

**DRAFT - FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE FEBRUARY 19, 2026
MEETING OF THE HIGHLANDS COUNCIL
NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES OF JANUARY 15, 2026**

PRESENT

CARL J. RICHKO)	CHAIR
KURT ALSTEDE)	VICE CHAIR
MARY AMOROSO)	
JOSEPH BASRALIAN)	
DANIEL BUSH)	COUNCIL MEMBERS
TIMOTHY DOUGHERTY)	
TAMMY KOOP)	
HELEN LE FROIS)	
MELONIE MARANO)	
MATTHEW OSWALD)	
KELLEY SMITH)	
DANIEL J. VAN ABS, PhD)	
JAMES VISIOLI)	

VIA TELECONFERENCE:

WILLIAM KIBLER)
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ABSENT:

BRUCE JAMES)
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CALL TO ORDER 215TH meeting of the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council was called to order at 4:00pm at the Highlands Council Offices in Chester, NJ.

ROLL CALL

Roll call was taken. Member James was absent. All other Council Members were present. Member Kibler was present via teleconference. *The following staff members were present: Ben Spinelli, Gabrielle Gallagher, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Kelley Curran, Jocelyn van den Akker, Neda Hartman, Corey Piasecki, Elizabeth Ward, Allison Bittner, Ranji Persaud, Casey Ezyse, Sarah Friend, Weston Strubert, Ian Brastow, Herbert August, Tom Tagliareni, Carole Dicon, Kyli Engle, Diana Swiderski and Annette Tagliareni. Others present via teleconference: Michael Eleneski, Associate Counsel, Governor's Authorities Unit (GAU) and Jill Denyes, Deputy Attorney General's (DAG's) office.*

OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT was recited.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE was recited.

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CHAIRMAN’S REPORT

Chair Richko reported that this is the first time in 12 years that we have a full Council. At this time, the following new Council members were sworn in by Chair Richko:

**Mary J. Amoroso, Joseph Basralian, Tammy Koop, Helen Le Frois,
Melonie Marano, Matthew Oswald and Kelley Smith**

After the new members were sworn in and a photo was taken, Chair Richko provided background information about each new member and offered the new members an opportunity to comment on their appointment.

At this time, Chair Richko said farewell to Michael Francis, a long-term Council member of 16 years. A plaque was presented to Member Francis in appreciation for his dedicated service to the New Jersey Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council and the residents of New Jersey from 2009-2025. Member Francis expressed his sincere gratitude and admiration for his time spent on the Council. Mr. Francis thanked the hard work of the Council leadership and staff.

Chair Richko commented on the 2025 New Jersey League of Municipalities Annual Conference in Atlantic City. Chair Richko was amazed by the number of visitors who stopped by the Highlands Council booth. Chair Richko thanked all Highlands staff for their participation in the conference.

Chair Richko also commented that on December 10, 2025, the Highlands Council received the President’s Award of Excellence from the New Jersey Tourism Industry Association (NJTIA) in recognition of the Council’s Tourism Expansion Grant Program. Chair Richko noted that Ben Rose, President of NJTIA quoted “Projects that receive the President’s Award really must stand out with regional or statewide impact. What was particularly notable about the nomination submitted for the Highlands Council was the collaboration. There was such a diversity of entities involved, from local DMOs and BIDs to historical societies and community organizations, all working toward a common goal.”

At this time, Ms. Haddock-Weiler gave an overview of the grant program and some samples on how grantees used their funding. Chair Richko read what was inscribed on the award “The New Jersey Tourism Industry Association Award of Excellence in Providing an Exceptional Experience That Enhances ‘Tourism Across New Jersey’” and handed the award to Ms. Haddock-Weiler for her exceptional work.

Lastly, Chair Richko acknowledged the passing of Member Dressler on December 4, 2025. Member Dressler served on the Council for 14 years and was a member of numerous committees. Chair Richko provided background on Member Dressler’s life, and a moment of silence was observed in honor of his memory.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S REPORT

Mr. Spinelli reported on the following items:

