

**New Jersey Highlands Council
Eco-Tourism and Recreation
Technical Advisory Committee
Opening Meeting
15 August 2005**

Summary:

The opening session of the Eco-Tourism and Recreation Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was held on August 15, 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 Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kim Ball Kaiser, Ross MacDonald, Liz Maziarz, Laura Szwak, and Adam Zellner. Adam Zellner, Executive Director, and Ross MacDonald, Economic Development Director, acted as moderators while Ross will serve as the Committee’s point of contact. Participating as technical advisors were Paul Bailey, Bob Barth, Duncan Douglas, Tom Drake, Bill Foelsch, Edward Goodell, Julia Somers, Bruce Taterka, Donna Traylor, Michael VanClef, Ed Wengryn, and Jennifer Zorn.

Opening comments made by Adam Zellner introduced the Committee to the purpose of the TAC’s and the role of eco-tourism and recreation within the broader scheme of the Highlands Regional Master Plan (HRMP), slated for completion by June 2006. Following introductions, round-table discussion identified major focus areas to be addressed by the Council in the HRMP. They included **enabling legislation, infrastructure and resource development, and advertising.**

Enabling Legislation

- A mission statement that outlines the Highlands’ vision for the region’s recreation and tourism infrastructure should be established and serve as a guide for future actions and projects.
- On the local level, community leaders should exercise vision in their land use policy decisions. Master plan updates, mandated in many towns under the Highlands Act, should incorporate a vision statement of what their communities should look like in 25 or 50 years. The rest of the updated Master Plan should work toward achieving this vision as other municipal planning documents and ordinances are updated to reflect it.
- On the State level, DEP regulations should be examined to make sure they are compliant with the tourism and recreation goals of the HRMP. Exemptions should be provided for compatible infrastructure like parking lots with access to trail heads and bed and breakfast establishments. Specifically, revenue from the tax that was recently levied on hotel revenues should not enter municipalities’

budgets unencumbered, but instead should be applied, in part, towards tourism infrastructure development and maintenance.

- The Highlands Council can serve as a ‘pulpit’ from which the interests of regional tourism can be promoted, and also as a funding coordinator that both grants funding itself and provides access to other funding pots for interested towns and agencies.

Developing Resources

- Identify the existing resources by conducting a recreation inventory that includes both active sites like athletic complexes and passive areas such as trail networks, fairgrounds, and navigable rivers and lakes.
- Develop a plan that incorporates the locations and natures of the existing resources with the mission and vision statements of the Highlands region. Identify ‘hub’ areas that are important for access to these resources.
- Implement this plan. Recommendations included:
 1. mapping and connecting trail networks
 2. establishing campsites along these trails and elsewhere
 3. providing amenities necessary for the use of these facilities like general stores and parking areas
 4. incentivizing motels and B&B’s to invest in proximate, but appropriate locations
- This plan should also consider the benefits of connectivity between resources. In other words, resources of particular type should be linked by a trail system and have necessary infrastructure along the way. An ‘historic’ route might run along an old rail line between historic structures with antique shops and general stores. A ‘fishing’ trail could run along a series of rivers with campgrounds and tackle stores.
- A diversity of tourism resources would help attract groups or families whose members have different interests and enjoy different activities.

Advertising

- General Recommendations:
 1. Advertising campaigns should be aimed at attracting amenable businesses, such as outdoor outfitters and small retailers, to the Highlands as well as eco-tourists.
 2. Tourism in the Highlands currently comes predominately from in-state. However, many New Jersey residents that live in Hudson, Essex, Bergen, and Union Counties are very uninformed about what opportunities exist just west of them. Therefore, advertising should target both in-state and out-of-state, urban audiences.
 3. The Highlands needs to develop an identity with which people can develop an association and familiarity. Specific 'brand names' were discussed including "Highlands: New Jersey's Backyard", and "The 'Other' New Jersey".
 4. The State should balance its advertising resources more equitably between the traditional recipients, like the Jersey Shore, and the Highlands.
 5. Encourage week and week-end vacationers as well as over-nighters.

- Specific Recommendations:
 1. The Council should explore advertising partnerships with other groups and agencies. Some examples mentioned were the World Series of Birding, local recreation departments, the Patriots Path (Morris County Park Commission), the Heritage Alliance for Tourism, and area chambers of commerce.
 2. Coordinate and make available grant money or other incentives to non-profits and local businesses investing in amenable projects.
 3. The Highlands region should focus its advertising efforts around a four-season schedule. Spring and summer promotions could advertise fishing trips, hiking, kayaking, and biking with fall promotions focusing on the foliage and winter promotions aimed at downhill and cross-country skiing and heritage areas.
 4. Develop 'planned trips' that take advantage of the region's connectivity and explore certain aspects of the Highlands such as mining, waterfalls, or bird-watching.
 5. Produce comprehensive pamphlets and guide books that make finding attractions and amenities more convenient and accessible. These publications should be made readily available at B&B's, general stores, on-line, and in other highly visible locations.

Adam Zellner concluded the meeting by reviewing some of the key discussion points:

- Scope of the project- Identify what exists and where it is advertised.
- Access- How do people get to the Highlands and how do they get around once they are here?
- Hubs- Identify them and figure out ways to develop them wisely.
- Message- Establish a simple statement defining the Highlands and its regional goals.
- Partnerships- Coordinate with private, public, non-profits, and other groups.
- Legislation- Address the hotel tax and create a grant program to aid eco-tourism.

The Highlands Council would like to thank everyone who participated in this opening meeting of the Eco-Tourism and Recreation TAC. We greatly appreciate any follow-up comments and questions from TAC members about this summary report. Please contact Ross MacDonald via email: ross.macdonald@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.