

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES OF JUNE 19, 2025

PRESENT

CARL J. RICHKO)	CHAIR
DANIEL BUSH)	COUNCIL MEMBERS
MICHAEL FRANCIS)	
BRUCE JAMES)	
WILLIAM KIBLER)	
DANIEL J. VAN ABS, PhD)	
JAMES VISIOLI)	

VIA TELECONFERENCE:

KURT ALSTEDE)	VICE CHAIR
TIMOTHY DOUGHERTY)	
MICHAEL DRESSLER)	

CALL TO ORDER 212TH meeting of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council was called to order at 4:00pm at the Highlands Council Offices in Chester, NJ.

ROLL CALL

Roll call was taken. All Council Members were present. Vice Chair Alstede, and Members Dougherty and Dressler were present via teleconference. *The following staff members were present: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Jocelyn van den Akker, Neda Hartman, Sarah Friend, Casey Ezyyske, Alex Hascha, Ian Brastow, Adelaide Rafieyan, Tom Tagliareni, Carole Dicton, Kyli Engle, Elizabeth Ward and Annette Tagliareni. Others present via teleconference: Michael Eleneski, Associate Counsel, Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU) and Jill Denyes Deputy Attorney General's (DAG's) office.*

OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT was recited.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE was recited.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Chair Richko announced that Alexis Franklin, Council's Associate Counsel, will no longer be the Council's GAU liaison and our new Associate Council is Michael Eleneski. Chair Richko expressed best wishes to Alexis in her new position with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

At this time, Chair Richko provided a timeline for the Branding and Marketing campaign for the New Jersey Highlands region. Chair Richko then read a few excerpts from Council's Resolution 2024-10 passed on March 21, 2024.

WHEREAS, the New Jersey Highlands Act charges the Highlands Council with protecting the Region's natural resources, as well as supporting sustainable economic conditions; and

WHEREAS, an Economic Sustainability Plan for the Highlands Region was developed over an 18-month period, and subsequently released by the Highlands Council in December 2021 to supplement the economic development section of the RMP, analyzing current economic conditions in the Highlands and setting forth a series of goals and objectives to strengthen the Region's economy; and

WHEREAS, the Economic Sustainability Plan identifies a series of actions devised to advance the stated goals and objectives, one of which is the creation of a branding and marketing plan which is intended to create a distinct Highlands image and reach a broad audience; and

DRAFT - FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE JULY 17, 2025
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Chair Richko then introduced Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, the coordinator of this effort.

Ms. Haddock-Weiler thanked Chair Richko for his support throughout this project, including serving on the Creative Committee. Ms. Haddock-Weiler stated that the branding process involved a great deal of work with in-depth research, stakeholder outreach and community engagement. Rigorous analysis of the region's strengths and opportunities were conducted and these findings were used to develop a brand image that is intended to increase tourism, support agriculture, bolster local businesses, and ultimately ensure a sustainable local economy for the Highlands. Ms. Haddock-Weiler added that the expectation of the brand is also to continue to educate the public about the importance of protecting our Highlands resources as we have done for the past 20 years.

Ms. Haddock-Weiler introduced Will Ketchum, President of North Star, the consultant team responsible for Place Branding & Marketing.

Mr. Ketchum provided a presentation on North Star's final report. The presentation may be found on the Highlands Council website:

www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/northstar_061925.pdf

Council Comment

Chair Richko added that to initiate this effort the Council will need funding. Chair Richko noted that the New York State Catskills receives approximately \$17M a year to promote their agricultural and tourism so the Council needs to get our legislators involved to assist with this initiative.

Member Francis commented that the Lake Hopatcong Lake Commission has funding.

At this time, Chair Richko asked if anyone from the public had any comments or questions.

Public Comment

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers commented that the Coalition welcomes this report and it is exciting, but it is her opinion that the challenge will be from the residents who live in the region.

Glen Van Olden, New Jersey Farm Bureau – Mr. Van Olden thanked everyone for not including only farm vistas in their branding project but also the value-added products that come from the farm and maintaining farm viability and farm profitability in the Highlands region and to keep the farmers on the farm.

