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BENJAMIN L. SPINELLI, ESQ.
Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

To: Budget & Finance Committee

From: Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq., Executive Director

Subject: Committee Meeting Minutes – July 9, 2025

Date: July 15, 2025

A Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee meeting was held on Wed., July 9, 2025 at 12:00pm via Zoom. The following participants were present:

Committee: Council Chair Richko, Committee Chair Visioli, and Committee Members Bush & Kibler

Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU): Jamera Sirmans, Associate Counsel

Highlands Staff: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Sarah Friend, Casey Ezyse, Allison Bittner, Neda Hartman, Carole Diction, Herb August, Ranji Persaud and Annette Tagliareni.

Committee Chair Visioli opened the meeting at 12:01pm.

Committee Chair Visioli reported that the committee will discuss several agenda items:

1. Plan Conformance Grant Requests
2. Tourism Expansion Grant Program
3. Extension of FY2025 Budgets

At this time, Highlands staff gave an overview on all Plan Conformance grant requests:

Township of Jefferson, Morris County - Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Survey (\$16,600)

Sarah Friend, Environmental Scientist, reported that Jefferson Township is requesting a Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Survey (SAV) grant in Lake Hopatcong to be used to assess the apparent losses in macrophyte growth when compared with the results of the 2018 and 2021 surveys. This survey will also be used to monitor newer invasive plant species, as well as to assess populations of rare, threatened, and endangered macrophyte species. In addition, a series of nearshore management measures are scheduled to be implemented at six locations throughout the lake in 2025 to prevent and/or minimize the development of HABs.



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Mr. Spinelli noted that this is a modest amount of funding but emphasized that the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) should be assisting with these types of issues to monitor the health of the resources. Mr. Spinelli added that due to the Council's limited resources, it should not be solely on the Highlands to do.

Mount Olive Township, Morris County – Mine Brook Dam Removal (\$90,800)

Casey Ezyske, Water Resource Management Specialist, reported that Mount Olive Township is working with the Musconetcong Watershed Association (MWA) on the removal of two Mine Brook Dams. The 183-acre parcel was previously used by the Hackettstown Municipal Utility Authority to provide drinking water to the Town of Hackettstown. The removal of the dams will help restore habitat for aquatic wildlife with cascading benefits for terrestrial wildlife. The removal of the dams will convert 7 acres of impounded area to a natural flood plain, reconnect 1.75 stream miles, and restore 1,900 feet of stream channel. The requested funding will provide for 60% of the design of the project.

Chair Richko asked for clarification that the grant is just for planning purposes. It was confirmed that it is a planning grant. Chair Richko also seconded what Mr. Spinelli said earlier that NJDEP should fund these types of projects.

Borough of Mountain Lakes, Morris County – Lakes Management Plan (\$112,200)

Ms. Ezyske reported that the Borough of Mountain Lakes prepared a Scope of Work with the assistance of Princeton Hydro, LLC to complete a Lake and Watershed Management Plan. The first phase will cost \$112,200 and includes the following components:

1. Identify, quantify, and prioritize the watershed-based factors which may cause eutrophication.
2. Identify the watershed management measures needed to address general causes of water quality impairments.
3. Identify the relative cost of the recommended general watershed management measures.
4. Identify and quantify the lake-based factors which may cause eutrophication.
5. Generate a general schedule, based on priority, for the implementation of the recommended watershed management measures.

Approval of funding for phase I includes analysis of nine (9) Borough lakes' watersheds. The Borough anticipates that this work will take place in 2025 through 2026. The Borough anticipates Phase II work for 2026 and will request funding upon the conclusion of Phase I work. Phase II will include trophic state assessment, analysis of the pollutant removal achievable through the implementation of specific watershed-based management techniques, MS4 permit discussions, and general assessment report.

Member Kibler commented that the last two (2) projects should be implemented by NJDEP.

