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Governor

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State of New Jersey

HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL

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CARL J. RICHKO
Chairman

BENJAMIN L. SPINELLI, ESQ.
Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Budget & Finance Committee

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

DATE: March 16, 2026

SUBJECT: Committee Meeting Minutes – March 10, 2026

A Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee meeting was held on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at 12:30 pm via Zoom. The following participants were present:

Committee: Council Chair Richko, Committee Chair Visioli, Committee Members Bush, Kibler, Koop, and Le Frois

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

Highlands Staff: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Corey Piasecki, Neda Hartman, Casey Ezyske, Carole Ann Diction, Annette Tagliareni, and Diana Swiderski.

Committee Chair Visioli opened the meeting at 12:30 pm.

A roll call was taken. All committee members were present.

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

1. Summary of grants approved at February’s Budget & Finance Committee meeting
2. New grant for High Bridge Borough
3. Agricultural Sustainability Grants
4. Tourism Website Maintenance Contract

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

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James Humphries, Director of Planning, Science & GIS, gave a brief summary of the grants that were approved at the previous Budget & Finance Committee meeting.

- Randolph Township (Morris County) was approved for \$25,000 to be used towards an Agricultural Sustainability Grant to establish a Farm to Table food event.
- Hope Township (Warren County) was approved for \$15,000 to be used towards a Plan Conformance Assessment.
- Washington Township (Warren County) was approved for \$30,000 to be used towards a Center Designation Study at the Washington South Redevelopment Area.
- Green Township (Sussex County) was approved for \$27,010 to conduct a drainage study of Lake Tranquility with the goal of enhancing stormwater management and support watershed improvements. The previous figure was noted as \$26,510, due to an error in their consultant's estimate calculations.
- Pohatcong Township (Warren County) was approved for \$16,000 to update their Open Space & Recreation Plan in order to qualify for future Green Acres Funding.

High Bridge Borough (Hunterdon County) – Water Use and Conservation Management Plan (\$45,000)

Kelley Curran, Science Manager, stated that High Bridge Borough, a fully-conforming municipality, is seeking \$45,000 in grant money to develop a Water Use and Conservation Management Plan (WUCMP.) The creation of the WUCMP will update net water availability for the two (2) subwatersheds that intersect the Borough and will assist with the reduction and/or elimination of identified deficits. The Borough is experiencing pressure issues with town drinking water supply wells that may require a modification to their water allocation permit which would spur the development of the municipal-wide WUCMP. The creation of a WUCMP is also a requirement of Plan Conformance.

Ben Spinelli, Executive Director, inquired whether the wells are in separate watersheds, to which Ms. Curran replied, yes. Ms. Curran noted that pressure issues in the wells are causing the pump of one of the wells to burn out. As a result, one well is pumping less water than its allocation and the other well system is pumping over its permitted allocation.

Committee Member Kibler thanked the Highlands staff for noting that High Bridge Borough is a fully-conforming municipality within the Highlands, and inquired whether it was usual practice to fund 100% towards a WUCMP. Ms. Curran replied, yes, there is a tri-party agreement between the consultant, in this case, CDM Smith, the town, and the Highlands. Mr. Humphries added that the WUCMP also serves an ecological purpose, as it supports life in streams and has a goal of reducing water usage through conservation strategies.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move High Bridge Borough's Water Use and Conservation Management Plan grant to the full Council for consideration. Committee Member Bush made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Agricultural Sustainability Grants

Corey Piasecki, Principal Planner, stated that in October 2023, the Highlands Council approved five applications for Sustainable Agriculture Grants spanning three fiscal years. Of these five, three proceeded successfully: Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA-NJ), Foodshed Alliance, and City Green Farm at South Branch Preserve. There are two sources of funding: Plan Conformance grant money that is appropriated through the state plan, and RMP Implementation Plan that does not have a dedicated appropriation through the state fund. The funding for these grants is from the RMP account.

