



State of New Jersey

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Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

To: Budget & Finance Committee
From: Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq., Executive Director
Subject: Committee Meeting Minutes – October 2, 2023
Date: October 5, 2023

A Budget and Finance (B&F) Committee meeting was held on Monday, October 2, 2023, at 10:00am via Zoom.

Committee Chair Holtaway opened the meeting at 10:00am. The following participants were present:

Committee: Committee Chair Holtaway, Council Chair Richko, and Members James and Visioli.

Highlands Staff: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Judy Thornton, Corey Piasecki, Allison Bittner, Neda Hartman, Herb August, Ranji Persaud, Karen Castanhas and Annette Tagliareni.

Highlands Council FY2024 Protection Fund Capital Budget

Herb August, Grants Manager, reported on the Highlands FY2024 Protection Fund Capital Budget. Mr. August noted that the Highlands FY2024 Protection Fund Capital Budget is an estimate of potential expenditures between the dates of July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024 based on the need to continue to facilitate Highlands municipal and county conformance with the Regional Master Plan (RMP) and regulatory requirements at the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Mr. August noted that he met with Highlands Council staff and estimated a budget using re-appropriations funds totaling \$2,182,352 for new Plan Conformance initiatives. The total estimated need is \$1,877,352 for grants ranging from \$15,000-\$150,000, to include the MS4 Permit Assistance.

Mr. Spinelli noted that the MS4 Permit Assistance from DEP is \$25,000 for Tier A municipalities and \$75,000 for Tier B to Tier A towns. Mr. Spinelli noted that one-third of the municipalities moving from Tier B to Tier A are in the Highlands region. Mr. Spinelli added that the need for a Stormwater Engineer on staff is a request of his that would assist our towns tremendously with this regulation.

Committee Chair Holtaway asked for a motion to move the Highlands Council FY2024 Protection Fund Capital Budget to the full Council for consideration. Member James made a motion and Council Chair Richko seconded it. All were in favor.

FY2024 Highlands Protection Fund Grant Requests

At this time, Mr. August noted that the Council approved several Plan Conformance grants since July 1, 2023. The following are additional Plan Conformance grant requests for Council's consideration at its October meeting.

Vernon Township, Sussex County: Master Plan Land Use Element/Climate Change - \$65,000

Allison Bittner, Regional Planner, reported on Vernon Township's grant request to update its Master Plan through a Highlands Plan Conformance Grant. The Township completed a Comprehensive Master Plan in 1995, with reexamination reports taking place several times between 2012-2022. This Master Plan update will include a climate change hazard vulnerability assessment referencing Highlands Council and NJDEP guidance and resources.

Jefferson Township, Morris County: Economic Development Planning - \$60,000

Ms. Thornton, Principal Planner, reported on Jefferson Township's grant request to develop a Sustainable Economic Development Plan to explore methods for promoting economic development in the Township. Ms. Thornton noted that 88% of the Township is located in the Highlands Preservation Area, and 12% of the municipality is in the Planning Area. The Plan will focus on the Township's existing commercial and developed areas, its historic communities with a mix of residential, commercial, and recreational uses. The Plan will include a market analysis of current and future business conditions in the Township, and an implementation schedule to guide and track the realization of proposed economic initiatives over the coming years.

Rockaway Township, Morris County: Local Zoning Local Control Grant - \$10,000

Ms. Bittner reported on Rockaway Township's grant request, under the "Local Zoning, Local Control" program developed by the Highlands Council in January 2023, to determine the potential impacts of warehouse development. The Township is requesting additional funding over the standard \$5,000 due to the size and scale of the Township's current industrial districts, as well as the presence of the regional mall.

Member Visioli commented that a lot of work needs to be completed and questioned whether there would be enough funding. Mr. Humphries responded that this is a first step. The Township will most likely need to come back for follow-up actions.

Holland Township, Hunterdon County: Open Space & Recreation Plan - \$40,000

Ms. Bittner reported on Holland Township's grant request to update its Open Space & Recreation Plan, since the last update was done in 2007. In Holland Township's 2020 Master Plan Re-Examination, it was recommended to update this plan so the Township can continue to qualify for NJDEP Green Acres Planning and Incentive grant funding and potentially preserve additional properties for conservation and recreation purposes.

Hunterdon County: Economic Development Planning - \$150,000

Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, reported on Hunterdon County's grant request to continue its efforts of implementing aspects of the Highlands Economic Sustainability Plan. The County will contract with a qualified and innovative marketing and promotional service provider to collaborate on promoting the 'Explore Hunterdon, The Other Side of Jersey' tourism brand. The funding will be used to develop a comprehensive package of services that includes traditional print media, online advertising, social media planning and implementation, press and influencer engagement, website updates, and design and creation of promotional materials.

Oxford Township, Warren County: Northwest Food Processing and Redevelopment - \$150,000

Corey Piasecki, Principal Planner, reported that Oxford Township's grant request came about during the Council's Sustainable Agriculture Grant process.

Sustainable Agriculture Grants:

Mr. Piasecki noted in July 2023, the Highlands Council released a Sustainable Agriculture Grant opportunity spanning three (3) fiscal years. The application period closed on August 11, 2023. Six (6) applications were received, each requesting at or near the maximum funding amount of \$100,000/year. Mr. Humphries emphasized that this grant request is for the first year. Council staff will come back to the Committee for subsequent years.

