

**New Jersey Highlands Council  
Community Investment  
Technical Advisory Committee  
Meeting Summary  
03 August 2005**

The opening session of the Community Investment Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was held on August 3, 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. Council staff in attendance were Chuck Gallagher, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kim Ball Kaiser, Ross MacDonald, and Adam Zellner. Adam Zellner, Executive Director, and Ross MacDonald, Economic Development Director, served as the meeting’s moderators.

Adam Zellner began the meeting by welcoming the Committee and providing an overview of the Highlands Council and the goals relating to community investment it hopes to achieve through the Highlands Regional Master Plan (HRMP). Technical advisory participants included David Bossart, James G. Gilbert, Deborah Hoffman, Dennis J. Kirwan, Charles Liebling, Michael Morel, Steve Mountain, Jim Sheldon, and Richard Sheola. The discussion centered on two groups that are vital to the promotion of community investment- municipalities and private investors.

**Municipalities**

- It was stated that growth, but not sprawl, is desirable to municipalities.
  1. Many towns would like to increase their commercial tax base and, pursuant to this goal, are trying to become more attractive destinations for shoppers, tourists, and other consumers.
  2. These towns also recognize the financial and environmental importance of preserving land as open space.
  3. However, affordable housing obligations require a certain amount of land to fulfill as well.
- In order to satisfy these conflicting land use demands, towns are being encouraged to employ smart growth planning.
  1. **Issue:** Many municipalities, especially small towns, face financial and personnel obstacles to pursuing smart growth. Potential funding opportunities

are not identified, and those that are found often require an application process that is too extensive, time-consuming, or expensive.

2. **Solution:** The Highlands should be a resource for towns that are attempting to achieve smart growth. Grant information, general consulting, and information about local market conditions could be provided in an effort to make smart growth easier for municipalities.  
The Council should also work to simplify the grant application process by coordinating with other government and non-government agencies to produce a more standard and efficient application procedure.  
The Council might also institute a tax-sharing program where municipalities that are experiencing greater revenues from commercial development would grant funds to communities that are doing more land preservation.
3. **Issue:** Once a project is proposed, it is often severely hampered by the approval process. Potential projects go through multiple rounds of approvals in which the standards are not always consistent. This results in unnecessary and costly delays that dissuade towns from attempting redevelopment efforts.
4. **Solution:** The approvals process should be streamlined, or 'fast-tracked', for smart growth projects, and should only be subjected to one round of scrutiny by the DEP. The Highlands Council could serve to review projects that are consistent with 'smart growth' policies, and help to expedite their DEP approvals.
5. **Issue:** Towns are often stuck in a reactionary role when locally unacceptable land uses are proposed, a position that usually makes the pursuit of smart growth more difficult and expensive. Every effort should be made to anticipate and plan for future conditions to facilitate smart growth.
6. **Solution:** A TDR receiving area designation could be used as an incentive for towns looking to develop to adopt smart growth plans or otherwise exercise smart growth policies.
7. It was also suggested that towns look at the possibility of producing mixed-use areas, such as 'residential-over-retail' districts, that could most efficiently produce the desired land uses mentioned above.
8. However, development potential of this nature is often constrained by a town's utility capacity, and efforts to expand it are expensive.

### **Private investors**

- **Issue:** Private investors find it unprofitable and/or overly burdensome to partner with municipalities in community development projects.

1. There is a ‘disconnect’ between where businesses want to locate, and where communities want to locate them. It is often more desirable for businesses to ‘start from scratch’ in a new building that can be constructed to fit their needs than it is to occupy a redeveloped office space.
  2. The majority of builders are more experienced with new constructions than with redevelopment, making it is less attractive and more risky to build or rebuild in already developed communities.
  3. Investors are wary of the Highlands regulations and the growth potential that remains in the region because of them.
  4. Investors have had a rough history in partnerships with municipalities. Agreeing with towns on specific project designs was described as ‘a never-ending process’. They are also wary of eminent domain rulings that give towns the right to take over projects during construction.
- **Solution:** The Council should act as a resource for investors that will make them more confident about doing business in the Highlands.
    1. The Council should educate investors as to exactly what is permitted or encouraged within the preservation and planning areas, and what opportunities have been created to offset the restrictions.
    2. A part of the Council’s educational or information-providing role should be identification of receptive and appropriate receiving areas in which complications are less likely to arise.
    3. TDR incentives might be provided for projects that consult local municipalities and are consistent with their community development plans.

The Highlands Council would like to thank everyone who participated in this opening meeting of the Community Investment TAC. We greatly appreciate any follow-up comments and questions about this summary report. Please contact Ross MacDonald via email: [ross.macdonald@highlands.state.nj.us](mailto: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](http://www.highlands.state.nj.us), and via email to Committee participants.