Mr. Piasecki noted that the following grants do not need to be moved to the full Council since the three-year period was approved by the full Council via Resolution 2023-26 (attached) and as noted in the resolution “subject to annual renewal by the Budget and Finance Committee.” The committee will consider these grants after Council staff’s overview.

Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA-NJ) - (\$70,950)

Mr. Piasecki stated that NOFA has three areas of need and interest for technical assistance: agroforestry implementation, value-added processing, and adherence to land-use regulations and on-farm marketing. The three farm sites that NOFA is partnering with, Ironbound Farm, Maranatha Farm, and Riamede Farm, are engaging with technical service providers to assist with the areas of need. This project will engage and educate producers via on-farm workshops, digital webinars, and conference sessions.

Foodshed Alliance (\$90,000)

The Foodshed Alliance advocates sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices, including the milling, distilling, and malting of grains. The capacity to produce, process, and market value-added grains will help to increase the number and sustainability of farms and agriculture-related enterprises. The Foodshed Alliance will continue to recruit growers to the project through extensive outreach, incorporating the Heritage Grain Manual through events including post-harvest grain handling, grain processing, and meeting grain quality standards. Through the project, farmers will also learn about direct-to-consumer market options and selling to local bakeries, restaurants, and other food outlets.

Committee Member, Helen Le Frois, inquired if the Foodshed Alliance was seeking to add other producers. Mr. Piasecki responded, yes, and added that Marksboro Mills is creating value-added products to distribute to bakeries.

City Green Farm at South Branch Preserve (\$90,000)

City Green is continuing the production of storage crops using an “alley cropping” system, which integrates rows of fruit and nut trees in veggie fields. This agroforestry practice will provide windbreaks for vegetable crops while the tree’s roots will mine nutrients from deep layers of soil and recycle them to the surface. The addition of an on-site well will help provide drip irrigation to more efficiently provide water retention.

Operating within Clifton and Paterson, City Green provides food access to communities in Passaic County. In 2025, 13,500+ pounds of fresh produce were donated by the South Branch Preserve Farm in Mt. Olive through weekly mobile markets and food banks. A 50-member CSA during the fall season and a 25-member CSA in the winter are also offered by the farm.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to approve the Northeast Organic Farmers Association, Foodshed Alliance, and City Green Farm at South Branch Preserve as noted in Council’s Resolution 2023-26. Committee Member Bush made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

Highlands Tourism Website Maintenance and Hosting (\$29,622 total for 3-year period)

Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, reported that the Highlands Tourism Website, <https://enjoynjhighlands.com/>, launched on February 25th this year and has received much positive feedback. North Star Branding and Marketing firm has offered a 3-year term to maintain and host the website, as well as training Highlands staff to administer updates.

Member Le Frois inquired about what happens after the 3-year term. Ms. Haddock-Weiler responded that the hope is to find another entity by then. Mr. Spinelli stated that the Highlands needs a stable funding source to take responsibility as it does not have the economic capacity to do so on its own. He added that it should be a cooperative effort between the Highlands and the counties and municipalities within the Highlands region. Council Chair Richko mentioned that there will be a brief presentation on the tourism website at Council’s next

meeting. Committee Members Kibler and Bush consider the website a great idea and investment.

Committee Chair Visioli asked for a motion to move the Highlands Tourism Website Maintenance and Hosting grant to the full Council for consideration. Committee Member Bush made the motion and Committee Member Kibler seconded it. All were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 12:56 pm.

RESOLUTION 2023-26
NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
APPROVAL OF FY2024 REGIONAL MASTER PLAN IMPLEMENTATION FUND
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE GRANTS

WHEREAS, the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act (Highlands Act), N.J.S.A. 13:20-1 et seq., has created a public body corporate and politic with corporate succession known as the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council); and

WHEREAS, the Highlands Council is tasked with implementing the Highlands Act; and

WHEREAS, section 6.g of the Highlands Act authorizes the Highlands Council to enter into any and all agreements or contracts to effectuate the purposes of the Highlands Act; and

WHEREAS, the preservation of farmland and the promotion of sustainable agriculture in the Highlands Region are two essential objectives of the Highlands Act; and

