

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER 17, 2026

PRESENT

CARL J. RICHKO	)	CHAIR
KURT ALSTEDE	)	VICE CHAIR
MARY AMOROSO	)	COUNCIL MEMBERS
JOSEPH BASRALIAN	)	
DANIEL BUSH	)	
WILLIAM KIBLER	)	
TAMMY KOOP	)	
MELANIE MARANO	)	
MATTHEW OSWALD	)	
KELLEY SMITH	)	
DANIEL J. VAN ABS, PhD	)	
JAMES VISIOLI	)	

VIA TELECONFERENCE:

HELEN LE FROIS)

ABSENT:

TIMOTHY DOUGHERTY)

CALL TO ORDER 221ST meeting of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council was called to order at 4:00 pm at the Highlands Council Offices in Chester, NJ.

ROLL CALL

Roll call was taken. Member Dougherty was absent. All other Council Members were present. Member Le Frois was present via teleconference. *The following staff members were present: Ben Spinelli, James Humphries, Corey Piasecki, Neda Hartman, Tom Tagliareni, Carole Dicton, Emma Turner, Diana Swiderski, and Annette Tagliareni.*

Present via teleconference: Jill Denyes, Deputy Attorney General's (DAG's) office and Azeem Chaudry, Associate Counsel, Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU).

OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT was recited.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE was recited.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Chair Richko acknowledged the passing of two Highlands Council members. Member Francis (16 years' service, former mayor of Hopatcong) and Member James (15 years' service and Passaic County Commission for 23+ years.) A moment of silence was held in their memory.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Mr. Spinelli reported on the following items:

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1. Mr. Spinelli also acknowledged the passing of Members Francis and James and said they were very decent people who shared a commitment to the Highlands.
2. Mr. Spinelli noted that today's meeting will be short. Presentation on the Monitoring Program Recommendation Report (periodic review of the Regional Master Plan,) and resolutions concerning the 2027 meeting schedules of the Highlands Council as well as the Highlands Development Credit Bank Board (even though no viable TDR Program or repeated source of funding).
3. Open Space & Recreation Plan (OSRP) continues to move forward. Edits have been made and ready for release to the public. This will most likely be on the Council's October agenda.
4. Mr. Spinelli and Highlands staff will meet with Bernards Township on September 23, 2026 regarding Planning Area plan conformance.
5. Highlands staff met with Chester Borough, NJDEP and iBank to discuss a partnership to address septic system issues and financing of same for Chester Borough, as well as other Highlands municipalities with aging sewer systems/cesspools. We are hoping Chester Borough can be a model.
6. Mr. Spinelli met with Commissioner Potosnak and his chief of staff to discuss resource needs and opportunities for cooperation. The Highlands Council has a positive working relationship with DEP but emphasized the urgent need for access to existing funding, including Corporate Business Tax (CBT) and Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) funds, to support land stewardship projects that currently cannot be adequately funded. Mr. Spinelli added that while the Highlands Act of August 10, 2004 significantly slowed environmental degradation in the Highlands region, it has not reversed the decline in natural resources. A greater investment in working with farmers and public and private landowners on soil management and forestry practices is needed. Forest coverage is closely connected to water quality, water quantity, and water availability during droughts. The region is responsible for providing 863 million gallons of water per day for export outside the Highlands, regardless of weather conditions.
7. Mr. Spinelli reiterated and noted for his monthly update that the 5th Circuit Court held that the U.S. Constitution does not guarantee citizens a right to clean drinking water. Mr. Spinelli concluded that protecting the Highlands' natural resources is essential to ensuring that residents and communities have a reliable supply of clean water.
8. A Request for Proposal (RFP) to Implement a Marketing Campaign for the New Jersey Highlands Brand. The responses are due by October 16, 2026. Staff anticipates providing a recommendation to the Council at its December Council meeting. We are also hoping to issue an RFP to promote sustainable agricultural practices with non profits (specifically small grain production) and to create a regional agricultural retention plan that will complement the OSRP and incorporate the new SADC forest easement program.
9. Regarding personnel, Dillon Rivers started on August 3, 2026 as our part-time IT Coordinator; and Emma Turner (present today) started on August 10, 2026 as our Resource Management Specialist.
10. Budget & Finance Committee will meet on October 1, 2026 to review three months of grant requests and review the 2027 fiscal year operating and grant budgets.
11. Highlands staff plans to present/attend the Northwest New Jersey Rivers Conference and Annual Harvest, Honey & Garlic Festival next month.
12. Lastly, Mr. Spinelli mentioned that we need access to the CBT funds to compensate landowners and begin preserving over 230 square miles of undeveloped but developable land in the Highlands, as well as to preserve agriculture lands and support stewardship.

