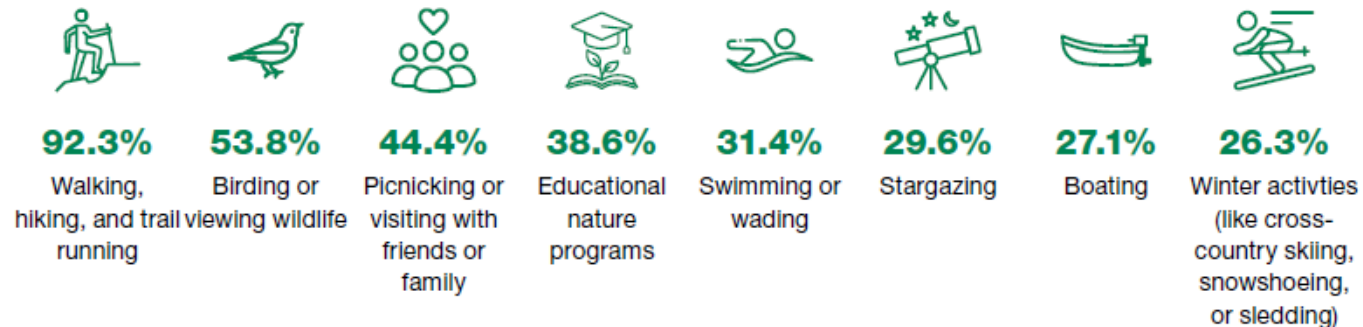


Chapter 2 – Public Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement

Outlines OSRP Stakeholder Engagement Process

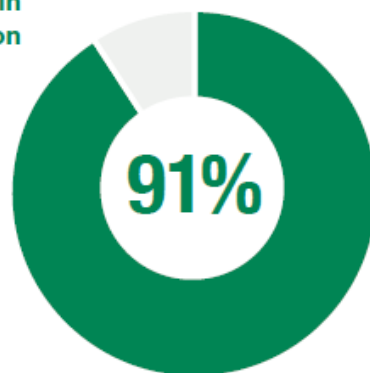
- Steering Committee
- 3 Subcommittees:
 - *Open Space and Farmland;*
 - *Outdoor Recreation; and*
 - *Acquisition and Funding*
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Outdoor Recreation Survey

Respondents were most interested in participating in:



Highlands Region Survey Results

Survey respondents had participated in outdoor recreation in the Highlands Recreation



While 36% of respondents didn't have any road blocks to enjoying outdoor recreation in the Highlands, some visitors faced challenges.

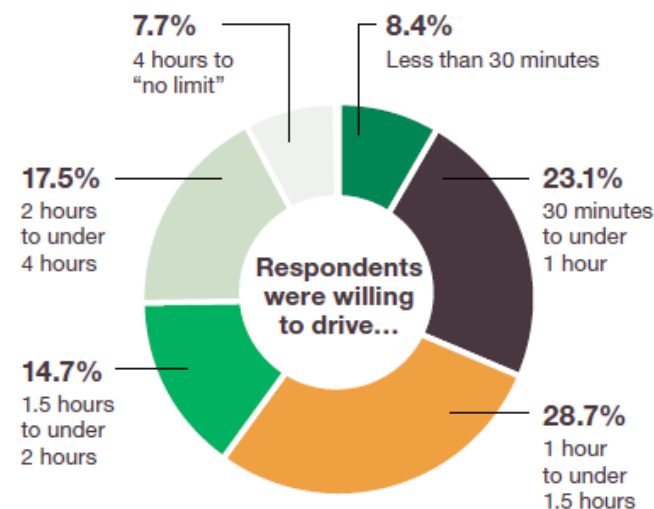
Other	17.4%
Lack of parking	17.3%
Lack of facilities (Including restrooms and water fountains)	15.5%
Too crowded	13.0%
Lack of signage	13.0%
Unsure where to go	12.6%

"Other" responses included off-road vehicles; lack of state or county resources to maintain areas; trash or litter; invasive species; ticks and mosquitoes; not enough time for recreation; off-leash dogs; unsafe road or lack of connection between sites; and logging impacting experience.