WHEREAS, agriculture, if it is to remain viable in the New Jersey Highlands, requires a sustainable land base. The Highlands Region contains over 859,000 acres, of which over 118,000 acres were categorized as agricultural land in 2002. Agricultural land, in both the Preservation and Planning Areas of the Highlands, is an important resource, providing essential value to the residents of New Jersey with locally available agricultural products, economic benefits of agricultural production, and rural character associated with agricultural land; and

WHEREAS, to preserve and sustain agricultural resources and enhance the viability of the agricultural industry, programs are needed that focus more on the practices farmers can use to achieve sustainable profitability, sustainable stewardship practices for natural and agricultural resources, and sustainable coexistence with non-farmers in a densely populated state; and

WHEREAS, the New Jersey Legislature declared that the maintenance of agricultural production and a positive agricultural business climate should be encouraged to the maximum extent possible wherever appropriate in the Highlands (Highlands Act, Section 2); and

WHEREAS, to sustain and enhance agricultural resources and the viability of the agricultural industry, it is necessary to provide incentives and funding opportunities, to not only preserve agriculture, but to encourage land stewardship through Best Management Practices (BMPs) that enhance the resources of the Highlands Region, and

WHEREAS, the 2022 Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan identifies agriculture as a key industry and economic driver for the Region; and

WHEREAS, with these goals in mind and utilizing funding from the RMP Implementation Fund, the Highlands Council is offering grants to nonprofit organizations and public institutions of higher education for projects that advance innovative/alternative sustainable agriculture; and

WHEREAS, the grant program seeks to encourage the implementation of projects that will assist agricultural operations in the Highlands region including value-added facilities, technical assistance, new farmer programs, sustainable land management practices and other sustainable agricultural activity; and

WHEREAS, the maximum award amount is \$100,000 per year, for a maximum of three years, subject to funding availability, and projects will be reviewed annually to ascertain status, effectiveness, overall implementation, and management of the grant award; and

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WHEREAS, each grant shall be annually reviewed by the Budget and Finance Committee at which time the Committee may authorize an additional year of grant funding not to exceed the annual award amount provided herein; and

WHEREAS, the grant application was released to the public on June 20, 2023, and six (6) applicants submitted grant applications on or before the deadline of August 11, 2023; and

WHEREAS, after reviewing the applications, staff conducted in-depth interviews with all of the applicants to determine the extent of their expertise in all facets of sustainable agriculture and their overall suitability to provide the services contemplated in the grant application; and

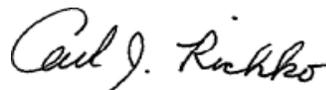
WHEREAS, Highlands Council staff recommends that the Highlands Council authorize entering into grant agreements with the following applicants:

Awardee	Amount
City Green, Inc.	\$90,000
North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development	\$90,000
Foodshed Alliance	\$92,840
Northeast Organic Farming Association of N.J.	\$93,245
Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation of the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lunaape (Lenape) Nation	\$83,930

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Highlands Council that the Executive Director, or their designee, is hereby authorized to enter into Sustainable Agriculture Grant Agreements with: City Green, Inc.; North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development; Foodshed Alliance; Northeast Organic Farming Association of N.J.; and the Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation of the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lunaape (Lenape) Nation, for the amounts provided above for a period of one year, subject to annual renewal by the Budget and Finance Committee.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was adopted by the Highlands Council at its regular meeting held on the 19th day of October, 2023.



 Carl J. Richko, Chairman

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NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
APPROVAL OF FY2024 REGIONAL MASTER PLAN IMPLEMENTATION FUND
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE GRANTS

Vote on the Approval of The Resolution	Motion	Second	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Councilmember Alstede		√	√			
Councilmember Dougherty						√
Councilmember Dressler			√			
Councilmember Francis			√			
Councilmember Holtaway	√		√			
Councilmember James			√			
Councilmember Sebetich			√			
Councilmember Van Abs			√			
Councilmember Visioli			√			
Councilmember Vohden			√			
Chairman Richko			√			