Gorden Levy, Jefferson Township – Mr. Levy commented that the presentation seemed low tech.

Mr. Ketchum responded that today's presentation included representative imagery. The full plan has a lot of digital marketing.

Hank Klumpp, Tewksbury Township – Mr. Klumpp believes that the Catskills was paid for unlike the Highlands. Mr. Klumpp added that the Highlands region needs funding.

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Dylan Medici, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Mr. Medici commented that this is a fantastic step forward. Mr. Medici added that Mr. Klumpp makes a great point that the Council is desperately underfunded and needs to convince New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) that this is a region that NJDEP needs to invest in and provide the Council with the tools to do that.

Member James urged everyone to use their vote to support the region.

At this time, Chair Richko added that we will continue to promote this plan.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Mr. Spinelli reported on the following items:

1. Today's agenda items consist of: A final presentation on North Star's Branding & Marketing Plan, Public Health & Safety Waiver in Washington Township (Warren County) due to the highest levels of PFAS in New Jersey; the State Planning Commission Cross-Acceptance of the New State Plan; and Plan Conformance Petitions for Mendham Township, Town of Belvidere and Jefferson Township.
2. A summary of Corporate Business Tax balances were shared with the full Council. These balances were provided by Jeffrey C. Everett, Executive Director of Garden State Preservation Trust. Mr. Spinelli reminded the Council that Resolution 2023-03 was passed requesting an allocation of a portion of the New Jersey Corporate Business Tax for the purpose of funding the Highlands Open Space Preservation Programs. Mr. Spinelli noted that he continues to face obstacles and shared those obstacles with the full Council (Keep It Green Coalition and Green Acres).
3. Related to the above, Mr. Spinelli noted that when the DEP Commissioner was questioned about funding for the Highlands Open Space Preservation Programs, the Commissioner stated that the Council was "merely a planning agency" and funding our open space efforts was not necessary. The Highlands Council has seven million constituents of current and future residents of this state to answer to, and that is tough enough without interference from so-called environmental interests.
4. Mr. Spinelli emphasized that the Council has an inadequate operating budget, inadequate level of staffing, inadequate grant funding to support our municipalities – even as more and more obligations are placed upon them. Mr. Spinelli noted that New York City exists because of the vast watersheds roughly the size of the Highlands.
5. Mr. Spinelli noted that there are currently 11 towns in the process of conformance in addition to the three before the Council today.
6. Affordable Housing Plans are coming in fast. Council staff met with Fair Share Housing Center to discuss progress with our towns and the content of the housing plans received to date.
7. A new Regional Master Plan (RMP) update that addresses the impacts of climate change on the region is in the works via a Request for Proposal (RFP) and we hope to have responses in and a proposed contract to consider at the Council's September meeting.
8. Messrs. Spinelli and Humphries met with the "Big 6" water purveyors. They are in the business of supplying water to the state's population and their source (commodity) is almost entirely found within the Highlands. The purveyors are: North Jersey District Water Supply Authority, Newark Watershed, New Jersey Water Supply Authority, New Jersey American Water, Viola Water Company, and Passaic Valley Water Commission.
9. Mr. Spinelli continues to work with City of Newark. The end goal is to ensure that forest coverage and forest health in the watershed will be greater in 50-100 years. Mr. Spinelli and staff member

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Alex Hascha accompanied Newark's new foresters and several experts on forest ecology to tour the site of the 2023 wildfire. Re-growth was very encouraging.

