

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL

MEETING MINUTES OF JANUARY 16, 2025

PRESENT

CARL J. RICHKO	)	CHAIR
KURT ALSTEDE	)	VICE CHAIR
TIMOTHY DOUGHERTY	)	COUNCIL MEMBERS
MICHAEL FRANCIS	)	
BRUCE JAMES	)	
DANIEL J. VAN ABS, PhD	)	
JAMES VISIOLI	)	

VIA TELECONFERENCE:

DANIEL BUSH	)
MICHAEL DRESSLER	)
RICHARD VOHDEN	)

CALL TO ORDER 210TH meeting of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council was called to order at 4:02pm at the Highlands Council Offices in Chester, NJ.

ROLL CALL

Roll call was taken. All Council Members were present. Members Bush, Dressler and Vohden were present via teleconference. *The following staff members were present: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Neda Hartman, Tom Tagliareni, Carole Ann Dicton, Liz Ward, Sarah Friend, Casey Ezyzke, Alex Hascha, Diana Swiderski and Annette Tagliareni. Others present: Via Teleconference: Alexis Franklin, Associate Counsel, Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU) and Jill Denyes Deputy Attorney General's (DAG's) office*

OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT was recited.

Chair Richko invited all to join him for a moment of silence in honor of our 39th President, Jimmy Carter, and for the victims of the California fires and thousands who have lost their homes.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE was recited.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

At this time, Chair Richko asked for nominations for the next two resolutions.

Resolution – Election of Vice Chair

Member James nominated Kurt Alstede as Vice Chair and moved the resolution.

Member Dressler was present via teleconference at 4:07pm.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 10-0.

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Resolution – Election of Treasurer

Vice Chair Alstede nominated James Visioli as Treasurer and moved the resolution.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 10-0.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

1. Mr. Spinelli wished everyone a Happy New Year and thanked the Council for their work in 2024 and looks forward to a productive 2025. Mr. Spinelli added that the Council's work is important and significant to the overall well-being of the state. Protecting water, forest, agriculture, small towns, continues to be vital. Mr. Spinelli added that he was sorry to report that Abby Postma will no longer be joining the Council due to personal reasons. The Council now has ten (10) members.
2. Drought continues. Recent rains and some snowfall have helped ease the wildfire issue but the rainfall deficit remains at around 20 inches regionwide. We are below standards for January (only .02 inches so far). Highlands still exported more than $\frac{3}{4}$ billion gallons of water each day, provided water to the 850,000 residents and businesses of the region and met the agricultural needs of the Highlands' farmers. Spruce Run and Wanaque Reservoirs remain well below normal levels.
3. Senate Bill S3466 has been approved by the Senate Environment Committee but was approved without the provision allocating \$7.5 million to the Highlands for open space and Highlands Development Credit (HDC) purchases. The Bill will provide for the Watershed Moratorium aid discussed for those watershed lands that were not receiving the moratorium aid. As a reminder, there are 19,000 undeveloped but developable lots in the Highlands region that represent over 230 square miles of the Highlands that can be developed. Much of that does not fall within Green Acres or SADC Preservation programs. The funding was sidetracked due to lobbying from environmental groups (a copy of which is in your packets).
4. Council continues to operate with reduced funding, inadequate levels of staffing and grant funding.
5. Council currently has 13 towns pursuing Plan Conformance to the Regional Master Plan (RMP).
6. At this month's Budget & Finance Committee and for Council's consideration today, Mount Olive was approved for a grant to study Budd Lake and come up with potential solutions to mitigate pollutants entering the lake at the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River. The Committee also authorized a tourism expansion grant program that implements recommendations from the Economic Sustainability Plan.
7. The Highlands Region Branding and Marketing Plan, also a recommendation from the Economic Sustainability Plan, continues to move forward. A presentation will be provided to the Council today to share some of the findings from their outreach and research.
8. Lopatcong/Pohatcong application – As discussed last month, the developer has filed a lawsuit to challenge the Council's failure to approve the request. This matter will be discussed in Executive Session.
9. Met with Dr. Meiyen Wu from Montclair State University to discuss cooperating on an analysis of the Jennings Creek wildfire site. The impact on water quality and the regeneration of the forest are primary concerns.
10. Working on convening all the water purveyors in the region to discuss common issues – impacts to source water and land conservation in watersheds.

