

**New Jersey Highlands Council
Education
Technical Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
8 August 2005**

Summary:

The first session of the Education Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was held on August 8, 2005, in the Highlands Council office in Chester, New Jersey. The TAC meetings are designed to provide specialized technical input to the Highlands Council within a broader program of public outreach efforts, such as “partnership” meetings with local officials and “network” meetings with the general public. Highlands staff in attendance were Lynn Brass-Smith, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kim Ball Kaiser, and Liz Maziarz. Geoff Knapp, resource and education specialist, served as moderator and point of contact for the committee. Participating as technical advisors were Sandy Batty, Joan Bedrin-Murray, Meg Berlin, Angela Cristini, Amy Hanson, Ann Hardiman, Thomas Kane, Michael Roth, and Michael Schilder.

The committee was able to provide some **initial observations**:

- There is a significant amount of misinformation circulating among the public with regards to the Highlands Act, its purpose and consequent regulations.
- Citizens look to municipal officials for information about the Highlands Act, making this communication interface particularly vital to the common perception of the Council and its mission.
- In addition to the general public and municipal officials, schoolchildren compose a particularly important and accessible audience.

Strategies for reaching **municipal officials** were considered first:

- Target audiences within the municipal government include (but are not limited to) town council members, zoning/planning boards, environmental commissions, recreation committees, shade tree commissions, boards of health, and open space committees. Presentations should be given that specifically address the respective positions of each of these bodies. However, the message delivered must be consistent- “everyone, top-to-bottom, should hear the same message”.

- Inquiries directed to local governments would be handled most efficiently if one staff person was particularly well-educated on the Highlands Act. Any questions could be directed to this person, who might also serve as liaison between the municipality and the Council. Special training sessions for such individuals might be offered.
- The content of these presentations should be both scientific and legal, with the former accurately depicted as justification for the latter. Also, 'sample exemption applications' and examples of other possible scenarios should be reviewed and the proper procedure outlined. Pamphlets and other informational media could be handed out as well.
- Appearances and testimonials from town officials with relevant experiences- Oxford Township TDR program, Pinelands/Meadowlands towns- would be particularly interesting and empowering to this audience.
- Finally, a single video or DVD might be produced and circulated to the 88 Highlands municipalities to further ensure that the same message is heard by all.
- Opportunities to educate officials outside of these presentations include the Council of Mayors convention in Atlantic City and League of Municipalities meetings.
- Municipalities could be encouraged to provide links on their web pages to the Highlands Council, NJDEP, and other relevant sites.

Mechanisms for educating the **general public** directly were discussed next:

- The Council should first assess the public's knowledge of the Act as well as the general principles that gave rise to it by conducting mail and telephone surveys.
- Any adult education programs should emphasize the economic aspects associated with the Highlands, and offer lessons that are designed to help people save money by conserving water and minimizing, for example, pesticide usage.
- Older, retired adults are more accessible because they have greater amounts of leisure time with which to educate themselves. Special efforts should be made to develop workshops geared towards them.
- Nature centers, parks, and other public areas are often managed by agencies with missions similar to that of the Highlands Council. Collaboration with these organizations could produce Highlands-related displays in their facilities, providing even more exposure.

- Children are very influential on their parents' behavior. Educational programs for children should have an interactive component that requires parental participation.

Finally, suggestions aimed at educating **school children** were elaborated:

- Advocate environmental classes as *vital* components of a core curriculum in Highlands schools.
- Foster communication between school teachers and Council staff to help develop an environmental curriculum that addresses Highlands issues like drinking water recharge and basic land use biology. Explore possibilities within this relationship for the Council to provide teaching aids, materials, and supplements.
- Utilize existing resources like the DEP's WOW (wonders of wetlands) and WET (water education for teachers).
- Initiate similar student and teacher programs based out of the Council offices in Chester that are more focused on areas of specific interest in the Highlands. Specifically, field trips and teacher in-service workshops might be developed.
- Establish a contact person in each Highlands school or district who will coordinate efforts and projects with the Council. ANJEE (Association of New Jersey Environmental Educators) could provide a good resource for identifying passionate educators that might fit this role.
- Host debates between high school debate teams on topics relative to the Highlands.
- Reach out to school districts for additional ideas that are both wide-ranging and more locally applicable. One example is the water conservation contest held by Montville Township schools in which participants read water meters to determine their houses' water usage.
- Investigate partnerships with Highlands-area scouting groups. Potentially develop a program to create a 'Highlands' badge similar to the one offered by the Meadowlands Commission.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of whatever programs are initiated through follow-up surveys, and 'before-and-after' questionnaires.

Lastly, a summary list of **short-term goals** was compiled:

- Counter the rampant misinformation that has been spread about the Highlands Act and Council as efficiently and quickly as possible.
- Identify and educate liaisons in each Highlands municipality.
- Clearly define the respective educational roles of the DEP and Highlands Council and explore the possibility of establishing joint programs.
- Reach out to County Superintendents about identifying potential liaisons in each school district.
- Contact other groups, agencies including 4H, Rutgers Co-op, HEPS (Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability), Trout Unlimited, and NJEA as well as individuals like Tanya Osnovich (NJDEP) and Sue Marinello (Montville water lady).

The Highlands Council would like to thank everyone who participated in this opening meeting of the Education TAC. We greatly appreciate any follow-up comments and questions from TAC members about this summary report. Please contact Geoff Knapp via email: geoff.knapp@highlands.state.nj.us . Notice of future meetings will be provided to the public on the Highlands Council website, www.highlands.state.nj.us, and via email to Committee participants.