10. Following are progress updates on some of our agenda items as discussed at our last meeting:
- a. New Highlands website is live.
 - b. Continue working on the RMP Monitoring Program and Recommendation Report (MPRR)
 - c. Open Space and Recreation Plan continues. Mr. Spinelli noted that TPL has eliminated their NJ office and staff is working with their mid-Atlantic office in CT.
 - d. Branding and Marketing – mentioned above.
 - e. New conforming municipalities - mentioned above.
 - f. Continue to advocate for new positions, and increased grant funding for our municipalities.
 - g. Sustainable agricultural grants are being renewed for their second year of work.
 - h. Science team is actively working on stream monitoring of Highlands waterways to fill in gaps in DEP's data.
 - i. Personnel – Carolyn Klaube, our ecologist, is out on maternity leave; Ian Barstow, our new GIS specialist is on board since beginning of the month; continue to interview for the receptionist/administrative assistant position; and our Summer intern a junior from Lafayette College, Adelaide Rafeiyan, will be with us until late next month.

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

Chair Richko commented on New York State's funding of \$108M invested annually for their management of its watershed. The Highlands receives \$3M.

Member Francis commented that maybe we need to invite the NJDEP folks so they understand what we do.

Mr. Spinelli noted that the Highlands staff works well with NJDEP staff; it seems to be an issue with the leadership.

APPROVAL OF HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MINUTES OF APRIL 17, 2025

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the Council Minutes of April 17, 2025.

Member Kibler made a motion to approve the Highlands Council Minutes of April 17, 2025. Member Van Abs seconded it.

A roll call vote was taken. The Highlands Council Minutes of April 17, 2025 were APPROVED 10-0.

PLAN CONFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Committee Chair Dressler reported that the Plan Conformance Committee met on June 5, 2025 and discussed many items.

Mr. Spinelli noted that the first item will be to discuss the public health and safety waiver for a water line expansion in Washington Township, Warren County.

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Resolution – Approval of Public Health and Safety Waiver for New Jersey American Water

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

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

At this time, Highlands Council staff (James Humphries, Director of Planning, Science & GIS) gave a presentation. The presentation may be found on Council's website:

www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/mtgppt_061925.pdf

Chairman Richko noted that this is for existing development only as it is an emergency situation.

Council Comment

Member Van Abs commented that there was a similar situation in Washington Township (Morris County) where the Council authorized extension of water lines to deal with contamination issues. Member Van Abs added that this is why the Regional Master Plan (RMP) was written to give flexibility to deal with these types of issues. Member Van Abs concluded that this is a mess and indicates incompetence on the part of the industry associated with this contamination issue.

Member Kibler commented that this particular safety waiver is an example of why this waiver available in the first place. Member Kibler pointed out that this is a Council meant to have 15 members of which we have ten (10). Member Kibler added because we are a Council of 15 members, we need eight (8) positive votes to accomplish anything, including a waiver in an emergency like this. Member Kibler emphasized that we have Council members who sometimes have a difficult time making it to the meetings. We need 8 out of 10 members to get anything accomplished. Member Kibler concluded that among the seats that are vacant is the seat that should be filled by an elected representative from Warren County which is precisely where this issue lies. Member Kibler hopes the Governor's office will take note of this. In Member Kibler's opinion, this Council is a hair's breadth away from being non-functional and the onus is on the Governor's office and Senators to get people in the seats so we can continue our work.

Public Comment.

Ben Yaskulka, Musconetcong Watershed Association (MWA) – Mr. Yaskulka commented on MWA involvement once they were aware of this situation. Mr. Yaskulka thanked the Council and New Jersey American Water for taking quick action on this.

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers commented that there is no question that this is a public health disaster. Ms. Somers added that this area is almost exclusively karst limestone, and the soils are very porous and the contamination is expanding all the time. Ms. Somers commented that she wouldn't be surprised if the Executive Director was called upon to extend the lines. Ms. Somers strongly urged the Council to approve this.

Hank Klumpp, Tewksbury Township – Mr. Klumpp commented that there was a similar problem in Washington Township.

Member Van Abs responded that it was Washington Township in Morris County.

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

Resolution – Approval of Cross Acceptance Response Reports Transmittal to The State Planning Commission

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution

Member Kibler moved the resolution. Member James seconded it.

Mr. Humphries continued the presentation. The presentation may be found on Council's website:
www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/mtgppt_061925.pdf

Chair Richko asked Mr. Humphries to explain this in simple terms.