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11. Expect to hear in March regarding the grant request to U.S. Forest Service in conjunction with the City of Newark to fund several actions aimed at protection and restoration of the 35,000-acre Pequannock Watershed and conducting an initial assessment.
12. Agenda for the upcoming year:
 - a. Update of the Highlands website.
 - b. Update to the Monitoring Program Recommendation Report (MPRR)
 - c. A new RMP update that addresses the impacts of climate change on the region.
 - d. Open Space Plan
 - e. Affordable Housing Plans
 - f. Branding and Marketing Plan
 - g. New conforming municipalities
 - h. Impervious coverage standards
 - i. Convene water purveyors in region
 - j. Establish mitigation and natural resources valuation/standards
 - k. Science Symposium in March at Kean Skylands
 - l. Continue to advocate for new positions and increase grant funding for our municipalities
 - m. Study of Jennings Creek Fire site
 - n. Display status of water resources in region in one central place on our website.
 - o. Digitize the RMP

At this time, Chair Richko asked if any Council members had comments or questions on the Executive Director's report.

Regarding the open space funding, Member Van Abs asked about the status of the Assembly bill (A4627) wondering if the case can be made there. Mr. Spinelli responded that it was possible. Member Van Abs then asked what is being done to reach out to the environmental community regarding their opposition to this funding. Mr. Spinelli responded that he asked Julia Somers to present a request to address the Legislature directly.

At this time, there was discussion regarding the bill and how the Highlands region could benefit from this funding and how best to advocate for this funding. Chair Richko stated that Council staff and Chair will get together to discuss strategies going forward and inform the full Council.

APPROVAL OF HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MINUTES OF DECEMBER 12, 2024

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the Council Minutes of December 12, 2024.

Member Visioli made a motion to approve the Highlands Council Minutes of December 12, 2024. Member Dougherty seconded it.

A roll call vote was taken. The Highlands Council Minutes of December 12, 2024 were APPROVED 10-0.

At this time, Chair Richko turned the meeting over to Ms. Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager. Ms. Haddock-Weiler gave a brief overview of the Branding and Marketing Plan. North Star Branding + Marketing (North Star) then provided a presentation regarding the status of the Highlands Region Branding and Marketing Project. The presentation may be found on the Council's website:

DRAFT - FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE APRIL 17, 2025
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www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calend/2025/jan16/North_Star.pdf.

After the presentation, there were comments/questions between members of the Council and North Star.

As a liaison for the Council, Chair Richko noted that he will be part of a series of meetings with Council staff and North Star.

BUDGET & FINANCE COMMITTEE

Resolution – Approval of Fiscal Year 2025 Highlands Protection Fund Capital Budget for Plan Conformance Funding Grants

Committee Chair Visioli reported that the committee met and discussed two (2) items at the Budget & Finance Committee meeting.

1. Tourism Expansion Grant Program
2. Mount Olive Township – Budd Lake Management Planning

Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager gave an overview of the Tourism Expansion Grant Program for the local level government agencies, destination marketing organizations, and non-profits. This grant program will allow entities to do more related to implementation, which is not available with our Plan Conformance grants.

Mr. Humphries added that once grant applications are received, Council staff will provide details to the Council for consideration.

James Humphries, Director of Planning, Science & GIS gave an overview of the Budd Lake Management Planning grant for Mount Olive Township, Morris County. Mr. Humphries noted that this grant would be the first phase of this plan and include:

1. Quality Assurance Project Plan development for baseline characterization and future monitoring;
2. Development of a Community Science Program; and
3. Baseline characterization of Budd Lake (includes 17 sampling events at 12 sites)

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Visioli moved the resolution. Member Van Abs seconded it.