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1. Welcome of new Council members.
2. Farewell to Mike Francis.
3. Statement of the Highlands Council mission as a non-partisan, non-political effort to protect the vital resources of the Highlands region, with clean drinking water as the most critical resource. Emphasis on clean drinking water as a foundational responsibility of good governance. Recognition that the Council's mission must endure political change, as the future of the State is at stake. Clean drinking water does not begin and end with political affiliation and geography.
4. Ongoing drought conditions. Statement that if the Highlands is in a drought, the State is in a drought.
5. Recognition of the hard work of Council staff as reflected in the agenda items. Welcome to municipalities that have embraced conformance.
6. 2025 accomplishments, including: launch of a new website; strengthened relationships with Newark, water purveyors, and partners; groundbreaking affordable housing policy providing significant value to municipalities; additional towns entering conformance; initiation of a climate action strategy; progress on the Open Space Plan; upgrades to online mapping tools; implementation of branding and marketing plan; land preservation agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; development of a sustainable agriculture program; stormwater initiatives with counties and municipalities; and continued fulfillment of substantial day-to-day responsibilities. Expression of gratitude to Council staff and Council members for their support.
7. Ongoing challenges facing the Council, including underfunding, limited resources, understaffing, and lack of a dedicated source of open space and restoration funding.
8. Reference to a quote from the Highlands Act that our work, "...should be guided, in heart, mind, and spirit, by an abiding and generously given commitment to protecting the incomparable water resources and natural beauty of the New Jersey Highlands so as to preserve them intact, in trust, forever for the pleasure, enjoyment, and use of future generations while also providing every conceivable opportunity for appropriate economic growth and development to advance the quality of life of the residents of the region and the entire State."
9. Council goals for 2026, including:
 - A. Proper funding of the Highlands Council:
 - 1) Adequate staffing levels
 - 2) Restoration of the General Operating Budget
 - 3) Restoration of the Highlands Protection Fund Capital Budget (grants)
 - B. Establishment of a dedicated source of open space funding
 - C. Funding for land management activities
 - D. Financial support for municipalities within the region
 - E. Adequate protection of regional resources, including:
 - 1) Strategic Climate Action Program
 - 2) Increased and maintained forest coverage and forest health
 - 3) Region-wide management of impervious coverage
 - F. Investment in the economic sustainability of the region, including:
 - 1) Support for the agricultural economy

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- 2) Funding for tourism and sustainability-based economic activity
- G. Recognition that protection of the Highlands is vital to the entire State and requires shared responsibility.
- H. Statement that August 10, 2004, represented the low point for Highlands resources. Acknowledgement that while decline has been slowed, damage that occurred prior to the Act has not yet been reversed.
- I. Welcome Walter Lane from the Office of Planning Advocacy (OPA). Congratulations on the adoption of the new State Plan.

At this time, Mr. Lane spoke on behalf of State Planning Commission (SPC) and OPA and thanked the Council, Ben's leadership and staff regarding the State Plan during the cross-acceptance process. Mr. Lane looks forward to the opportunity of getting the State Plan implemented and continuing the partnership with the Council.

At this time, Chair Richko asked if any Council members had comments or questions on the Executive Director's report.

There were no comments or questions by Council.

APPROVAL OF HIGHLANDS COUNCIL MINUTES OF OCTOBER 16, 2025

Chair Richko noted that the Council has seven old members to vote on the Council minutes of October 16, 2025, however, we need eight (8) votes to approve the minutes.

At this time, Gabrielle Gallagher, Chief Counsel, explained that because eight votes are required to approve the minutes, one vote from a new Council member is needed. Ms. Gallagher noted that new Council members may vote on the minutes as long as they have read them.

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the Council Minutes of October 16, 2025.

Member Van Abs made a motion to approve the Highlands Council Minutes of October 16, 2025. Member Alstede seconded it.

A roll call vote was taken. The Highlands Council Minutes of October 16, 2025, were APPROVED 12-0, with abstentions by Members Amoroso and Le Frois.

BUDGET & FINANCE COMMITTEE

Committee Chair Visioli reported that the Budget & Finance Committee met on January 6, 2026. Council will consider two (2) resolutions.

Resolution – Approval of Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands Protection Fund Capital Budget for Plan Conformance Funding Grant

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At this time James Humphries, Director of Planning, Science and GIS, presented an overview on the Highlands Protection Fund Capital Budget process, followed by a summary of today's grant proposals for Council's consideration. The presentation may be found on Council's website:

www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2026/01_january/mtgppt_jan2026.pdf

- Morris Plains Borough, Morris County – Plan Conformance Assessment Grant - \$15,000
- Morris County, Morris County Park Commission – Natural Resources Inventory - \$27,900
- Netcong Borough, Morris County – Center Implementation - \$88,000
 - Circulation Plan Element - \$30,000
 - Environmental Resources Inventory - \$3,000
 - Center Planning - \$30,000
 - Housing Element & Fair Share Plan - \$25,000

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Visioli moved the resolution. Member Alstede seconded it.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers was delighted to see Morris Plains Borough's grant.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 14-0.

Resolution – Approval of Fiscal Year 2026 Highlands Protection Fund Capital Budget for Plan Conformance Funding Grant for Hunterdon County

Mr. Humphries gave a summary of the Hunterdon County grant in the amount of \$146,256 for a Watershed Management Plan (Year 2 Scope of Work). The presentation may be found on Council's website: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2026/01_january/mtgppt_jan2026.pdf

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Visioli moved the resolution. Member Dougherty seconded it.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment

Ben Yaskulka, Musconetcong Watershed Association (MWA) – Mr. Yaskulka expressed how grateful MWA is to be able to work with Hunterdon County, their municipalities and the Council on this project. MWA had a great Year 1 and look forward to a great Year 2.