Mr. Humphries explained the cross-acceptance process: the State Planning Commission has issued a draft State Plan and they asked the towns to comment on that State Plan. Because we are a region with an RMP, we also wanted the towns to comment on some RMP issues and the map.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment.

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers commented that she is a member of the State Planning Commission and is happy that the Council is at this point. It looks like the State Plan is on track and may be adopted this year and it is appropriate that the RMP is part of the State Plan (whether in the Preservation/Planning Area). Ms. Somers feels it is an important step forward.

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

Resolution – Approval of the Petition for Plan Conformance for the Township of Mendham, Morris County

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Bush moved the resolution. Member Francis seconded it.

At this time, Mr. Humphries gave a presentation. The presentation may be found on Council's website:
www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/mtgppt_061925.pdf

At this time Chair Richko acknowledged Mayor Neibart and invited her to comment on Mendham Township's Petition. Mayor Neibart commented that the Township is excited to take the next steps and thanked Mr. Spinelli for answering all our questions. Mayor Neibart added that the Township is already in the process of completing the outstanding documents.

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Public Comment.

Glen Van Olden, New Jersey Farm Bureau – Mr. Van Olden commented that the Farm Bureau supports the Council's comprehensive support in fostering a thriving farming industry, funding farm innovation grants and promoting farm friendly policies. Mr. Van Olden added that the recent Highlands Branding project advocates value-added products and elevates agri-tourism as a prime goal to maintain farm liability. Mr. Van Olden also added that the soon adopted New Jersey Development & Redevelopment Plan mirrors the Highlands agriculture policies in this respect. Mr. Van Olden spoke in opposition of Mendham Township's Petition for Plan Conformance and urged the Council not to vote in favor of it until the Township shows support for agriculture businesses and is in accord with the farming policy and goals of the Highlands Council and the New Jersey Right To Farm Act.

Fred Backer, Mendham Township – Mr. Backer owns a family-run farm for 98 years and agrees with Mr. Van Olden's comments. For almost 40 years, Mr. Backer never had cooperation from the Township. Mr. Van Olden commented that the Township Council wasn't always supportive and that he is very supportive of the Highlands Council. Mr. Backer added that Mayor Neibart is in support of us but not all Township members are supportive.

Council Comment

Vice Chair Alstede stated that the Highlands RMP supports agriculture and shared with the members some concerns he has regarding Mendham Township's Petition and recommended the inclusion of seven (7) items into the Township's report for the full Council to consider:

1. Require Mendham Twp. to adopt a revised and updated Right to Farm Ordinance in consultation with the Morris County Agricultural Development Board and the State Agricultural Development Committee that mirrors the state Right to Farm Act.
2. Require Mendham Township to appoint and maintain a Municipal Agricultural Advisory Committee (MAAC) composed of 5 members; 3 must be Mendham Twp. land owning farmers and 2 being Mendham Township farmers.
3. Require the Township to seek and solicit input from the Mendham Township Municipal Agricultural Advisory Committee, once formed, on all issues that would potentially impact agriculture in the municipality.
4. Require Mendham Township to undertake a "Mendham Township Agriculture Economic Viability Report" that will assess the current environment for farmers in the township and identify actions that could be taken by the township government to improve and enhance farm economic viability within the municipality.
5. Require Mendham Township to specifically exclude trees grown for crops (such as fruit trees, Christmas trees, and ornamental trees) from its currently proposed Tree Removal ordinance. Trees that are dead, diseased, or threaten farm buildings, livestock fencing, and crops should also be exempt from the proposed ordinance.
6. Require Mendham Township to review with the Morris CADB, the SADC, and the Mendham MAAC its current equine related ordinances and appropriately revise to support the industry. Current ordinances are exclusionary and in conflict with the State Right to Farm Act in requiring over 100 acres for commercial horse farms in addition to a nearly impossible to achieve horse show permitting process.
7. Require that these agricultural related items be addressed and incorporated into Mendham Township policy prior to receiving any grant monies, outside of agriculture grants, from the Highlands Council.