Respondents wanted to see more:

- 55%** Trails
- 55%** Wildlife sanctuaries or nature areas
- 30%** Informational kiosks or signage
- 30%** More facilities (like picnic tables, restrooms, water fountains, and cookout areas)
- 24%** Waterfront access areas

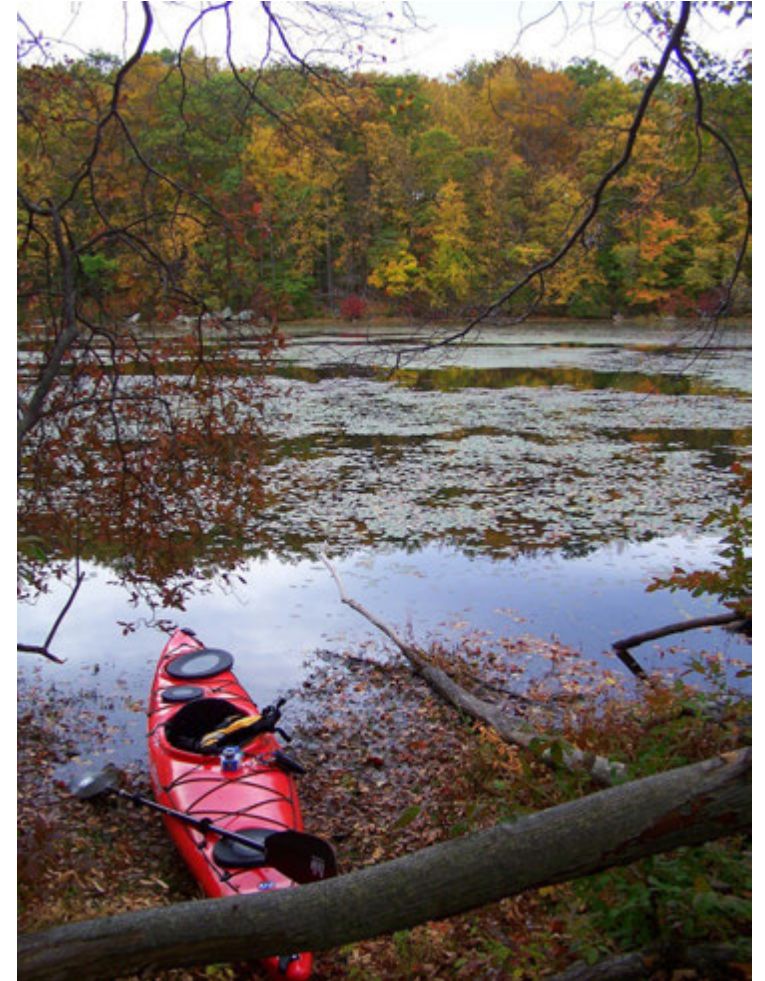
Most respondents (28.7%) were willing to drive 1 to 1.5 hours to access recreation opportunities in the Highlands Region; nearly 8% were willing to drive 4 hours or more!



Chapter 3 – Highlands Region at a Glance

Historical and Current Context of the Region

- History of the Land
- Land Use
- Climate Risks and Planning
 - Demographic and Socioeconomic Context
- Environmental Justice
- Indigenous History in the Highlands
 - Ceremonial Stone Landscapes
- Spanish-Speaking and Latino Residents in the Highlands



Chapter 3 – Highlands Region at a Glance

Recreational, Farmland, and Conservation in the Highlands Region

- Outdoor Recreation
- Farmland Preservation
- Open Space Conservation
 - *Status of Land Preservation and Recommendations from the Highlands Council*