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Member Morano was present at approximately 4:10 pm.

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

Vice Chair Alstede asked for clarification regarding smaller boroughs with cesspools located in an appropriate expanding sewer service system to accommodate homes on small lots. He noted that such municipalities cannot restrict access to new capacity or target projects and this might be an opportunity for a developer to seize capacity to build affordable housing.

Mr. Spinelli responded that it depends on the circumstances and further explained the difference between conforming versus non-conforming municipalities. There was continued conversation regarding potential litigation and costs of these upgraded sewer systems.

Member Van Abs spoke about his experience with wastewater management and suggested that municipalities should have everyone ready to go into the sewer system the moment the treatment plant is increased or created. He also added that most Highlands municipalities with this need are in the preservation area so the rules are very different and affordable housing should not be an issue.

Member Oswald noted that in Riverdale, sewer lines were installed and residents would buy into the allotment and would have to connect once their house was sold. Member Oswald added that by buying into it, the allotment could not be used by someone else.

Chair Richko commented that the Highlands needs to continue to do our work to protect our water resources.

Vice Chair Alstede was temporarily absent at 4:30pm.

APPROVAL OF HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MINUTES OF JULY 16, 2026

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the Council Minutes of July 16, 2026.

Member Smith made a motion to approve the Highlands Council Minutes of July 16, 2026. Member Visioli seconded it.

A roll call was taken. The Highlands Council Minutes of July 16, 2026 were APPROVED 11-0.

Vice Chair Alstede returned to the meeting at 4:32pm.

RMP AMENDMENT COMMITTEE

Vice Chair Alstede referred to Corey Piasecki, Principal Planner. At this time Mr. Piasecki explained that Council was voting today to release for public comment updated recommendations included in a 2026 Monitoring Program Recommendation Report (MPRR). Mr. Piasecki then provided a presentation highlighting accomplishments since the 2018 report and some of the recommendations

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included in the 2026 report, as well as next steps/timeline. The presentation may be found on the Council's website:

www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2026/09_september/HCmtg_sept2026_ppt.pdf

Council Comment

Vice Chair Alstede inquired about the updated Highlands Redevelopment Area Designation procedures. Mr. Piasecki clarified that the Highlands Redevelopment Area Designation procedures, including the proposed changes, are being handled separately from the 2026 report and will be discussed in the future once the proposed changes are vetted.

Chair Richko called for a roll call vote.

A roll call vote was taken. The vote was 13 in favor, 0 opposed. The vote was APPROVED 13-0.

After the vote, Mr. Piasecki announced that a flyer including a QR-code to access the Recommendation Report and information about the public comment period will be available in the reception area after the meeting, and those details and the report are also available on the Highlands Council website.

OTHER BUSINESS

Resolution – Highlands Council Annual Meeting Schedule for 2027

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Bush moved the resolution. Member Kibler seconded it.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment

There was no Public comment.

A roll call was taken. The Resolution was APPROVED 13-0.

Resolution – Highlands Development Credit Bank Annual Meeting Schedule for 2027

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

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

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

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Public Comment

There was no Public comment.

A roll call was taken. The Resolution was APPROVED 13-0.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS

Member Van Abs noted that the Recommendation Report was a significant undertaking and recommended it to the public. Member Van Abs congratulated the staff for getting the report to this point.