Chair Richko asked if anyone from the public wanted to comment on the Mount Olive Township grant for Lake Management Planning.

Kristi MacDonald, Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) – Ms. MacDonald gave a brief overview of the Budd Lake Management plan.

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Benjamin Harris, Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) – Mr. Harris gave a brief overview about the organization of the project.

Vice Chair Alstede asked if RHA is providing service on behalf of Mount Olive Township. It was noted that “yes” RHA is providing service to the Township.

Council Comment

There were no Council comments.

Public Comment

Irene Sergonis, resident of Mount Olive – Ms. Sergonis commented that she appreciates all the work that is being done to preserve Budd Lake.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 10-0.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS:

There was no old/new business.

Chair Richko noted that he will now accept public comments and move the Executive Session to after the public comments and then adjourn the meeting.

Public Comments

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers commented that the North Star presentation was exciting but suggested the region not be referred to as a watershed. Ms. Somers also commented on the West Milford fires, Green Acres rules amendments, and the corporate business tax (CBT).

Cynthia Korman, Borough of Mountain Lakes – Ms. Korman thanked the Highlands Council for the Affordable Housing Guidelines and commented that it is an excellent document and will be used by the Borough.

Laura Oltman, Pohatcong Township – Ms. Oltman commented on her frustrations regarding the warehouse that is being planned in Phillipsburg. Ms. Oltman asked if Phillipsburg ever completed their traffic study. It was confirmed that the study was completed.

Ben Yaskulka, Musconetcong Watershed Association (MWA) – Mr. Yaskulka thanked Council staff for their input on the MWA vision plan and would like to share the plan with the Council and staff.

Michael Newman, member of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition Natural Heritage Committee – Mr. Newman echoed some of the comments from Ms. Oltman and frustrations regarding warehouses

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and how we can stop some of this development. Mr. Spinelli responded that Council has [Policy Standards for Warehousing in the New Jersey Highlands Region](#) that can be found on our website.

Chair Richko left the meeting temporarily at 5:45pm.

Vice Chair Alstede took over the meeting at 5:45pm.

Vice Chair Alstede asked if there were any more public comments.

The public portion of the meeting ended at 5:49pm.

Member James left the meeting at 5:49pm.

Chair Richko returned to the meeting at 5:50pm.

Resolution – Executive Session

Chief Counsel Gabrielle Gallagher read the following resolution into the record:

WHEREAS, the Open Public Meetings Act, N.J.S.A. 10:4 6 et seq., permits the holding of closed sessions by public bodies in certain circumstances, and the Council is of the opinion that those circumstances presently exist; and

WHEREAS, the Council will discuss pending or anticipated litigation within the meaning of N.J.S.A. 10:4-12(b)(7);

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Council may enter into closed session at its public meeting of January 16, 2025, for that purpose. It is anticipated at this time that the nature of the closed session will be made public upon completion or resolution of the issues to be discussed, except any privileged matter will not be disclosed.

This Resolution shall become effective upon a roll-call vote of the Council.

Chair Richko requested a motion on the resolution.

Member Van Abs made a motion. Member Francis seconded it. All were in favor.

[EXECUTIVE SESSION]

The Executive Session adjourned at 6:07 pm.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of the minutes of the meeting of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council.

Date: ***1/30/2025***

Name: ***Annette Tagliareni***
Annette Tagliareni, Executive Assistant

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Vote on the Approval of Minutes	Motion		Second		Yes		No		Abstain		Absent
Councilmember Alstede											
Councilmember Bush											
Councilmember Dougherty											
Councilmember Dressler											
Councilmember Francis											
Councilmember James											
Councilmember Kibler											
Councilmember Van Abs											
Councilmember Visioli											
Chairman Richko											