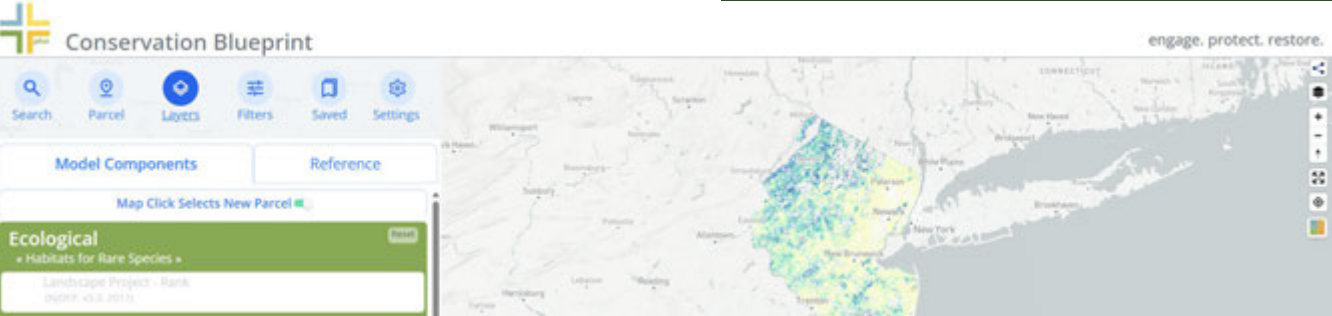
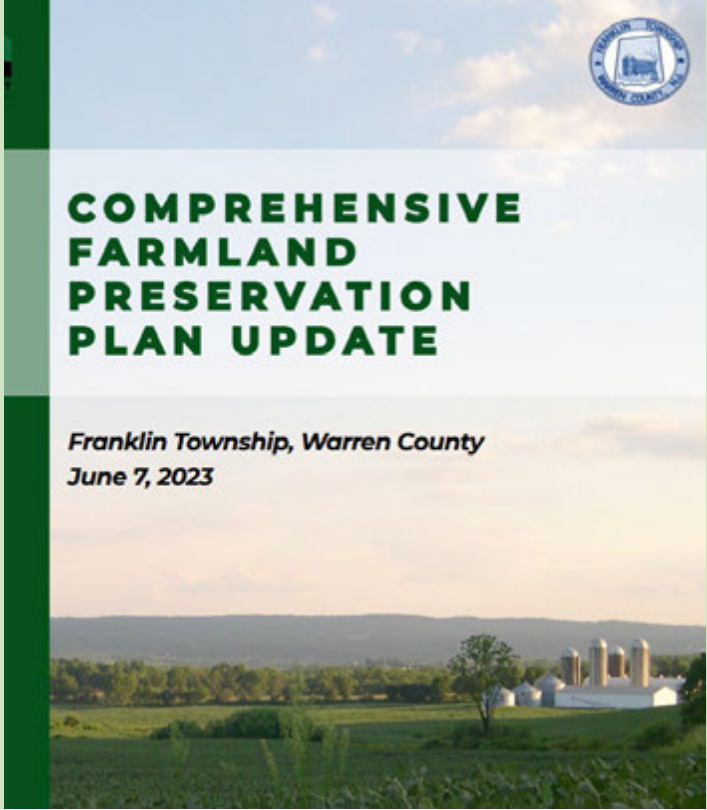
Regional Planning Context

- State, Regional, and Local Alignment
- Notable Projects and Initiatives

Economics of Conservation and Preservation



Local & Regional Plan Review



Chapter 4: Goals for Open Space, Outdoor Recreation, and Farmland Preservation in the Highlands



Highlands Council's overall goals in developing the OSRP:

1. To better optimize the balance of conservation and development in the region;
2. To strengthen relationships with partners; and
3. To develop proactive strategies for land acquisition and management

Council staff and TPL established Open Space and Farmland Subcommittee and Outdoor Recreation Subcommittee to set specific objectives; either:

- Measurable, map-based evaluation: scores based on innovative GIS analysis
- Subjective, qualitative evaluation: add nuance, may require site visits, stakeholder engagement, or additional data collection

OSRP Goals: Open Space Conservation

GIS-Based Goals

- Adjacent to protected lands
- Conserve Bird Areas and Migratory Routes, Critical Habitat, Vernal Pools, Wildlife Corridors, Natural Heritage Priority Sites, Areas in Special Environmental Zones, and Forested areas to protect habitat and water quality in the Highlands region.
- Conserve Groundwater Recharge Areas, Surface Water Buffers, Wellhead Protection Areas, and Karst
- Conserve parcels with highest wildfire risk
- Conserve parcels in Flood Zones
- At risk of development (no existing protection)

