

GOVERNMENT

County Commissioners Support Pause for NJDOT Highway Rockfall Projects

By RIKKI MASSAND

May 3, 2021 at 9:00 AM



Credits: Rikki Massand

HUNTERDON COUNTY, NJ - The Hunterdon County Board of Commissioners approved a resolution ballasting other regional efforts in objection to NJDOT's controversial rockfall mitigation planning, creating a platform of solidarity with both the Warren County Board of County Commissioners regarding its opposition to mitigation measures along scenic Rt. 80 in western Jersey, and within Hunterdon County as other local advocates remain wary of adverse impacts, as many focused on the Rt. 29 corridor south from Frenchtown.

In March, Hunterdon County Commissioner Zach Rich urged the governing body to take preemptive action in crafting and passing a resolution to stand against the New Jersey Department of Transportation rockfall mitigation projects that are being planned

for major scenic routes in the state. Two areas of the county were noted to be in jeopardy of negative visual impacts and diminished aesthetic appeal – both the Jugtown Mountain along I-78 in Bethlehem Township, and [the Devil's Tea Table](#) (historic rock formation) area along scenic Rt. 29 in Kingwood Township.

On the NJDOT's radar are projects including portions of Interstate 78 at Hunterdon's northern stretch and along State Rt. 29, which is a national scenic byway spanning from its interchange with I-295 in Hamilton Township north, entering Hunterdon County from Lambertville and Stockton, and running parallel to the Delaware River and D & R Canal, to Frenchtown.

A resolution to support neighboring Warren County's strong opposition to such a "blanket" strategy for roadside rock formations was not endorsed by the county board when it first was discussed, on March 16, but a month later an updated version conveying Hunterdon's concerns was approved. This initiative was fine-tuned and eventually propelled forward by the county board a month after Rich explained that Warren's issues with NJDOT rockfall mitigation have a correlation to Hunterdon County.

"In a nutshell, we do not want wire grading, construction and gradings all over the side of a cliff in beautiful Hunterdon County, that's something we want to prevent," he said.

County administrator Kevin P. Davis told the board about areas facing DOT scrutiny for rockfall mitigation or construction (possibly wire-fencing and reconfiguration). In August 2019, the Devil's Tea Table area was identified as the third highest priority rockface project in the state.

Also noted by NJDOT staff at the time, the remediation work along this bucolic stretch in Hunterdon was scheduled for 2023, and would be funded with federal transportation dollars.

Among the worries, are that the NJDOT would blast into the rock lining Hunterdon County's scenery and "crape" up to 15 feet in, wire-fencing the sides while announcing this measure as justified due to falling rock or debris.

"Concerns about the NJDOT's plans have been raised by the governing bodies of Kingwood, Bethlehem and West Amwell Townships, and the [Delaware River Greenway Partnership](#), a number of concerned residents and the [Devil's Tea Table Alliance](#), which includes representatives on both sides of the Delaware River," Davis said. "The concerns range from the high cost of the project, possible impacts to local wells from any rock blasting that may occur, proposed traffic issues and detour plans, potential environmental excavation and specifically not enough public input for the plan. The resolution before the board addresses these concerns with regard to the proposed rockfall mitigation project, and calls upon the NJDOT and the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority to pause the project and examine alternatives and to hold a public discussion."

The Kingwood Township Committee approved a similar resolution in early April, and [The Lower Delaware Wild and Scenic River went on record](#) and asked Hunterdon County's governing body to pass a rockfall resolution after the Devil's Tea Table Alliance presented the issues to them.

"I'm going to tell this board the way it works," Rich said. "They (NJDOT) have been working at this for years, and they have been drilling and with survey crews out on Rt. 29. The state DOT is already spending money and the feds have already given them the money for these projects. I am saying if we do not do something now, and the project keeps proceeding further down a path, it's going to be harder to pull it back."

The Hunterdon board-approved resolution cites New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Natural Heritage Priority Sites' Coverage for the Devil's Tea Table formation, "created to identify critically important areas to conserve New Jersey's biological diversity, with particular emphasis on rare plant species and ecological communities, and the area known as Devil's Tea Table, including siltstone and shale cliff and adjacent dry woods overlooking the Delaware River, is designated by NJDEP as Natural Heritage Priority site."

The resolution also states a need for protection of the historic and cultural heritage assets of both the Delaware River Scenic Byway (Rt. 29) and the Devil's Tea Table, along with a glimpse at the unique history of Hunterdon County's Delaware River towns region.

"Whereas, the area parallels the Delaware River Scenic Byway, a designation by the USDOT, endorsed by the NJDOT, and subject to the Delaware River Corridor Management Plan; and whereas, the bluffs along Route 29 contain world famous outcrops of Triassic-age lake cycles, known as Van Houten cycles, providing the textbook record of lake formation due to climate change in the Jurassic and Triassic periods of the Mesozoic Era, and which could be considered 'geologic heritage' due to possessing aesthetic, intrinsic or scientific and educational value, and providing unique insight into geological processes; and whereas, the Devil's Tea Table geologic formation also has unique local, historical and geological significance, and is believed to hold religious significance to Indigenous people; and whereas, the archaeological record the Kingwood Township Route 29 corridor revealed artifacts of Indigenous people and prehistoric man inhabiting this portion of the river corridor dating from 6500 B.C. through the 1700's, when the Turtle clan of the Lenapi Indians occupied the area," the resolution read in citing the properties of the area.

Rich said that while it would be up to the collective Board of County Commissioners, "with whatever we want to do," his points on March 16 emphasized the timely action of Warren County's resolution as a proactive stance to preserve the natural beauty and vistas that people associate with Central West New Jersey. He noted that, along with County Commissioner J. Matthew Holt, he's worked on the resolution with attention to detail.

When the board voted on this resolution on April 20, Rich thanked his colleagues and the support for "pumping the brakes on this."

“We just really need to sit down with the NJDOT and the NJTPA and everybody can get on board, get on the same page and figure this out,” he said.

This article was found on www.tapinto.net.