



Warren County Environmental Advisory Committee
165 County Route 519 South, Belvidere, NJ 07823-1949

MINUTES

Wednesday, February 18, 2026

CALL TO ORDER: 7:00 pm

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT:

Adequate notice of this meeting has been given in accordance with the Open Public Meetings Act by forwarding a notice of the date, time and location of the meeting to The Star-Ledger, The Daily Record and the Warren County Clerk and by posting a copy thereof on the bulletin board of the Warren County Courthouse and Administration Building. Public participation is encouraged. In order to assure full public participation, those individuals with disabilities who wish to attend the meeting should submit any requests for special accommodations one week in advance.

ROLL CALL:

Present: Clairanne Arcaro, Michael Byrnes, Sasha Fernandes, Josephine Noone, Kerry Pflugh, Matt Polsky

Absent: Audra Frank

SALUTE TO FLAG

NEW BUSINESS:

Presentation by Ben Spinelli, Executive Director, Highlands Council

One of the goals of the WCEAC for 2026 is to work with the County Commissioners to research and make recommendations on Highlands Planning Conformance. Therefore, our Chair, Kerry Pflugh, invited Ben Spinelli, Executive Director of the Highlands Council to come and speak to us this evening.

- The Highlands Act was passed in 2004. There are 88 municipalities and 7 counties in the Highlands in New Jersey. The region is split into preservation and planning areas.
- If the municipality is in the preservation area, the governing body is required to align land use regulations with the Highlands Act. If the municipality is in the planning area, the governing body can choose whether or not to conform to the Highlands Act.
- The Highlands is a vital source of drinking water.
- We are currently experiencing drought conditions and low ground water levels.
- Preservation of farmland is very important to maintain the capacity to grow food in this region both now and in the long term.
- Sewer and water services are prohibited from being added in the preservation zone. Relief can be extended through redevelopment or some exemptions.
- In the planning area in Warren County, Belvidere, Hackettstown, Washington Borough, and Washington Township are in full Highlands Plan Conformance.
- The Highlands Council provides an initial \$15,000 assessment grant to determine whether or not the municipality wants to go forward with Highlands Regional Master Plan Conformance. As part of this initial assessment, they create a list of properties that would be impacted by Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) conformance. If the municipality chooses to go forward, Highlands Council Planning Grants are available to pay for the steps necessary to achieve RMP conformance. See link:
<https://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/grants/>

- Warehouse development guidelines have been adopted as a RMP update and are on the website. See Policy Standards for Warehousing in the New Jersey Highlands Region: <https://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/warehousing/>
- There is an Affordable Housing RMP update as well. See Highlands Affordable Housing Implementation Guidelines: <https://www.nj.gov/njhighlands/planning/affordable-housing/>
- There were some questions for Ben Spinelli about how the fees we pay for water in New Jersey are utilized.
- Ben Spinelli will send Kerry Pflugh information about the first steps necessary to do an initial assessment for Warren County. RMP conformance would be completely voluntary for Warren County. Counties are not required to conform to the Highlands Regional Master Plan. County plan conformance could include roads, bridges, stormwater management, wastewater plan, open-space plan, and county-wide economic development, including data centers and warehouses.
- Kerry Pflugh will invite Warren County Planning Department Director, Ryan Conklin to attend one of our upcoming meetings.
- The biggest push back is that landowners feel that the property value of their land will be negatively impacted by RMP conformance. The State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC) rolled out new land valuation methods for farmland preservation which should address some of these concerns.
- Members of the WCEAC will be pursuing independent research into the advantages and draw backs of Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) conformance in order to share our findings with the Warren County Commissioners.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Monica Sobon spoke about the fear that landowners have that Highlands RMP conformance will negatively affect their property values.

Sarah Hare spoke about the need for better outreach to the public regarding the Highlands Act and the Highlands Watershed Area.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: Minutes from **January 21, 2026**, motion to approve by Clairanne Arcaro, 2nd Sasha Fernandes, approved by acclamation with Josephine Noone abstaining.

CORRESPONDENCE:

We received a letter from the NJ Department of Transportation dated January 22, 2026. The letter was to provide us with legal notification that an application for a Highlands Applicability Determination will be submitted to the NJDEP. The proposed project is for the NJ Route I-78, Route 22 to Drift/Dale Road Project in which the NJDOT proposed to install new fiber optic line, connect existing ITS devices to the fiber optic line, construct new cross connect cabinets, CSS poles, cameras, and DMS structures and signs along I-78.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS REPORTS:

Michael Byrnes:

Michael will look into ideas for myth busting regarding the Highlands RMP conformance process. Michael noted that the EPA recently rescinded the Endangerment Finding, which had established that greenhouse gases endanger public health and welfare. He also noted that there is a sink hole in Phillipsburg and they don't yet know the cause. There was discussion about the possibility of a meat-processing facility at the former Covanta site. Commissioner Kern shared that Warren County College received a federal grant for research into developing a meat processing curriculum. See linked article: https://www.wfmz.com/news/area/western-newjersey/food-processing-hub-and-warren-county-community-college-receive-980-000-grant-for-new-center/article_84b3198f-127c-4c66-9e2b-69e6d74aaf21.html

Sasha Fernandes: N/A

Audra Frank: Not present

Josephine Noone:

Commissioner Kern sent a Data Centers Model Ordinance to all mayors and town managers in Warren County. This information was also emailed to all of the members of the Warren County Environmental Advisory Committee. Josephine shared the letter from Commissioner Kern and the model ordinance with Washington Borough Green Team members and they discussed it at their February meeting. The members of the Washington Borough Green Team voted unanimously to support passage of a Data Centers Ordinance by the Washington Borough Council, which would make data centers a non-permitted/prohibited use. Washington Borough Councilman Chris Infinito reported that the Washington Borough Council passed the ordinance on first reading at their meeting on February 17, 2026.

Matt Polsky:

Matt has done research on how to make a meat-processing facility as environmentally friendly as possible. The Musconetcong Watershed Association will be doing a public information meeting on PFAS in the near future. Matt expressed his concern on changes in environmental regulations at the federal level, and brought up whether this is in our jurisdiction as advisors to the County Commissioners. We had a brief discussion on these points.

Clairanne Arcaro:

The Pollinator Protectors will be tapping trees for maple sap this Sunday at 1:00 at Ramsaysburg Historic Homestead in Knowlton Township. (While not mentioned in the discussion this evening, you can find information regarding this ongoing project here:

<https://ridgeviewecho.com/2025/03/19/from-gardens-to-syrup-warren-county-group-expands-conservation-efforts/>

CHAIR REPORT (Kerry Pflugh): Kerry was present at the ceremony during which Commissioner Kern was sworn in as President of the New Jersey Association of Counties (NJAC). See link: <https://www.njac.org/>

OLD BUSINESS:

ADJOURNMENT: Motion to adjourn at 9:15 pm by Michael Byrnes, 2nd Clairanne Arcaro, approved by acclamation.

Submitted by Josephine Noone