Site-Specific Evaluation

- Consistent with regional and local plans
- Maintenance and stewardship capacity



OSRP Goals: Farmland Preservation

GIS-Based Goals

- Unprotected Farmland
- Parcels with Important Farmland Soils
- Contiguous to Preserved Farmland

Site-Specific Evaluation

- “Right to Farm” ordinance
- Municipal farmland preservation plan
- Not adjacent to active recreational facilities
- Potable water supply
- Interested owner
- Does not qualify for other state, county, or local preservation programs based on parcel size



OSRP Goals: Outdoor Recreation

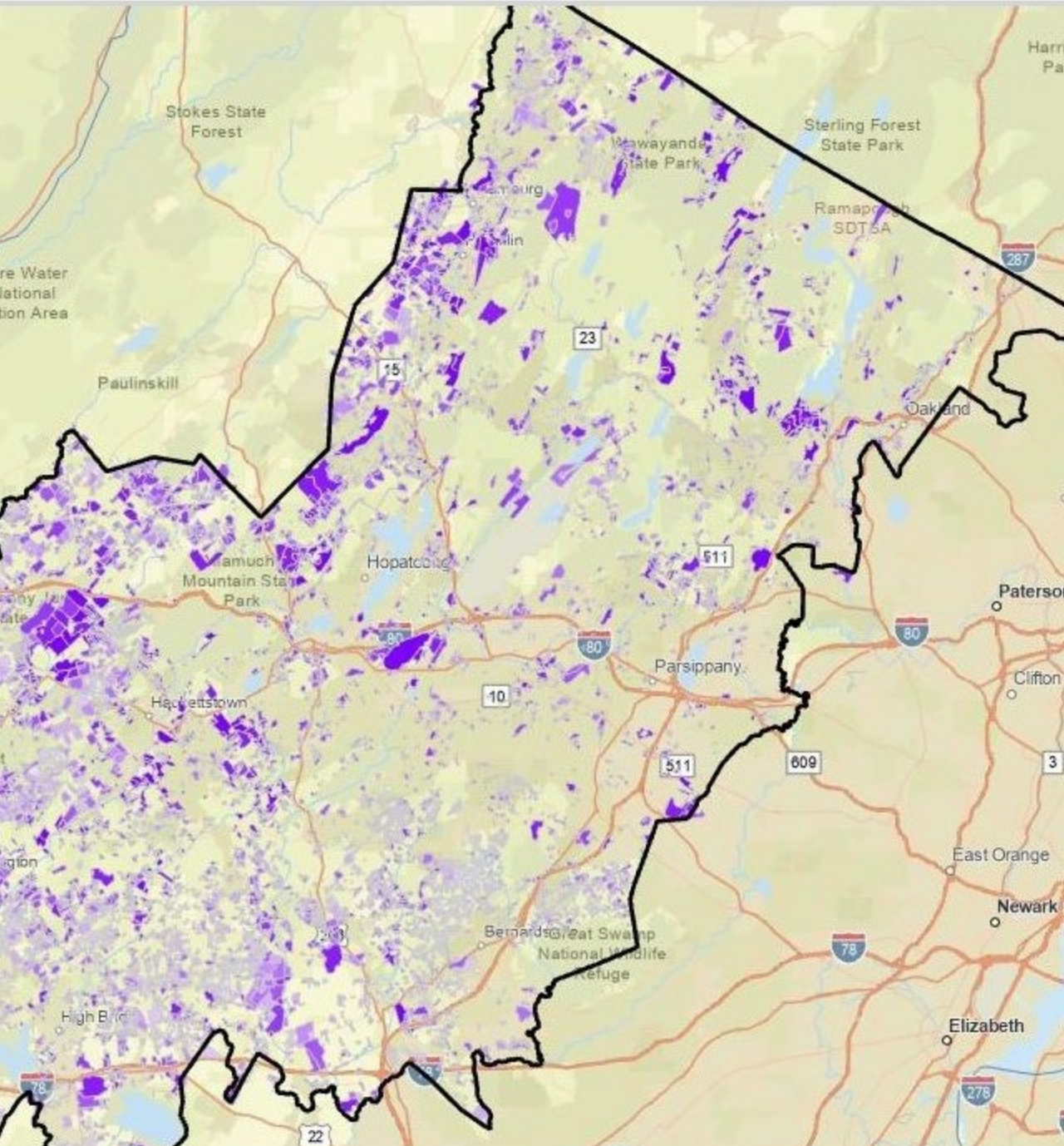
GIS-Based Goals

- Trail continuity
- Adjacent to water-based recreation
- Improve residents' access to nearby recreation
- Connect to multi-modal transportation hubs
- Near high population density
- Conserve parcels with cultural significance, areas along Scenic Byways, near existing Historic Trails, and near Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Places in or near Overburdened Communities

Site-Specific Evaluation

- Connect to existing recreation amenities
- Improve tourism & economic development
- Support accessibility and inclusivity
- Consistency with regional and local planning
- Maintenance and stewardship capacity
- Protect areas of cultural significance
- Expand region's recreational offerings





Chapter 5: Analyzing the Highlands Region for Land Preservation

Highlands OSRP

- 1. Recreation Inventory**
Where are the outdoor recreation assets, preserved land, and resources with natural, historic, archaeological, and scenic significance in the region?
- 2. Level of Service Analysis**
*How well do these locations meet residents' recreation needs near home?
(Hiking and multi-purpose trails, natural areas for birding, hunting, water-based recreation)*
- 3. Parcel-Scoring Analysis**
Parcels were scored 1-10 based on how well they met the goals defined by Highlands staff and subcommittee members.

Key Findings of Highlands Parcel Analysis

- 9,567 parcels analyzed
- Scoring 7 or higher (out of 10) suggests the parcel is best suited to meet the goals of open space, farmland preservation, or outdoor recreation

