



## **Town of New Paltz Critical Environmental Areas Proposal Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is a Critical Environmental Area?**

A Critical Environmental Area (CEA) is a geographic area with unique or exceptional environmental characteristics. Local governments are authorized to designate CEAs under State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) regulations. A list of currently designated CEAs is available at: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/permits/6184.html>

### **Why Designate Critical Environmental Areas?**

The CEA designation alerts landowners, developers, and regulatory agencies to important or unique local environmental features. During SEQR, the Planning Board (or lead agency) must consider how proposed projects might affect the qualities of the CEA, among other potential environmental impacts that must be evaluated. The designation thus ensures that special features are not overlooked, and that potentially harmful impacts to them are evaluated.

### **How do Critical Environmental Areas affect Landowners?**

**CEA designation does not protect land or restrict development in these areas.** The CEA designation only influences review of “[Type I](#)” or “Unlisted Actions” subject to SEQR. Most activities of private landowners are listed as “[Type II Actions](#)” and do not require SEQR, including building a single-family (or 2- or 3-family) house, home addition, garage, shed, deck, swimming pool, or other minor accessory structure on an approved lot, landscaping maintenance, farming, or building farm structures. Within the proposed areas, subdivision of land is the most common type of activity requiring SEQR.

### **Which areas of New Paltz are being proposed as Critical Environmental Areas?**

The Shawangunk Ridge and the Plutarch Woods and Wetlands. Complete descriptions and maps of the proposed areas are available at <https://www.townofnewpaltz.org/environmental-conservation-board/pages/critical-environmental-areas-proposal>. The proposed areas include Agriculture-3 and Floodplain zoning districts and do not include any commercial zones.

### **Why is the Shawangunk Ridge exceptional or unique?**

The Shawangunk Ridge is considered one of the highest priority areas for biodiversity conservation in the northeastern United States owing to its unique geology and ecology. Many outstanding examples of natural communities are present including extensive high quality chestnut oak forest as well as unique cliffs, talus, and boulder fields. These areas provide habitat for state endangered, threatened, and rare species such as Peregrine Falcon and Timber Rattlesnake, and contribute to regional forest habitat connectivity. The Ridge is also mapped as a resilient area for biodiversity under climate change based on the extensive connected habitat and topographic diversity of its landforms. Forests of the Ridge furthermore provide watershed protection for New Paltz’s drinking water reservoirs and contribute clean water to tributaries that feed the Wallkill River. The Ridge is also a scenic landmark for New Paltz and the Mohonk Preserve and Mohonk Mountain House properties are designated National Historic Landmarks.

### **Why are the Plutarch Woods and Wetlands exceptional or unique?**

Though less well known, this area of New Paltz and neighboring Esopus and Lloyd is also part of a “Significant Biodiversity Area” recognized by the New York State Department of

Environmental Conservation based on the presence of extensive forest and high-quality wetland habitats supporting many rare species including the endangered Northern Cricket Frog. The Nature Conservancy has also identified this larger area as a regionally-significant matrix forest block for the northeastern United States. The large, relatively well-connected forest area and presence of extensive interior forest habitat supports populations of many development-sensitive forest breeding songbirds and other wildlife. Much of this area is also predicted to have climate resilience for biodiversity, in addition to the important carbon storage and sequestration value of the forest.

### **What happens if a project is in or near a CEA?**

SEQR Environmental Assessment Forms (EAFs) include questions to identify whether a proposed project is within or adjoining a designated CEA. If so, the lead agency (usually the Planning Board) is directed to identify and evaluate the magnitude of potential adverse impacts to the qualities of the CEA. If a moderate or large impact is identified, the lead agency must decide if the impacts are significant and whether they can be avoided or substantially mitigated. The CEA designation does not create any formal requirements or restrictions for the developer.

### **Benefits of CEA Designation:**

- Raise awareness about exceptional or unique areas in our Town
- Promote more proactive planning and design to conserve critical resources
- Avoid project delays by considering these issues upfront
- Focus attention on maintenance of large, connected habitat areas – keeping track of the “big picture” in addition to site-level considerations
- Reduce potential impacts of future development projects to the CEA qualities

### **Designation of an area as a CEA does:**

- NOT affect construction of a single-family dwelling on an approved lot
- NOT regulate development like zoning
- NOT require that any development be considered a Type I action
- NOT require the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement
- NOT require a declaration of positive impact

### **Links to Additional Information:**

- CEA Fact Sheet: [https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/remediation\\_hudson\\_pdf/ceafactsheet.pdf](https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/remediation_hudson_pdf/ceafactsheet.pdf)
- SEQR Handbook (see p. 49) <https://www.dec.ny.gov/permits/6188.html>
- FEAF Workbook: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/permits/91771.html>
- Town of Wawarsing CEA video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrB-0CvRNJM>

**Questions or comments?** Contact [encb@townofnewpaltz.org](mailto:encb@townofnewpaltz.org)