

CONSERVATION COMMISSION MINUTES

Regular Meeting

June 13, 2023 at 7:00 pm

Meeting Room 3, Municipal Center, 3 Primrose Street, Newtown, CT

These minutes are subject to approval by the Conservation Commission

Present: Holly Kocet, Michael Ablondi, Will Drew, Mark Boland

Staff: Steve Maguire, Deputy Director of Land Use, Dawn Fried, Clerk

Ms. Kocet opened the meeting at 7:03 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mr. Boland moved to approve the minutes of April 25, 2023. Mr. Drew seconded. All in favor. The minutes from April 25, 2023 were approved.

Mr. Maguire introduced himself. He will be taking over for Mr. Sibley as staff representation from Newtown's Land Use Agency. The Commissioners welcomed Mr. Maguire.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Open Space Update

Mr. Maguire reviewed the open space donations approved by the Board of Selectmen. He explained the transfers will be finalized once they are recorded. Mr. Maguire noted one small parcel was taken out of the transfer. The owner chose to donate that parcel to a private party.

Highlands Conservation Act Endorsement

Mr. Maguire gave an overview of the Highlands Conservation Act (attached) and a letter he received from Trent McCann from Newton Forest Association (NFA) (attached). Mr. Maguire explained the Highlands region has extended their boundaries to include Newtown. The NFA would like the Conservation Commission (CC) to endorse the Highlands Act which will be presented to the Board of Selectman.

Newtown will now be eligible for federal funding from the Highlands Act. The Highlands Act is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and disperses funds to CT DEEP based on conservation projects that meet specific criteria.

Mr. Maguire stated this would be a great opportunity for the CC to collaborate with NFA to receive grants and funding for more resources. The CC can pair up with NFA or work independently. The Commission had a brief discussion. They agreed this was a "win-win" situation and would be a great opportunity for Newtown.

Ms. Kocet made a motion to endorse the Highlands Act. Mr. Drew seconded. All in favor.

DISCUSSION AND ACTION ITEMS

AI's Trail Corridor Draft Action Plan

Ms. Fried will send out the draft again for the Commissioners to review.

Invasive Knotweed Management group looking for CC support

Ms. Kocet has concerns with the Japanese knotweed growing throughout the town. She stated the invasive is growing out of control, especially along the roadways, and need to be managed. Ms. Kocet is hoping to get an ad-hoc group together to map out and manage the knotweed.

The Commission had a discussion on the pros and cons of using herbicides especially in the wetland areas. Ms. Kocet emphasized that herbicides should only be applied by licensed professionals. Ms. Kocet would also like to ask the Board of Selectman for their support on herbicide applications. The Commissioners would like to help with this process and are supportive of Ms. Kocet and her efforts.

Hometown National Parks Initiative

Ms. Kocet stated the Hometown National Parks Initiative was a success. Close to 100 people attended. They gave out trees and shrubs to the first 50 people. Dan Holmes with Holmes Fine Gardens is running a raffle for a free garden. He will be offering his services and plants for the garden.

Earth Day

Ms. Kocet suggested rather than have a table at Earth Day next year maybe the Commission can help out with a river clean up or another hands-on activity.

Planting donated native "sprouts" on open space.

Ms. Kocet spoke about native plants that Protect our Pollinators have been growing. The native plants started from seedlings and will be ready by the end of summer/early fall. Mr. Ablondi asked if the plants are for sun or shade. Ms. Kocet stated most of the plants are for part or full sun. Ms. Kocet would like to discuss open space options for the plants when the time gets near. She will keep the Commission posted.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Boland moved to adjourn the CC meeting. Mr. Ablondi seconded. All in favor. Meeting adjourned at 7:36 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Dawn Fried



Newtown Forest Association, Inc.