Vice Chair Alstede recognized Members Francis and James for their contributions to the Council.

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

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers mentioned that on September 19, 2026, members of the Coalition will be rappelling down a 20-story building to raise funds for the protection of the Highlands and clean water and hopes for others to join them. Ms. Somers also shared that on October 5, 2026, Mr. Spinelli will be speaking at the Coalition's annual meeting.

Dylan Medici, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Mr. Medici welcomed Emma Turner to the Highlands Council staff and mentioned that Mr. Spinelli will be speaking at the North Jersey Rivers Conference about the Council's Forestry Best Management practices on October 16, 2026.

Andrew Bennett, Sparta Township – Mr. Bennett expressed his disapproval with the events that have taken place in the Township since the Highlands Council received Sparta's resolution for submission of petition for Highlands planning area conformance.

Frank Bennett, Sparta Township – Mr. Frank Bennett continued to read Mr. Andrew Bennett's comments. The written comments were submitted for the record.

Member Bush made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Visioli seconded it. All were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 4:59pm.

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: 10/15/2026

Name: Annette Tagliareni

Annette Tagliareni, Executive Assistant

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Vote on the Approval of Minutes	Motion	Second	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Councilmember Alstede			√			
Councilmember Amoroso			√			
Councilmember Basralian			√			
Councilmember Bush						√
Councilmember Dougherty			√			
Councilmember Kibler			√			
Councilmember Koop			√			
Councilmember LeFrois			√			
Councilmember Marano			√			
Councilmember Oswald		√	√			
Councilmember Smith	√		√			
Councilmember Van Abs						√
Councilmember Visioli			√			
Chairman Richko			√			

**PUBLIC COMMENT SUBMITTED AT
HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MEETING ON
SEPTEMBER 17, 2026**

Good afternoon. My name is Andy Bennett. I am an approved consulting forester here in NJ, overseeing forest stewardship activities on over 35,000 acres in the northern third of the state, many of those acres within the Highlands region. I am also recognized as a USDA Technical Service Provider, a certified pesticide applicator with the NJ DEP, a board member of the NJ Forestry Association, and a member of NJ Farm Bureau and NJ Outdoor Alliance. I only mention those affiliations to say that I'm not coming here today representing any of those organizations.

with my cousin Frank.
~~We~~ We came here today as members of a family that has owned land in Sparta and Andover for generations. Our family has been on our land since the 1800s and has called Sparta home for generations. Our farm is one of the few left in our community.

We are very concerned about recent events that have occurred in Sparta. We understand that the Highlands Council has recently received Sparta's petition for Planning Area conformance, and that your staff is now reviewing the application and determining what changes Sparta would need to make to conform with the Regional Master Plan.

We are here early in that process because there are important questions about how Sparta reached this point that we believe the Highlands Council should understand before staff completes its review and before this application eventually reaches you for a vote.

ISSUE #1 - The timeline is my first concern.

On September 2, Sparta's Planning Board held a special meeting for the presentation and discussion of the Highlands Initial Assessment; your director and planner were present at that meeting. Sparta's own public notice confirms that the September 2 meeting was specifically for the Highlands Initial Assessment.

Approximately 48 hours later, at 5:36 Friday afternoon, September 4, the Township Council agenda for September 8 was amended. Sparta's own agenda records confirm that amendment.

Monday was Labor Day.

And on Tuesday, September 8 — just six days after the Initial Assessment was presented — the Township Council voted to submit its petition for Planning Area conformance. We were at that meeting. We expressed our concerns, as did other members of the township. Despite those concerns, the vote went forward and passed 4 votes to None, with one member of the council abstaining from the vote and asking his fellow council members to delay the vote and ask that more time be given for the public to understand what all these means (sounds like a reasonable ask). After presenting an 'Initial Assessment' related to Planning Area Conformance, 6 days later they voted to move forward. This is far too fast for a process like this to take place. The public needs to be informed.

