



Thanks, John Weingart, for your work leading Highlands Planning Council

By Hunterdon County Democrat

February 05, 2010, 6:31AM

From the start, when he rapped the first meeting of the Highlands Planning Council to order in 2004 using an antique snow hammer, John Weingart chaired the regional land use body with patience and manners.

The snow hammer, a tool to tamp snow out of horses' shoes and hooves, was a symbol of the heritage of the largely undeveloped northwest part of the state, thought Weingart, a Delaware Township resident and associate director of Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics. That heritage was part of the reason the Highlands Planning Act was passed and the regulatory land use body created, he said.

Weingart went on to chair all 90 meetings in five years, plus other public hearings, until his term expired and he was replaced in December. His public service in a difficult job deserves thanks and admiration.

Weingart was one of the 14 members appointed by McGreevey in that governor's last days. Despite the surreal circumstances, Weingart said, the group meshed well while working in a highly charged, highly visible public arena. It hired dedicated, responsive staff. It ultimately drafted a regional master plan balancing the dueling necessities of economic development and the preservation and protection of the drinking water supply for much of New Jersey.

We give Weingart credit for keeping emotions cool while nudging ahead the controversial work. A political scientist, he knew the premise of regional land use would butt up against one of New Jersey's most ingrained traditions, that of home rule. As such, the Highlands Council incurred the wrath of conservative politicians, and land owners who claim to this day that the state masterminded a massive land grab without compensating them.

Weingart says his experience on the Highlands Council made him a better teacher and deepened his perspective on government and politics. We know his participation was crucial to crafting a wide-ranging project to help the state protect a basic building block of life — its water. We thank him for his efforts.

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