P.O. Box 213
Newtown, CT 06470
www.newtownforestassociation.org

Connecticut's Oldest Private Land Trust
Founded 1924

Trent McCann
Executive Director

Board of Directors

Bart Smith, *President*
Mike Dylag, *Vice President*
Guy Peterson, *Treasurer*
Harvey Pessin, *Secretary*
Scott Baggett
Dan Dalton
Bob Eckenrode
Jody Eldredge
Liliane Gentry
Edward Kelleher
Catrina Morgan

May 25, 2023

Subject: CT Highlands Expansion

Members of the Conservation Commission,

The Newtown Forest Association has worked for nearly a century to protect and conserve open spaces in Newtown. Recently we learned of an opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of Newtown under the Highlands Conservation Act, along with 3.4 million acres across the Northeastern United States.

Inclusion under the Highlands Act would mean our town would be eligible for access to a pool of millions of dollars in federal grant money to further our shared goals of conservation in Newtown. Already in conjunction with the Newtown Land Use Agency, the NFA plans to bring our request to the Newtown Board of Selectmen for their approval.

We ask for your additional support in our effort to bring Newtown under the expanded region of the Highlands Conservation Act before we bring this to the Board of Selectmen. Please feel free to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Trent McCann

NFA Executive Director

(203) -270-3650

trent.mccann@newtownforestassociation.org



Highland Hills Greenprint
Collaborative

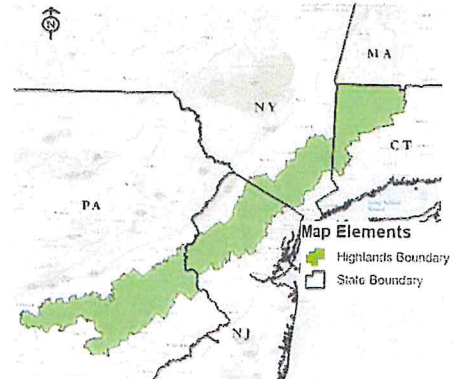
COULD YOUR TOWN BE A HIGHLANDS TOWN?



Highlands Conservation Act Objectives:

- * Clean drinking water * Healthy forests * Thriving wildlife populations * Productive agriculture
- * Abundant recreational opportunities

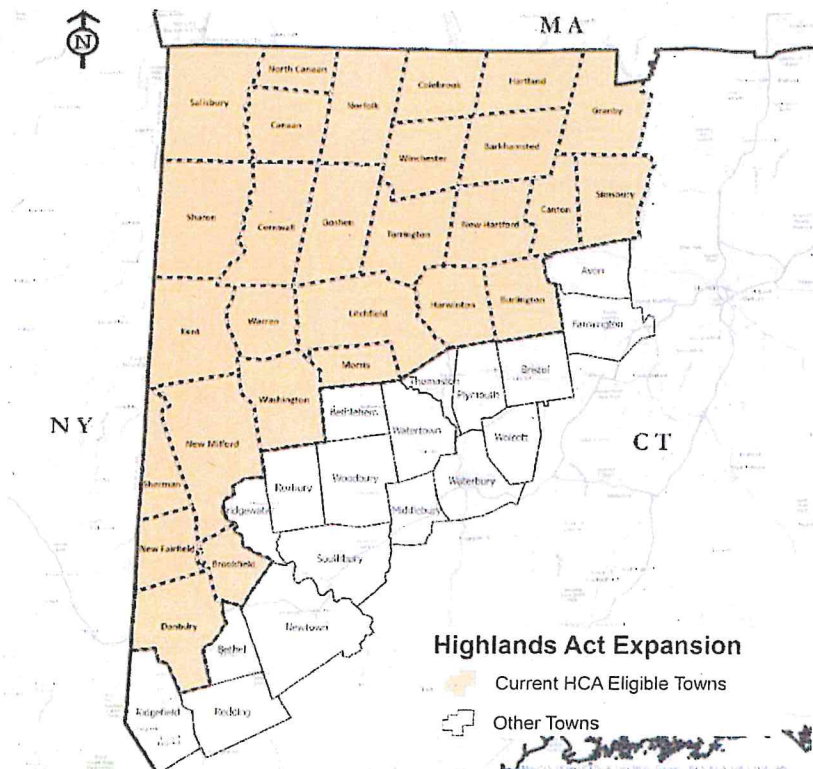
Background: The Highlands region spans 3.4M acres across four states: Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The Highlands Conservation Act was first passed by Congress in 2004 to conserve lands with important natural resources in this region. Since that time, it has brought *over \$80 million dollars* in federal conservation funding to the four states for use in Highlands communities. Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, funds are dispersed by state agencies (in CT, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection), to support land conservation projects that advance Highlands Conservation Act Objectives.