County	Number of Parcels Analyzed	Number of Parcels Scoring 7 or Higher
Bergen	96	0
Hunterdon	2,145	67
Morris	2,549	98
Passaic	473	35
Somerset	350	2
Sussex	1,432	72
Warren	2,522	185
Total	9,567	459

Key Findings of GIS Parcel Analysis

- For **open space conservation**, **2,799 parcels** (31.2% of all parcels scored for open space) scored 7 or higher; **2,326** (24.3%) of the parcels scored 7 or higher for **outdoor recreation**; and **3,347** (37.3%) of the parcels scored a 7 or higher for **farmland preservation**.
 - **Farmland Preservation**: Reflects agricultural character of the region (second highest land use after residential); Hunterdon County had highest number of high-scoring parcels
 - **Outdoor Recreation**: Morris County had highest number of outdoor recreation due to transportation connectivity and higher population density
 - **Open Space Conservation**: Sussex and Warren counties had most high-scoring parcels (due to rural nature of the counties); scored highly for wildlife corridors and proximity to nearby preserved lands

How to Use OSRP Mapping Results



- Intended for use as decision support, not decision making
- Facilitates comparison and prioritization between sites using data
- GIS analysis should serve as baseline for qualitative, due diligence analysis
- Data layers will be available on REX and linked on Highlands Council website

Chapter 6 – Acquisition and Funding for the Highlands Region

OSRP Funding Needs

- Land management funding to address permanent land preservation, improved land stewardship practices, and ecological restoration
- Financial support for Highlands municipalities to mitigate the limits that the Highlands Act places on future development

Local Funding for Parks and Conservation in NJ

- Including analysis of open space taxes in the region

State & Federal Funding for Parks and Conservation in NJ

- Comprehensive list and brief descriptions of funding available for parks and conservation, including important context and considerations for Highlands municipalities



