



State of New Jersey

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 26, 2022

Highlands Council Names Ben Spinelli Executive Director

*Former Highlands Council Member and Chester Township Mayor to
Lead Regional Planning Agency*

CHESTER, N.J. —At its most recent meeting, the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) appointed Ben Spinelli to the position of Executive Director. Spinelli will lead the 23-person staff and report directly to the Chairman of the Highlands Council for an annual salary \$135,000. In addition to being one of the original members of the Highlands Council, Spinelli brings an exceptionally strong background in public policy and land use management to the role.

“When we began this search we were committed to finding someone with meaningful experience in the Highlands region and we were fortunate to have several very qualified candidates come forward,” said Carl Richko, Highlands Council Chairman. “Ben’s tenure on the Highlands Council certainly set him apart, but he also brings deep expertise in environmental policy, municipal land use law, sustainable local, regional and state-wide land use practices, land preservation, agricultural retention and strategic planning. His experience and ties to the region are just excellent.”

Spinelli began his career as a county prosecutor and trial attorney, later entering public service as an elected official, holding the office of Mayor in Chester Township, Morris County for three terms from 1998 until 2007. During his tenure as Mayor, Spinelli joined the New Jersey Office of Smart Growth as Chief Counsel and Director of Policy, later taking on the role of Executive Director for the agency before transitioning into the nonprofit sector and ultimately private consulting. It was also during his

time serving as Mayor that Spinelli was appointed to the Highlands Council, where he served from 2004 until 2006.

“I’ve always understood the importance of protecting the natural resources of the Highlands for people living both within and outside of the region,” said Spinelli. “It’s where I’ve lived with my family for the past 32 years and where I’ve invested my time, effort, and passion for building a sustainable society. It all comes full circle with the chance to serve in a position that will draw upon all of my knowledge, talents, and experience”

In 2015, after serving as a Senior Policy Advisor on a presidential Task Force for Disaster Recovery, Spinelli co-founded a consulting partnership providing services to businesses, landowners and government entities on matters of land use, land conservation, agricultural retention, regulatory matters, strategic planning, and policy. That business merged with Greener by Design in 2017, where Spinelli has served as principal working with multi-national corporations, energy partnerships and an ever-growing portfolio of governmental entities. Spinelli is also an adjunct professor in the Department of Chemistry and Environmental Science at NJIT, and an adjunct professor of Sustainability Studies at Kean University.

“Everything that I have worked on for the past two decades has prepared me for this position,” he said. “I’ve dedicated a significant portion of my professional career to sustainable planning issues, and in particular protection of the resources of the Highlands region. From being the mayor of a Highlands community, to advocating for the protection of the Highlands and sitting as a Highlands Council member, I have been deeply involved in the important issues facing this region. This is an incredible opportunity for me to continue to ensure that the Highlands will meet the needs of New Jersey’s residents for generations to come.”

Spinelli is expected to take over the role in August following the retirement of current Executive Director Lisa J. Plevin, who has held the role since 2018. Under her leadership, the Council advanced numerous significant regional projects, including a number of important lake, watershed, and stormwater management plans that help municipalities address the root causes of Harmful Algal Blooms; the development of an Interactive Environmental Resource Inventory application; and the completion of a trail signage and digital mapping project for the New Jersey portion of the long-distance Highlands Trail. Plevin also worked to greatly increase the Council’s outreach efforts with municipal, county, state and community partners resulting in more than 20 municipal and county planning grant awards for projects that advance the goals of the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan.

“Lisa’s contributions to the Highlands Council during the past four years have been tremendous and will have a lasting impact not only on the agency, but on the region as a whole,” said Richko. “Her engagement with municipal and county officials has resulted in greater trust and a stronger spirit of collaboration that is essential to implement of the Highlands Act and Regional Master Plan.”

Actions taken by the Council at this meeting will take effect following the Governor's review and consideration of the meeting minutes, up to 10 business days from receipt of the minutes. Materials related to this meeting including resolutions, presentations, audio, and minutes will be posted at: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calend/index.html (click on July 21 meeting).

The Highlands Council is a regional planning agency, established in 2004 with the passage of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act and charged with implementation of the Act. More information is available at www.nj.gov/njhighlands.

ATTACHMENTS:

Ben Spinelli Bio and headshot.

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