Vice Chair Alstede recommended that the Council staff amend these items to Mendham Township's Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report and resolution.

Mr. Spinelli stated that Vice Chair's recommendations are fair. Mr. Spinelli added that municipalities struggle with how to accommodate in a suburban setting, but the measures set forth are mostly achievable and reasonable. Mr. Spinelli added that Highlands funding would cover some of this work.

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At this time Gabrielle Gallagher, Chief Counsel, advised that the Council could vote to amend the resolution from the floor to add the seven (7) items addressed by Vice Chair Alstede by a motion, a second and majority vote.

Member Dressler moved to amend the resolution. Member Alstede second it.

Council Comment

Member Van Abs felt strongly that the recommendations should go out for public comment due to a major change. Member Van Abs was also concerned about precedent and asked if we would then do the same thing for any other municipality with significant farmland that may have similar issues.

Member Bush commented that he agrees with the recommendations but is not sure it is fair to every other town. He commented that this should go out for public comment and the resolution should be tabled.

Member Francis commented that the 7 items are reasonable, achievable and measurable and that a public comment process is important.

At this time, there was continued discussion.

Chairman Richko asked for a motion to table the resolution.

Member Bush moved to table the resolution. Member Kibler seconded it. A roll call vote was taken and all were in favor.

Resolution – Approval of the Petition for Plan Conformance and Center Designation for the Town of Belvidere

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Visioli moved the resolution. Member Bush seconded it.

Mr. Humphries continued the presentation. The presentation may be found on Council's website: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/mtgppt_061925.pdf

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment.

There was no public comment.

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

DRAFT - FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE JULY 17, 2025
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Resolution – Approval of Petition for Plan Conformance For the Township of Jefferson, Morris County

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

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

At this time, Elizabeth Ward, Regional Planner, gave a presentation. The presentation may be found on Council's website: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2025/06_june/mtgppt_061925.pdf

Chair Richko acknowledged Jessica Caldwell, Planner for Jefferson Township.

Jessica Caldwell, Jefferson Township Planner – Ms. Caldwell commented that Jefferson Township was one of those municipalities that was standoffish when initially working with the Highlands Council. Ms. Caldwell added that she credits the Highlands staff as well as Mr. Spinelli for meeting with the municipal officials. She remarked that the plans and the work we have done for the Economic Development Plan have helped the municipality see that our goals are similar and working together serves the Township in the long run.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment.

Gordon Levy, Jefferson Township – Mr. Levy asked if his land can be included in the potential redevelopment zone since he has not been compensated for his land.

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

OLD/NEW BUSINESS:

Member James left the meeting at 5:52pm.

Vice Chair Alstede commented regarding Mr. Spinelli's frustration regarding the lack of funding for the Highlands Council. Vice Chair Alstede added that there is a deliberate resistance to fund the Highlands Council through Corporate Business Tax. Vice Chair Alstede also added that there is a movement to direct funds from farmland preservation to urban agriculture and this has not come through the State Board of Agriculture and SADC.

Chair Richko responded that we need to take a road trip to Trenton as mentioned by Member Dougherty a few months ago.

Chair Richko opened the meeting for public comment and noted the 3-minute limit.

Public Comments

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Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers wanted to reflect on the conversation regarding Mendham Township. Ms. Somers commented that all farms are not created equal and tabling the resolution was a good thing.

Sarah Neibart, Mayor of Mendham Township – Mayor Neibart commented that there is a mischaracterization and misinformation about Mendham Township farmers. Mayor Neibart stated that she would be happy to discuss updates and any concerns. Mayor Neibart agreed with Ms. Somers' statement that not all farms are created equal.

Hank Klumpp, Tewksbury Township – Mr. Klumpp commented on the Backer's farm and asked who was there first. Mr. Klumpp commented on the Right To Farm Act, Fair Housing, Tourism grants and Highlands water.

Member Bush made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Francis seconded it. All were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 6:03pm.

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: ***7/2/2025***

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

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											