In December 2022, the Highlands Conservation Act was reauthorized with some significant new provisions:

- **Additional Highlands Eligible Towns:** The area eligible for Highlands Conservation Act funding can be expanded to include new towns in the region.
- **Newly Eligible Conservation Interest Holders:** County and municipal government entities can now be recipients of Highlands Act funding for land conservation.
- **Highlands Resource Updates:** U.S. Fish and Wildlife will update its project eligibility criteria in alignment with the conservation objectives, best available data and current science.

What New Towns May Be Eligible For Highlands Act Funding?



The original Highlands Conservation Act identified 28 Northwest CT towns as part of the Highlands Region. Communities southeast of the Rte. 202 corridor in Western Connecticut were left out, although many of these towns have natural resources supporting the conservation objectives the Highlands Act aims to protect. Similarly, in the other three states, towns with Highlands conservation resources were excluded from the Highlands Region.

The reauthorization of the Highlands Conservation Act expansion of the Highlands Region boundary to include additional towns that contain Highlands resources.

We can help your Town apply for inclusion in the Highlands Region (if it is not already) and attract federal conservation dollars for qualified land protection opportunities in your community.

Frequently Asked Questions

- (1) What does my town need to do?
Town leadership (town council, first selectman, mayor) needs to state (e.g. through a letter or resolution) willingness to be added to the Highlands Region.
- (2) How can my town position itself to be eligible for Highlands Act funding?
Indicating your town's willingness to be added to the Highlands Region is the first step in enabling conservation projects in your town to receive Highlands Conservation Act funds.
- (3) Does this commit my town to anything?
No. It will enable your town to be eligible for funding only. It does not commit the town to applying for funding, nor does it guarantee funding.
- (4) Would this impact the town's grand list or mill rate?
No. Being included in the Highlands Region allows for the potential use of federal Highlands funding in efforts to protect property with willing landowners in the community. The funding passes through to qualified state, county or municipal government entities that will purchase conservation land (through ownership, conservation easement, or both in combination).
- (5) Does this add regulations or oversight in my town?
No. If your town is added to the Highlands Region, there will be no additional regulations or oversight, just the potential to access federal funding.
- (6) Is every undeveloped parcel in my town potentially eligible?
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has eligibility criteria based on the Highlands conservation objectives. These criteria are being updated based on the 2022 reauthorization language. We expect along with this update, the criteria will expand to new Highlands towns.
- (7) What happens next?
If your town leadership indicates willingness to be added to the Highlands Region, the letter or resolution will be forwarded to the Connecticut DEEP. The State will make a recommendation to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Director of U.S. Fish and Wildlife will have final approval.
- (8) Is there a deadline or a window of opportunity to state my town's willingness to be added?
There is currently no deadline to indicate your willingness to be added to the Highlands boundary. We anticipate U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will review requests periodically. There is likely benefit to indicating willingness sooner (e.g. Spring 2023) rather than later.
- (9) How does my town become a conservation interest holder? What does that entail?
While permitted in the 2022 reauthorization language, the details of municipal and county governments receiving Highlands funds for land conservation are still being worked out.

Who can I contact with additional questions?

Housatonic Valley Association
Tim Abbott
(860) 605-5625 | tabbott@hvatoday.org

Newtown Forest Association
Trent McCann
trent.mccann@newtownforestassociation.org