

**NEW JERSEY HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL
Petition for Plan Conformance – Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report**

APPENDIX A

PUBLIC COMMENTS/HIGHLANDS COUNCIL RESPONSES

Petition for Plan Conformance

Bedminster Township, Somerset County

Public Comment Period: October 25, 2011 – November 8, 2011

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PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED

Written comments regarding Bedminster Township’s Petition for Plan Conformance were accepted by the Highlands Council through the close of the Public Comment period on November 8, 2011. Comments were provided by the following individuals/entities:

1. Helen H. Heinrich, Research Associate, on behalf of the New Jersey Farm Bureau
2. Erika Van Auken, Campaign and Grassroots Coordinator, on behalf of the NJ Highlands Coalition

The comments are summarized below with Highlands Council responses provided for each.

PUBLIC COMMENT/RESPONSE SUMMARY

A. HELEN HEINRICH COMMENTS

Comment 1:

The NJ Farm Bureau continues to appreciate the opportunity to review the Plan Conformance petition for Highlands communities with substantial acreage in active agriculture. Bedminster Township has more acres under Farmland Assessment than any other municipality in Somerset County and is second only to Hillsborough in land actively devoted to this land use. It shows a high percentage of prime farmland in both the Preservation and Planning Areas though only around 1000 acres will be covered by the township’s Plan Conformance effort. That 16,378 acres could be managed as the Highlands Agricultural Resource Area instead reveals a major challenge to the town in creating a positive business environment for all Bedminster farms as the Highlands Act requires.

We strongly support the requirements that Bedminster strengthen its planning policies dealing with agriculture as a mandate for their initial Plan implementation and hope that the budgeting of \$20,000 for development of its Agricultural Retention and Farmland Preservation plan will produce timely and fruitful results. This process will enable Bedminster to consult its current farmers and farmland owners about what they visualize for their agriculture future. With the highest prices for grains and forage crops in many years and the new emphasis on locally grown food, there would seem to be new opportunities to enhance farm viability for both the large farm tracts as well as the many smaller ones. This effort should also lead to adoption by the municipality of a conforming Right to Farm ordinance and enable the whole community develop a vision of the future of its agriculture supported by municipal planning policies.

Despite the fact that Bedminster proposes to conform to the RMP for only its land in the Preservation Area, we ask that the Agricultural Retention and Farmland Preservation Plan be developed keeping in mind the needs of all the 16,378 acres in the potential Agricultural Resource Area, and not be limited to only those operations in the Preservation Area. It makes sense to envision all of the community’s agricultural operations as one mutually-supportive economic unit and to provide it with a level playing field in terms of opportunities and regulation. It is hoped as well that continuing farmland preservation efforts including the use of the municipally approved 8-year program will add to the 1825 acres now preserved from development.

Highlands Council Response 1:

The Highlands Council acknowledges the NJ Farm Bureau’s support for development of the Agricultural Retention/Farmland Preservation Plan, which is to be developed for application to the whole of the

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municipality as a component of Plan Conformance. The Township has adopted a Right to Farm ordinance (Ord. #2000-07, S 1, available on-line at <http://clerkshq.com/default.ashx?clientsite=Bedminster-nj>), which the Highlands Council will review for consistency with the Right to Farm Act. Bedminster Township is clearly committed to preservation and retention of the agricultural resources within the community, as evidenced by its progress in farmland preservation thus far. The Bedminster Township Master Plan contains a significant agricultural conservation component reflecting the on-going commitment to this important area of the community's planning. The municipality has also developed a Farmland Preservation Plan (available on-line at: <http://www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/home/genpub/Bedminster%20Somerset%20plan.pdf>). With this planning effort so far along, the focus of the work to be covered by Highlands Council Plan Conformance grant funding will be on the Agricultural Retention component (as noted in the Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule). It should be noted that each of these existing Township documents include specific reference to the Municipally Approved 8-Year Program and to the criteria established by the Somerset County Agricultural Development Board for development of such programs, in furthering agricultural retention in the community.

Comment 2:

Furthermore, is there potential to coordinate the agricultural sustainability planning of surrounding communities with actions here in Bedminster? Other nearby communities are receiving grants also to support this task which could fund development of a more regional strategy for enhancing the viability of local farming operations. The Somerset County Agriculture Development Board and the NJ Department of Agriculture could help these communities work together to enable a more profitable agricultural future. NJ Farm Bureau through its Somerset County Board of Agriculture could also lend assistance.

Highlands Council Response 2:

The Highlands Council is interested in coordination of such efforts and will continue to work with all applicable agencies to develop the most effective plans and planning tools possible to further agricultural sustainability in affected communities. Somerset County is partnering with the Highlands Council on other initiatives through Plan Conformance, as well, may be interested in assisting in such efforts.

B. ERIKA VAN AUKEN COMMENTS

Comment 1:

The New Jersey Highlands Coalition supports Bedminster Township's petition for plan conformance. We appreciate the township's initiative to implement the non-mandatory Stream Corridor Restoration and Protection Plan. We strongly urge the township to consider conforming its Planning Area and to address additional non-mandatory components of the RMP. In general, we are looking forward to seeing what the Council and the Township are able to achieve through plan conformance.

Highlands Council Response 1:

The Highlands Council acknowledges and appreciates the support of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition for Bedminster's Petition for Plan Conformance. The Township is invited and encouraged to continue to consider conformance for the Planning Area portion of the municipality and may submit a request for such approval at any time. The Highlands Council will continue to provide any assistance to the municipality to further that examination and to identify the opportunities that it presents to the Township.