

**Highlands Borough Mayor & Council Meeting Minutes
April 12, 2023– Special Meeting Minutes**

SPECIAL MEETING: 6:00PM

The Borough Clerk read the public meetings statement.

The notice requirements provided for in the Open Public Meetings Act have been satisfied. Notice of this meeting was properly given by transmission to the Asbury Park Press and the Two River Times and by posting at the Borough of Highlands Municipal Building and filing with the Borough Clerk all on March 28, 2023. Items listed on the agenda are subject to change.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL

Councilmember Olszewski and Mayor Broullon were Present. Councilmember Melnyk arrived at 6:04pm. Councilmember Chelak and Councilmember Cervantes were absent.

Also in attendance were special counsel Vito Gagliardi, Jr., Esq., and Kerri Wright, Esq., Borough Administrator Michael Muscillo, and Municipal Clerk Nancy Tran.

DISCUSSION ITEM: Regionalization of Highlands, Atlantic Highlands, and Sea Bright in a K-12 school district.

Mayor Broullon reported receipt of the Commissioner's letter dismissing Shore Regional and Ocean Port's petition of appeal and noted the mediation scheduled for April 21st.

Mr. Gagliardi gave an overview of the regionalization timeline and Ms. Wright gave the financial numbers relating to the impact on Highlands if the Board of Education's petition were approved (to create a two-community PK-12 regional without Sea Bright). Mayor Broullon added that the three towns are doing what they think is best for their town and their neighbors utilizing equalized property values and student population.

Councilmember Olszewski asked Mr. Gagliardi about his experience with other regionalized school districts. Councilmember Melnyk asked for clarification about Dr. Beam's amendment.

Mayor opened public portion.

PUBLIC PORTION

Charlie Rooney, Sea Bright, thought it was time to move regionalization question forward and let the voters decide.

Erwin Bieber, Councilmember of Sea Bright, appreciated Highlands' efforts before asking for verification of the benefits and savings of regionalization with and without inclusion of Sea Bright, of the funding formula, and of the Boards of Education's involvement. Mr. Gagliardi answered his questions.

Muriel Smith, Atlantic Highlands, thanked Highlands and Council for hosting the meeting. She asked about the deadline to get the question on the ballot. Mr. Gagliardi answered that the question needs to be approved 60 days before the election and added that there are additional voting opportunities available but he was hoping for an approval before the end of August. Ms. Smith asked for clarification about the question and who pays if other election options were taken. Ms. Wright read the proposed question and noted that the schools need to expand to K-12 in order for Sea Bright to join. Ms. Smith asked about the mediation process and both Mr. Gagliardi and Ms. Wright couldn't speculate but were preparing beforehand as much as possible.

Gina Melnyk, Highlands, noted that she's a parent of a Henry Hudson student and thanked Highlands Council for their regionalization efforts. She expressed that she's disheartened that the Board of Education is not interested in including Sea Bright with the regionalization. She asked if the Commissioner's dismissal was made public. She felt that the parties should take time to do the right thing but to keep moving forward.

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Mark Fisher, Atlantic Highlands, asked for clarification of the first and second petitions. Mr. Gagliardi explained and noted that the recent dismissal made the second petition moot. Mayor Broullon and Councilmember Olszewski added funding formula considerations and hope for coming up with a percentage where everyone wins.

Mr. Bieber, Sea Bright, stated that he had been at meetings where Atlantic Highlands said that they would welcome Sea Bright once Sea Bright was unencumbered. Mr. Gagliardi responded that the law permits the regionalization decision to be made without Board of Education approval but that it would be preferred if Board of Education supported regionalization. Mr. Bieber noted that we will see each parties' intent in the next couple of weeks and added that if we didn't act now, the decision will be made for us.

Charlie Rooney, Sea Bright, asked about the formula and the mediation. Mr. Gagliardi stated that he did not want to share his negotiation plans presently but gave general suggestions.

Paul Cefalo, Highlands, new Board of Education member, shared his support of regionalization with Sea Bright and noted that the Board members had not been presented with another option to vote on at the meeting at which they approved the amended petition.

Jonathan Bush, attorney for the Boards of Education, clarified his client's position and added his opinion that Sea Bright was not truly unencumbered until the appeal window closes.

Linda Ziemba, Highlands, asked for clarification of Sea Bright being unencumbered, the Hold Harmless it signed, and the reason for the second petition. Mr. Gagliardi was optimistic of the Commissioner's decision. He noted that the Board of Education may be cautious, but the law is friendly and its purpose clear.

Allison Jacobs, Atlantic Highlands, is a Board of Education member but stated that she was speaking for herself. She wants Sea Bright to join but noted that there were a lot of preparations needed before it can happen. Mr. Gagliardi added that the Boards of Education (through their superintendent) asked for the mediation and then opted not to participate; he stated that because of this, it would be disingenuous if they then objected to any agreement reached between Highlands and Atlantic Highlands Mayors and Councils.

Councilmember Melnyk asked about the student population and Councilmember Olszewski added that the teachers' union contract would be a factor.

With no further comments from the public, the Mayor closed public portion.

Councilmember Melnyk asked about the school line item in the budget and Mr. Muscillo answered.

In closing the meeting, Mayor Broullon summarized the goals for regionalization and thanked everyone for coming out.

ADJOURN:

Upon motion by Mayor Broullon, seconded by Council President Olszewski, motion carries to adjourn at 7:40PM.

All in Favor.

Approve: _____

Mayor Carolyn Broullon

Attest: _____

Nancy Tran, Borough Clerk