Northwest Food Processing and Innovation Center in Oxford Township has been moved to the Plan Conformance grant program to support the redevelopment of the defunct Covanta Incinerator Plant to a regional food processing facility. The Northwest Food Processing and Innovation Center has proposed the development of an implementation plan for the creation of a regional hub for food processing and an incubator for creative agricultural business development. The project seeks funding for the development of the implementation plan for the center which includes the creation of business and marketing plans.

Committee Chair Holtaway asked for a motion to move the Plan Conformance grants to the full Council for consideration. Member Visioli made a motion and Member James seconded it. All were in favor.

Sustainable Agriculture Grants: (cont'd)

Mr. Piasecki then gave an overview of the other five (5) applications received during the Council's Sustainable Agriculture Grant process. Eligible projects include an initiative that will assist agriculture operations in the Highlands Region including value-added facilities, technical assistance, new farmer programs, sustainable land management practices, and other sustainable agriculture activity. Proposals would be innovative in nature, replicable, and aligned with the goals, policies, and objectives of the RMP – specifically Goals 3A & 3B.

City Green, Mount Olive Township, Morris County - \$90,000

The Land Conservancy of New Jersey has preserved a large tract of land in Mt. Olive, of which 12 acres is available for farming by the applicant through a long-term land use agreement. The applicant has requested \$90,000 for the first year of the grant to expand and accelerate the implementation of regenerative farm practices, provide education to emerging farmers, and strengthen their transportation infrastructure. City Green is a non-profit farming and gardening organization based in Clifton, NJ, that offers practical, technical, and financial resources to foster equitable access to local food and green spaces in support of sustainable, healthy communities while promoting climate resilient farming techniques. The project is in an overburdened community in the Highlands.

Foodshed Alliance, various locations - \$92,840

The Foodshed Alliance advocates for sustainable, regenerative agricultural practices that promote human and ecosystem health while achieving a sustainable livelihood for farmers. Farmers can increase the sustainability and profitability of their value-added grain enterprise by taking advantage of multiple market options available in the Northeast. Through the project, farmers will learn about three major regional wholesale markets- milling, distilling, and malting the grains, quality parameters required by each one, and range of prices paid. Farmers will also learn about highly profitable direct-to-consumer market options and selling to local bakeries, restaurants, and other food outlets.

Northeast Organic Farming Association, Tewksbury Township, Hunterdon County- \$93,245

Operation Diversification will take place at Provenance Farm in Tewksbury Township as well as on farms throughout the Highlands Region. A diversity of on-site ecosystems (cropland, forest, wetlands, and

streams), the farm approaches the restoration of land with a range of practices that seek to provide demonstrations of replicable projects to otherwise risk-adverse farmers and landowners interested in implementing comprehensive stewardship and conservation practices.

North Jersey RC&D, various locations - \$90,000

North Jersey RC&D is seeking funding to expand the program by 24 Highlands farms over three years while increasing understanding and recognition of the River Friendly Farm (RFF) Certification program. The RFF Certification program is a comprehensive program that aims to promote sustainable and environmentally friendly practices among all farms. Farms are evaluated based on soil health, nutrient management, pest management, farmstead management, waterway protection, and water conservation.

Ramapough Lenape Nation, Green Township, Sussex County - \$83,930

Located on 40 acres of NJDEP land in the Whittingham Wildlife Management Area, the Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation is aiming to establish a consistent food supply of indigenous crops to support the Turtle Clan Food Sovereignty. The project will work in coordination with NJDEP to develop organic farming practices in accordance with policies for leased land in a Wildlife Management Area to include the prohibition of deer fencing, irrigation, and absence of harvesting in important wildlife windows.

Committee Chair Holtaway asked for a motion to move the Sustainable Agricultural Grants to the full Council for consideration. Member James made a motion and Member Visioli seconded it. All were in favor.

At this time, all Council staff, except Mr. Spinelli, Mr. Persaud and Ms. Tagliareni, left the meeting as the next agenda item included current staff salaries.

Highlands Council FY2024 General Operating Budget

Ranji Persaud, Manager of HR, Fiscal & Office, reported on Highlands Council proposed FY2024 General Operating Budget. Mr. Persaud noted that the Council's proposed budget is projected at \$2,988,092, which is a reduction of \$40,555 from last fiscal year's budget. The Council received \$2,429,000 in State Appropriation in FY2024 with a carryover bank balance of \$554,092, and miscellaneous revenues projected at \$5,000. Mr. Persaud added that since current staffing levels and salaries are now stable and consistent, it is unlikely that the Council will have any significant carryover funds at close of FY2024 (all unexpended FY2023 salary funds held by NJ Department of Treasury were returned to the Council for use in day-to-day operations). Mr. Persaud stated that in this proposal, the IT budget was increased by about \$25,000 due to increased costs for required Microsoft licensing software which was offset by a reduction in legal expense line item.

In conclusion, Mr. Persaud added that there is an urgent need for Council staff to request an increase in State Appropriation for day-to-day operations in FY2025, as well as funding for four (4) additional full-time positions.

Committee Chair Holtaway asked for a motion to move the Highlands Council FY2024 General Operating Budget to the full Council for consideration. Member Visioli made a motion and Member James seconded it. All were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 10:53am.