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Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

To: Budget & Finance Committee

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

Subject: Committee Meeting Minutes – September 8, 2025

Date: September 10, 2025

A Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee meeting was held on Mon., September 8, 2025 at 12:58 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, Allison Bittner, Neda Hartman, Carole Ann Dicton, Kyli Engle, Corey Piasecki.

Committee Chair Visioli opened the meeting at 12:58pm.

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

1. Plan Conformance Grant Requests
2. Tourism Expansion Grant Program

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

West Milford Township, Passaic County - Zoning Ordinance Update ($24,000)
Allison Bittner, Principal Planner, reported that West Milford Township recently adopted a Comprehensive Master Plan Update with a new Land Use Plan Element and Master Plan Re-Examination report earlier this year. Part of the recommendations from these reports is to undergo substantiative zoning changes for the Township. This includes removing stagnant zoning and implementing modifications to residential and commercial zones. Additionally, as part of the Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, conforming Highlands municipalities are to adopt the new conformance ordinance. The zoning changes proposed will help improve economic development opportunities in West Milford and encourage a more diverse housing stock.

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

High Bridge Borough, Hunterdon County – Stormwater Management Planning ($34,750)
James Humphries, Director of Planning, Science & GIS, reported that High Bridge Borough is requesting additional funding to comply with the enhanced regulations of the NJDEP Municipal Stormwater General Permit (MS4). Compliance will ultimately work to maintain and improve the environmental quality for all residents and the general public through improvements in water quality. Highlands Council grant funding will be used to supplement NJDEP grant funding for which High Bridge already applied for. Specifically, the Borough is requesting funding for preparation of the Phase 1 Watershed Improvement Plan which is due on January 1, 2026. Tasks include: compilation of maps, data and tables; preparation of the Watershed Inventory Report; public information session/solicitation of stakeholder input; and submission of the Preliminary and Final Reports to NJDEP.

Chief Counsel Gallagher asked for a motion to move the Plan Conformance Grant to the full Council for consideration. Committee Member Bush made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

TOURISM EXPANSION GRANT PROGRAM

Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, reported that the Highlands Council has received one (1) recent grant application for the Tourism Expansion Grant Program from the Borough of Hopatcong in collaboration with the Lake Hopatcong Foundation for $8,600. The Tourism Expansion Grant Program was established in January 2025 to provide grant funds to support and advance tourism in the Highlands Region, including marketing, advertising, events, web-based projects, and other creative proposals to grow the tourism industry. Funding for this grant program is drawn from the RMP account and $400,000 was made available for these grants. The Tourism Expansion Grant Program has been very well received and thus far the Highlands Council has awarded nine (9) individual grants and allocated $382,874 in funding. Currently there remains $17,126 available to fund remaining applications. With the approval of the Hopatcong project, $8,526 will be available for a future applicant.

Borough of Hopatcong/Lake Hopatcong Foundation (Sussex County) ($8,600)
Wayfinding Improvements to Stimulate Ecotourism in the Lake Hopatcong Region
Ms. Haddock-Weiler reported that the proposed Tourism Expansion Grant project seeks to increase ecotourism in the Lake Hopatcong area through increased outdoor recreation wayfinding on roadways, hiking trails, and kayak launch points. The strategy includes leveraging the 200,000 plus annual visitors to the Hopatcong State Park to increase usage of the existing 17-mile trail network around the Lake, as well as the connections to other trail systems. The project will facilitate the installation of signage on both foot trails and water trails to increase awareness and enable visitors easy access.

The project will also promote the Highlands Region brand through an event-focused brand ambassadorship with the Lake Hopatcong Foundation (LHF) and the Borough of Hopatcong. Overall, the project will help to reinforce the Highlands Region as a center of natural resource protection and recreation. This is one of the main goals of the Highlands Region Economic Sustainability Plan.

Council Chair Richko asked if the Highlands Region branding will be used by all entities. Ms. Haddock-Weiler answered that, yes, it will be used. Council Chair Richko spoke in support of the Lake Hopatcong grant.

Chief Counsel Gallagher asked for a motion to move the Tourism Expansion Grants for Borough of Hopatcong/Lake Hopatcong Foundation in the amount of $8,600 to the full Council for consideration. Committee Chair Visioli made the motion and Council Chair Richko seconded it. All were in favor.

Executive Director Spinelli asked Member Bush a question about Holland Township, which Member Bush answered.

The meeting adjourned at 1:07 pm.