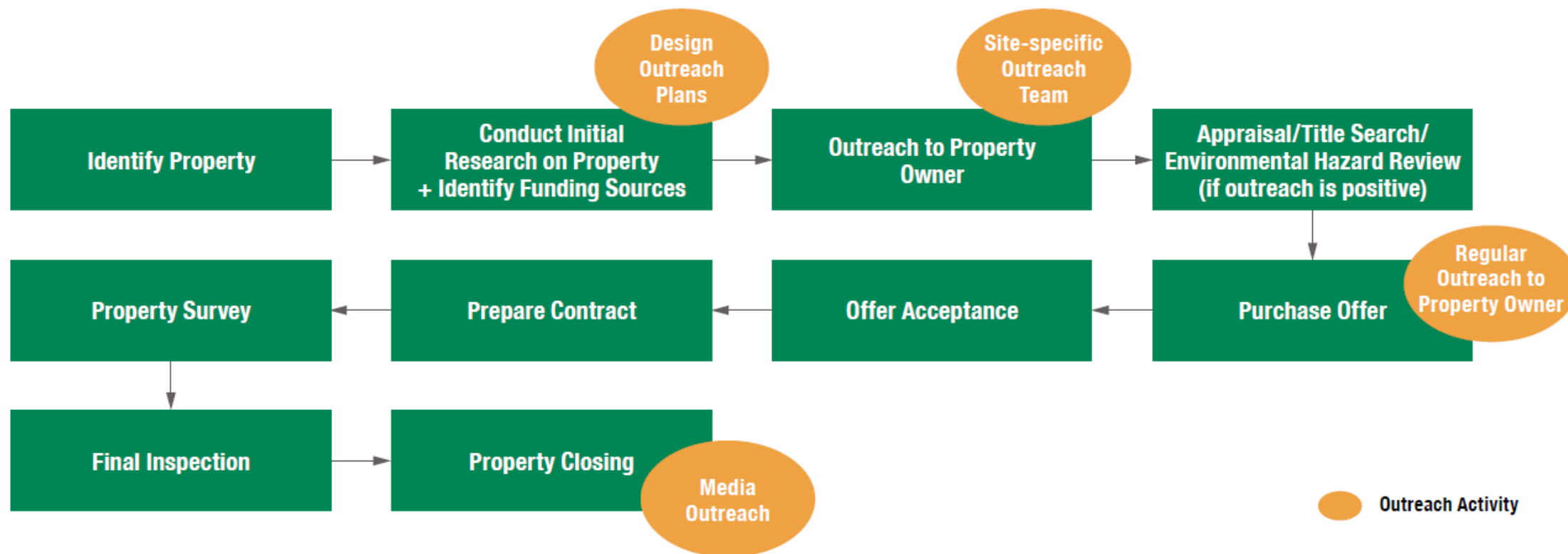
Appendix: Acquisition and Funding Toolkit



Guides key partners and practitioners in developing and executing a coordinated outreach approach for land preservation

- Key resources, mapping relationships, setting timelines, designing and implementing outreach plans
- Guided by input from Acquisition and Outreach subcommittee and TWENTY TWENTY's expertise in NJ

Acquisition Workflow + Associated Outreach Activities





Since 1972, TPL has protected 4 million acres of public land; created 5,364 parks, trails, schoolyards, and iconic outdoor places; raised \$93 billion in public funding for parks and public lands; and connected nearly 9.4 million people to the outdoors.

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Thank You

Budget & Finance Committee



Plan Conformance Grant Awards FY27 Process

- Grant recommendations to be presented to Council quarterly.
- Conformance status and other factors will be considered to prioritize available funding.
- Next presentation will be October.
- On agenda today: 7 recommendations, 3 resolutions.



Highlands Council Protection Fund Grant Awards

First Resolution

- **Comprehensive Master Plan - \$153,558**
Mendham Township, Morris County
- **Master Plan Update - \$25,000**
Wharton Borough, Morris County
- **Hydrogeological Study (Phase 2) - \$22,000**
Borough of Netcong, Morris County
- **Stormwater Management Plan - \$20,300**
Mountain Lakes Borough, Morris County
- **Master Plan Reexamination - \$17,600**
Glen Gardner Borough, Hunterdon County



Highlands Council Protection Fund Grant Awards

Second Resolution

- **Stormwater Management Plan - \$15,000**
Holland Township, Hunterdon County

Third Resolution

- **Redevelopment Study - \$15,000**
Chester Township, Morris County



Budget & Finance Committee



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