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Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Budget & Finance Committee

FROM: Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq. Executive Director

DATE: October 8, 2025

SUBJECT: Committee Meeting Minutes – October 6, 2025

A Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee meeting was held on Monday, October 6, 2025, at 12:20 pm via Zoom. The following participants were present:

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

Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU): Michael Eleneski, Associate Counsel

Highlands Staff: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Neda Hartman, Sarah Friend, Carole Ann Dicton, Kyli Engle, Ranji Persaud, Casey Ezyske, Herb August, Annette Tagliareni, Kelley Curran, and Diana Swiderski.

Committee Chair Visioli opened the meeting at 12:20 pm.

A roll call was taken. Committee Member James was absent. All other committee members were present.

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

1. Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands General Operating Budget
2. Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands Protection Capital Fund Budget
3. Plan Conformance Grant Requests
4. Tourism Expansion Grant Program
5. Award for a Highlands Climate Change Technical Report

At this time, Highlands staff gave an overview on the agenda items:

Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands General Operating Budget

Ranji Persaud, Manager of HR, Fiscal & Office Services, reported that the FY2026 General Operating Budget is straightforward with some small adjustments made to address the actual costs of equipment, software and services (i.e., IT equipment, software, services and a new line item for Communications Department for outreach work, social media, associated expenses, etc.). It was noted that the State Appropriation was relatively the same as previous years, with a small increase in state aid to cover salaries per collective bargaining agreements. It was also noted that unexpended funds were returned to the Council from FY25. The budget covers basic expenses and payroll and did not include any new, additional staff members.

Executive Director Ben Spinelli stated that the Highlands Council has been operating under the same budget since 2011, making it difficult to accomplish all that is needed.

Member Kibler had questions regarding employee salaries. Mr. Persaud responded to his questions.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the FY2026 Highlands General Operating Budget to the full Council for consideration. Committee Chair Visioli made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands Protection Capital Fund Budget

Herb August, Grants Manager, stated that grants have been cut since the Christie Administration, from $4.4 million annually to just over $2.1 million. Last year's (FY2025) budget line items needed to address Trenton policy needs, with large amounts going towards Affordable Housing and MS4 Stormwater Management Planning. Herb suggested that these programs will still be a priority as well as other DEP mandated municipal plans addressing climate resiliency. A list of expenditures for the budget was provided to the Committee Members for review.

Committee Member Kibler expressed disappointment regarding the cut in funding and wished for better support from the governor and legislators. Despite the lack of appropriate funding, he praised the Council on how much has been accomplished.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the FY2026 Highlands Protection Capital Fund Budget to the full Council for consideration. Council Chair Richko made the motion and Committee Member Bush seconded it. All were in favor.

Hunterdon County – Watershed Management Plan – Phase 2 ($146,256)

Casey Ezyske, Environmental Scientist 2 Water Resources, stated that Hunterdon County is seeking $146,256 for the second year of the development of a Watershed Management Plan in collaboration with Musconetcong Watershed Association. The goals are to finalize water quality assessments and municipal reports, develop solutions with stakeholders to improve water quality, and create and implement an EPA 9-Element Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan.

Member Bush was recused from voting on this grant for Hunterdon County.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Plan Conformance Grant for Hunterdon County to the full Council for consideration. Council Chair Richko made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Mount Olive Township, Morris County – Lake Management Plan – Phase 2 ($88,814)

Ms. Ezyske reported that Mount Olive Township is requesting $88,814 in funding to support the implementation of Phase 2 of the NJDEP-approved Budd Lake Characterization project. The Township has partnered with the Raritan Headwaters Association on this study with the goal of identifying current water quality conditions. Phase 2 tasks include education and outreach programs, baseline characterization of Budd Lake, and reporting and data sharing. The estimated timeline is 12 months, and Phase 2 is expected to be the final phase of the plan.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Plan Conformance Grant for Mount Olive Township, Morris County to the full Council for consideration. Committee Member Bush made the motion and Council Chair Richko seconded it. All were in favor.

TOURISM EXPANSION GRANT PROGRAM

Holland Township, Hunterdon County ($8,500)
Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, reported that the Highlands Council has received one last grant application for the Tourism Expansion Grant Program from Holland Township to fund the celebration of their annual Community Day in combination with the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This event is scheduled for September 12, 2026, and will feature the new Highlands brand.

At this time, Mr. Spinelli noted that due to Member Bush's recusal for this grant and quorum concerns at the Council level, he requested that the committee approve this grant to be approved under the Executive Director's Authority instead of Council.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Tourism Expansion Grants for Holland, Township, Hunterdon County in the amount of $8,500 to the Executive Director's Authority. Member Kibler made the motion and Council Chair Richko seconded it. All were in favor.

Mr. Humphries noted that there will be two additional grants Council will consider at its October meeting. The committee approved these grants at their September Budget & Finance Committee meeting.

Award for a Highlands Climate Change Technical Report

Sarah Friend, Environmental Scientist 2, reported that the Highlands Council issued a Request for Proposals (RFPs) to develop a Climate Change Technical Report for the Highlands Region. The specific tasks for the report are: 1) Development of Climate Indicators and Trend Analysis; 2) Climate Impacts Assessment; and 3) Recommendations for Adaptation and Resilience. The Council received six (6) proposals and interviewed four (4) respondents, ultimately choosing the strongest and most cost-effective firm.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Award a Contract for a Highlands Climate Change Technical Report to the full Council for consideration. Council Chair Richko made the motion and Committee Chair Visioli seconded it. All were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 12:54 pm.