

CATEGORIES: Politics, Law and Public Policy; Politics, Law and Public Policy / Government; Politics, Law and Public Policy / Planning and Redevelopment

### Public Participation Enhances Effective Government

Eagleton Institute's John Weingart completes term as chair of New Jersey Highlands Council

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By Steve Manas

Part politician, part diplomat, part psychologist, part ringmaster. That's an apt description for the former leader of a high-profile government agency whose very *raison d'être* angers many stakeholders.

As the unpaid chair of the [New Jersey Highlands Council](#), John Weingart shifted among roles easily during his five-year term, which expired early this month. He transformed 14 civic-minded strangers into a cohesive council and oversaw a professional staff of 25 charged to convince officials and residents from 88 municipalities – plus countless special interest groups – to abide by provisions of the controversial Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

The 2004 legislation signed by then-Gov. Jim McGreevey, who appointed Weingart, aims to protect drinking water for more than 5 million New Jerseyans and to preserve the state's vanishing open space tracts.

Some opponents argue that the council limits or prohibits development in portions of the 800,000-acre Highlands tract in north Jersey, takes away their economic freedom, and hurts property values. Others criticize the council for not being restrictive enough.

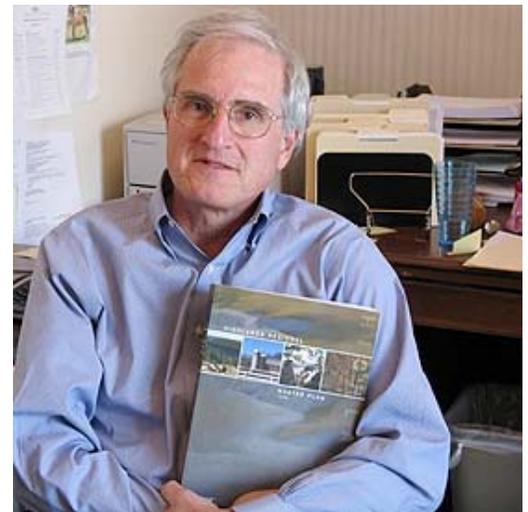
Weingart's day job as associate director of the [Eagleton Institute of Politics](#) served him well for his role with the council: Eagleton's mission links the study of politics with its day-to-day practice.

He also has extensive experience in local and state government, especially on environmental matters, much of it gleaned as an assistant commissioner with the [Department of Environmental Protection](#). As council chair, he mixed his expertise with the art of public relations to keep the council moving, first toward adoption and later toward implementation of a Highlands Regional Master Plan.

"Among council members, I tried to be an honest broker with no personal agenda," Weingart said. "I found that adding a little humor could help get the council through some tense situations. As many as 150 interested citizens turned out for some Highlands meetings to listen and speak their mind."

The atmosphere at Highlands public meetings fell somewhere between what he encountered as chair of the [Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission](#) from 2002 to 2004 and as executive director of the [New Jersey Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility Siting Board](#) in the mid-1990s, Weingart said.

"The D&R's charge is to regulate development in a narrow band of land along the Delaware and Raritan rivers and its impact on water quality and scenic resources," he said. "Meetings were uncontroversial and short, and attracted maybe four or five observers and rarely any reporters."



The same could not be said for the radioactive waste disposal board.

“Meetings were well attended and covered by the media,” Weingart said. “There always was a high level of emotion that [scientific] facts about low-level radioactive waste would rarely diminish.” Weingart remembers when the board approached respected NBC News anchor John Chancellor to narrate a promotional film on host community benefits, the Princeton resident declined, saying, “I can think of no public problem more daunting than yours.”

Frustrations aside, Weingart remains a fan of public participation in government. “Boards and commissions with a fairly narrowly defined focus can be among the most effective parts of state government,” he says. His 2004 study found that 5,000 New Jerseyans, most of them volunteers, served on hundreds of state boards or commissions.

“While each one is started for a good purpose, many boards outlive their usefulness,” Weingart observes. “Recent governors took a few steps toward re-evaluating them but the last time a significant number were abolished or consolidated was during the Florio administration. Governor-elect Chris Christie, however, seems committed to at least looking into the situation.”