

NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS COUNCIL
SUMMARY OF THE PUBLIC AVAILABILITY SESSION - SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

At 4:15 pm on September 7, 2006, immediately following the meeting of the Highlands Council, Chairman John Weingart convened a public availability session. Joining him were Council members Debbie Pasquarelli and Janice Kovach. Also present were several members of the Council staff including Tom Borden and Denise Guidotti. About a dozen members of the public were present including five who offered comments which are summarized below.

Eric Stiles, Audubon Society. Mr. Stiles provided two separate comment documents for the Council's consideration on the topics of Riparian Corridors and Significant Natural Areas. He stated that 600 foot buffers should be considered by the Highlands Council for the protection of a wildlife corridor. This approach was taken by the Pinelands Commission for the Tom's River study area based upon the recommendation of the scientific community.

Julia Somers, Highlands Coalition. Ms. Somers said when asked by the press about the just-concluded Council meeting, she said she thought the Council had done a good job of starting the difficult task of regional planning. She stated she believed the Council needs more meetings to get the plan done in time. She said Highlands Open Water and the policy decision process were the only issues discussed. She suggested to include the wording "shall not degrade water." She cited that in the Highlands Act the goals are the same for both Planning and Preservation Areas, specifically pointing to section 10.b.1 and 10.c.1. She noted the division of water into three categories and suggested that the Council should instead treat all open waters in the entire region as a whole in that all waters should receive a minimum buffer of at least 300 feet of each edge. Ms. Somers added that if the Council is going to protect wildlife it really should be set with at least a 600 foot buffer. She didn't believe that 150 and 50 foot buffers are sufficient.

Helen Heinrich, New Jersey Farm Bureau. Ms. Heinrich commented about the agricultural side of the Highlands rules. She said the Bureau has submitted some comments on buffers and that it may add more to these comments. She noted concern over the rigid 300 foot buffer in the white papers and background papers. Every 300-foot buffer is more than an acre of land. If the Council increases from that, it will be thousands of acres added. Ms. Heinrich said that farmers don't have a lot of options as to changes in their agricultural practices. The size of buffers is a big concern because they have been taught to believe that it is a site specific issue. Turning cropland into buffers is a major concern. She stated that there are million of dollars of federal funding that may be put at risk if stringent riparian buffer requirements are put in place. She stated the alarm over requirements making it difficult to be eligible for federal programs because if a municipality follows up on the Highlands plan, it may make them ineligible for those programs. She noted that forested farm acres also have to be addressed. Ms. Heinrich said the Bureau is hoping there can be flexibility and that a sliding scale of buffers from high quality waters to lower quality waters is essential. The Council should help with outreach to meet objectives. She stated the need to find money to pay for all these additional lands that will be in the buffers. She congratulated the Council for taking on a very tough job.

Scott Olson, Byram Township. Mr. Olson commented on the meeting materials, and their availability on the website. He noted that when the Council discusses background papers that weren't released in advance of meetings, it is hard for the public to follow. He said he would like to see on the web site tie-ins as to what documents relate to what item on the agenda, and have them appear several days before each Council meeting if possible. He also said that some people have said they don't know where the maps are located on the website. Mr. Weingart thanked him and agreed that the Council members would also appreciate getting the documents sooner. Ms. Pasquarelli agreed and said that it could be helpful if instead of the usual practice of sending out all

of the documents in one package to members, that staff could at least send members the minutes first, and then subsequent documents as they become completed.

Nancy Chambellan. Ms. Chambellan asked that the Council use caution as to relying on Category C1 classifications of stream protection. She noted that relying upon these classifications is inadequate because many round-two candidates for C1 classification still remain stalled in Warren County.