ISSUE #2 - The Council's Supposed Evidence that they are doing the will of the people.

The council members continue referencing a survey that was conducted between October 1, 2024 and November 14, 2024 as evidence that the community of Sparta is supportive of working towards conformance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan in the Planning Area of Sparta. This survey asked questions about traffic, open space, water quality or other community priorities. Questions like this can be used to help gain insight into the values of people in the town, but how on earth can you use this information to support the idea that there is public support to move towards conformance with the remaining 56% of your town, nearly 14,000 acres.

took that at face value. The Highlands Council expects towns to do their own homework and understand the financial implications of this decision. And I would suggest that a town needs to provide this information to its citizens prior to walking them into this conformance conversation, let alone adopting a resolution to apply to begin the process. This is absolutely nuts!

ISSUE #3 – Ongoing Litigation and expenses

Sparta is already deep in litigation with at least four developers in relation to applications for a variety of warehouses (differing sizes) and affordable housing. At a recent town council meeting, it was acknowledged that in three years, the town has effectively spent a surplus of over \$11 million dollars fighting these developments and now finds itself out of money. And I assume that only more litigation will occur in reaction to this decision by the town council.

Additionally, Sparta's total property-tax rate increased from 3.668% in 2025 to 3.829% in 2026. For a home at Sparta's average assessed value, that represents an increase of approximately \$616 in the estimated annual property-tax bill — about \$51 a month. At the same time, Sparta's school district entered 2026–27 facing an approximately \$1 million deficit.

Given the fiscal pressures already facing both the municipality and the school district, where is the fiscal analysis showing how Planning Area conformance could affect Sparta's future development capacity, ratables and school finances? Wouldn't this be a prudent step for the township to take prior to applying for conformance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan?

Why is the town council not asking the direct question – as a resident of the community, would you be in favor of the town pursuing compliance with the Highlands Regional Master Plan in the Planning Areas of our town? And further, how about these follow up questions – Do you have any idea what conformance means? Do you know that this could mean that your taxes will go up? Do you know that this means that your town will lose certain opportunities for further development and subsequently give up having a larger tax base? Do you know that this could in turn have an effect on the town's ability to fund our schools? Landowners, do you know that your property's development value will be severely eroded by this decision?

Side note, this survey was conducted nearly two years ago (November of 2024) yet is being used as the primary support for taking this action towards conformance.

You all are obviously aware of the recent struggles taking place in Highlands communities. Neighboring towns like Jefferson are in trouble and having to borrow money just to stay afloat. A bipartisanship effort is being made to help towns in the Highlands Preservation Area that are struggling to keep the lights on. NJ Assembly Bill A4860 says this “Development restrictions implemented as part of the ‘Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act’ and the ‘Pinelands Protection Act’ have hampered the ability of many municipalities to collect much-needed property tax revenue...” The legislative statement explicitly connects development restrictions with the fiscal problem these towns are facing.

When asked if an economic impact analysis would be done at some point, the council assured the public that this would come later and the Highlands Council would help with that. Yet, when Mr. Spinelli was asked at the September 2 meeting, he clearly said this was not part of the Highlands Council work, but rather this was the town's responsibility. I

In summary, we just want you to know that the Highlands Council is potentially stepping into a process that has already generated significant controversy and litigation. We don't want this Council to discover unresolved problems after the process is much further along. We would rather you see those issues now, when they can still be addressed.

We're not here arguing for or against conformance, which is exactly what we have said to the Sparta Town Council. We just want appropriate information, and we want the town council to lead the public through a transparent and thorough process. This has not been done to date.

And specifically, we're asking the Highlands Council to require Sparta to conduct meaningful additional public outreach specifically concerning Planning Area conformance — explaining the proposed changes, the potential effects on development and private landowners, potential economic impacts for the township - and giving residents a genuine opportunity to ask questions and provide informed comments.

If Sparta is going to make a decision this consequential, the public should have a meaningful opportunity to understand that decision before the Highlands Council is asked to approve the result.

Thank you.