Borough of Netcong, Morris County – Infiltration and Inflow Study (\$24,900)

Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, reported that the Borough of Netcong proposes to conduct an Infiltration and Inflow (I&I) Study on a section of the Borough's sanitary sewer system. The project will address extraneous flow – infiltration, rainfall-induced infiltration, and inflow of storm water – with a goal to reduce extraneous flow while extending the service life of the collection system infrastructure. The program will be executed in multiple phases, with the first phase focused on the areas of greatest concern. It was noted that when the Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance was approved at the April 17, 2025 Highlands Council meeting, the Implementation Plan and Schedule included an estimated amount of \$35,000 to conduct the I&I Study, but the actual amount for the work is \$59,900 so the Borough's request is for an additional \$24,900 to undertake the study.

Byram Township – East Brookwood Stormwater Management Study (\$40,000)

Allison Bittner, Principal Planner, reported that the Township of Byram is requesting grant funding to conduct a stormwater management study (engineering-type study) and analysis in the East Brookwood neighborhood. The area is a combined mix of older planned developments, lake communities, and newer communities that all experience

varying types of stormwater issues. In particular, the older planned communities experience several drainage issues. The final product will be a Stormwater Management Report that will review the study and include projects that the Township can implement to address such issues, as well as any hurdles to implementation, and the incorporation of green infrastructure as well as BMPs for stormwater. The study will allow Byram to properly address an ongoing issue and improve the quality and quantity of surface and groundwater in an existing built area.

Committee Member Kibler asked if Byram Township has considered a stormwater utility.

Mr. Spinelli responded that the Township does not have a stormwater utility currently but there have been discussions about forming a regional stormwater utility.

Hopatcong Borough, Sussex County – Open Space and Recreation Plan & Environmental Resource Inventory (\$25,000)

Ms. Bittner reported that Hopatcong Borough is requesting grant funding to update their Open Space and Recreation Plans as well as update their Environmental Resource Inventory (ERI). The Borough's Open Space Plan was last updated in 2011, and the ERI last updated in 2014. The Borough will be utilizing the Highlands Interactive ERI for \$5,000 with the remainder of the cost going to the Open Space and Recreation Plan (\$20,000).

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move Plan Conformance Grants for Jefferson Township, Mount Olive Township, Mountain Lakes Borough, Netcong Borough, and Byram Township in the amount of \$309,500 to the full Council for consideration. Committee Member Kibler made the motion and Committee Chair Visioli seconded it. All were in favor.

Member Bush was recused from the following Hunterdon County Plan Conformance grant requests.

Hunterdon County – MS4 Stormwater Grant (\$150,000)

Kelley Curran, Science Manager, reported that Hunterdon County is requesting grant funding to update stormwater mapping on County roads only in Highlands region municipalities (Alexandria, Bethlehem, Bloomsbury, Califon, Clinton (Town and Township), Glen Gardner, Hampton, High Bridge, Holland, Lebanon (Borough and Township), Milford, Tewksbury, and Union). Similar to municipalities, there are now additional characteristics that must be field collected to meet NJDEP MS4 compliance standards that are outlined in the Highway Agency MS4 Permit. Tasks to complete this work include: Data Reconciliation (existing data will be audited for quality, duplication and completeness), Field Data Collection (update locations of surface assets that are part of the stormwater sewer system and collect required attributes), Outfall Inspections and Map Preparation. While the original request to complete all tasks in the submitted scope of work (SOW) was \$297,215, Highlands staff is recommending a cap of \$150,000. It was noted that NJDEP did not initially offer grants to counties but announced on July 2nd that they are now providing grants in the amount of \$100,000 (minimum) to counties to update stormwater mapping. Highlands Council staff will ensure that Hunterdon County applies for the grant, which combined with Council funding will get them closer to the full proposed amount indicated in their SOW.

Mr. Spinelli noted that the County will be asked to apply for NJDEP grant funding first and then funds would be released from Highlands.

Committee Member Kibler commented that this is a great investment.

Hunterdon County – Bike Plan (\$4,800)

Ms. Haddock-Weiler reported that Hunterdon County has received funding from the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) to prepare a Bicycle Plan for the county and is requesting Highlands Council funding to pay for the administrative costs of managing the project. The Plan will identify and map proposed routes of on- and off-road bicycle facilities based on analysis of collected and existing data and present County Plans, including

conformance with the goals of the Highlands Regional Master Plan. The county will incorporate the new Highlands brand and logo in the resulting plan which will further the region's tourism appeal.