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Member Bush was recused from this resolution.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 13-0.

PLAN CONFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Chair Richko reported that the Plan Conformance Committee met on January 6, 2026, and Council will consider two resolutions.

Resolution - Approval of Petition for Plan Conformance for the Borough of Mendham, Morris County

Corey Piasecki, Principal Planner, presented a brief overview of the Plan Conformance process, followed by a summary of Mendham Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance in the Planning Area. The presentation is available on the Council's website:

www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2026/01_january/mtgppt_jan2026.pdf

Mr. Humphries noted that Council staff will provide detailed presentations on the work of the Council during future Council meetings.

Chair Richko invited Mayor Kelly to speak on behalf of Mendham Borough's Petition.

James Kelly, Mayor of Mendham Borough – Mayor Kelly gave an overview on the Borough's history with the Highlands Council and the importance of Plan Conformance. Mayor Kelly commented that the Borough is grateful for Council's consideration and hopeful about where we are headed.

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Van Abs moved the resolution. Member Bush seconded it.

Council Comment

Member Van Abs noted that the Affordable Housing Plan is not on the list and wasn't sure if the Borough already went through that process. Mr. Piasecki responded that the Borough completed the plan to meet our standards.

Public Comment

Tracy Gordon, Raritan Headwaters Association (RHA) – Ms. Gordon, on behalf of RHA, supports the Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance with Highlands conditions.

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers was thrilled about the Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 14-0.

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Resolution - Approval of Petition for Plan Conformance for the Borough of Peapack & Gladstone, Somerset County

Elizabeth Ward, Principal Planner, gave a presentation on Peapack & Gladstone Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance in the Planning Area. The presentation may be found on Council's website: www.nj.gov/njhighlands/about/calendar/2026/01_january/mtgppt_jan2026.pdf

Chair Richko invited Mayor Corigliano to speak on behalf of Peapack & Gladstone Borough's Petition.

Mark A. Corigliano, Mayor of Peapack & Gladstone Borough – Mayor Corigliano commented that he is excited to be getting through the plan conformance process. Mayor Corigliano gave some history and attested that the Highlands Council has changed over the years and feels the Borough's conformance will add to the watershed and other Highlands resources.

Chairman Richko asked for a motion on the resolution.

Member Visioli moved the resolution. Member Marano seconded it.

Council Comment

There was no Council comment.

Public Comment

Tracy Gordon, Raritan Headwaters Association – Ms. Gordon, on behalf of RHA, supports the Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance.

Julia Somers, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Ms. Somers supports the Borough's Petition for Plan Conformance.

A roll call vote was taken. The resolution was APPROVED 14-0.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS

There was no old/new business.

Chair Richko opened the meeting for public comment and noted the 3-minute limit.

Public Comments

Lindsay Mason, Washington Township, Morris County – Ms. Mason stated that the Washington Township Morris County Land Use Board seeks to propose that the Highlands Council remove the prime groundwater recharge area designation throughout the township. The Township wishes to convert certain parcels to municipally important groundwater recharge areas so they can create less of a roadblock for future development. She is concerned this will affect water quality. Council staff noted that they are aware of Ms. Mason's concern and it will be discussed at the next Council meeting.

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MEETING MINUTES OF JANUARY 15, 2026

George Cassa, Califon Borough – Mr. Cassa is concerned for the people of Glen Gardner who are not getting support from the NJDEP regarding water quality that was recently affected by a quarry's sediment outflow into Spruce Run. A resident took video of the outflow and called the NJDEP Enforcement Hotline but was told that videos are not accepted. An additional issue is that NJDEP has been unresponsive regarding failed municipal water supply pumps. Mr. Spinelli noted that NJDEP Enforcement has an office located in our building and urged Mr. Cassa to visit.

Elliott Ruga, New Jersey Highlands Coalition – Mr. Ruga stated how pleased he was to see a full Council and how he is looking forward to working with them.

Member Van Abs made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Bush seconded it. All were in favor. The meeting was adjourned at 5:37pm.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of the minutes of the meeting of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council.

Date: 1/27/2026

Name: Annette Tagliareni
Annette Tagliareni, Executive Assistant

Vote on the Approval of Minutes	Motion	Second	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Councilmember Alstede						
Councilmember Amoroso						
Councilmember Basralian						
Councilmember Bush						
Councilmember Dougherty						
Councilmember James						
Councilmember Kibler						
Councilmember Koop						
Councilmember LeFrois						
Councilmember Marano						
Councilmember Oswald						
Councilmember Smith						
Councilmember Van Abs						
Councilmember Visioli						
Chairman Richko						