Committee Chair Visioli asked if there are any action plan/timelines provided. Council staff responded that a SOW was submitted, and it is monitored. It was also noted that the Council will only reimburse funding to the grantees after completion of deliverables.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move Plan Conformance Grants for Hunterdon County in the amount of \$154,800 to the full Council for consideration. Council Chair Richko made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Highlands Council Tourism Expansion Grant Program

At this time, Ms. Haddock-Weiler gave a presentation/overview on the Tourism Expansion Grant program.

Ms. Haddock-Weiler noted that the Highlands Council received three (3) additional grant applications for the Tourism Expansion Grant Program. The Council previously approved six (6) grants at its April meeting. Ms. Haddock-Weiler added that all of these applicants will serve as ambassadors to the Highlands branding efforts.

NY-NJ Trail Conference (\$35,000)

The NY-NJ Trail Conference has proposed a "Northern New Jersey Highlands: Building a Destination through Recreation and Culture" grant project. The goal is to spark a vibrant tourism economy rooted in the natural beauty, rich history, and cultural vitality of the Northern New Jersey Highlands. The focus will be on four Highlands municipalities – Ringwood Borough and West Milford Township in Passaic County, Vernon Township in Sussex County, and Jefferson Township in Morris County. Each of these has submitted a letter of support for the project.

The project will include a new Highlands Trail Guide, a dedicated landing page on the Trail Conference website for hiking trails in the targeted municipalities, a template for kiosk panels at trailheads and in downtowns, and branded merchandise for the general population. The project will also serve as a template for additional Highlands towns for future implementation.

Hackettstown Business Improvement District (\$23,424)

The Hackettstown Business Improvement District (BID) has proposed a "Discover the Magic through Events and Marketing" project to expand two existing weekend festivals (Oktoberfest and Hometown Holiday Weekend) and launch a marketing campaign to promote Hackettstown and the Highlands' partnership in tourism and visitation. The Oktoberfest is a popular autumn street fair style event, spanning several streets throughout town and offering family friendly activities, contests, craft vendors, food, music and drink, and more. Hometown Holiday Weekend occurs in early December focusing on the holiday season, including tree lighting, musical performances, holiday bazaar, caroling, and more. With grant funding, each of these events will grow with more activities and greater outreach. The marketing campaign will seek to attract more visitors from New Jersey and Pennsylvania, advertising the benefits of Hackettstown and a walkable downtown and the expansive resources of the Highlands. Marketing materials will feature the new Highlands brand.

Town of Clinton (\$9,450)

The Town of Clinton has proposed an "Enhancing the Visitor Experience" project to focus on tourism facilities in the downtown. Clinton is a popular destination for daytime visitors and the grant would help enhance the overall visitor experience and encourage longer and repeat visits to Clinton's historic downtown tourism destinations. The proposal includes support for their numerous annual events, festivals, and outdoor activities. The Town will add a new information kiosk adjacent to Allie's Way, refurbish the existing kiosk at Halstead Street adjacent to the Community Center, incorporating the Highlands brand and logo at each. The Town will install clean, accessible portable restrooms at the two key locations: Historic Downtown Clinton and the Clinton Community Center. The

Town of Clinton wayfinding signs will also incorporate the Highlands brand and logo. Ultimately, the Town envisions establishing a permanent Welcome Center in the future as time and funding permit.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move Tourism Expansion Grants for NY-NJ Trail Conference, the Town of Hackettstown, and the Town of Clinton in the amount of \$67,874 to the full Council for consideration. Council Chair Richko made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Extend the 2025 Fiscal Year Budgets (General Operating & Highlands Protection Fund)

Herb August reported that every year the Council is asked to extend the previous budget until the new one is considered in October. This extension is a placeholder to continue to operate at the same average monthly spending level.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Extension of the 2025 Fiscal Year Budgets to the full Council for consideration. Member Bush made the motion and Council Chair Richko seconded it. All were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 12:36pm.