



BOROUGH COUNCIL RECAP - JULY 21st, 2025



This post serves as an unofficial recap of tonight's council meeting, for members of the "Holler About Hightstown" group. All are encouraged to attend meetings or review official meeting minutes when posted to the borough website

(<https://ecode360.com/HI1169/documents/Minutes?category=Borough%20Council>)

"Minute Maid Plant" Redevelopment

At the March 17th meeting, Council initiated a study of 480 Mercer St (the former Minute Maid plant) to determine whether this property meets the "Area in Need of Redevelopment" designation criteria (as defined under NJ's redevelopment law). Such a designation would give the Borough Council flexibility to negotiate with developers and to incentivize redevelopment of the property.

The matter was referred to the Planning Board, and a study was performed by the Borough Planner, Brian Slauch. The complete report, dated June 9th, is contained within the July 21st Council Meeting packet

(https://www.hightstownborough.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/07.21.2025_Packet.pdf). The report covers the history of the site and its current conditions, including photos throughout the exterior and interior.

The current facility was found to be in poor condition, as it is a collection of aged buildings originally designed for use as a beverage bottling plant - as was its use until 2006. In the years to follow, it has been used as a pillow stuffing factory and warehouse. However, this operation will be moving to new facilities in Roxbury and Freehold, leaving the site once again vacant.

The Borough Planner concluded that this property does meet the state's definition of a redevelopment candidate, and the Planning Board agreed - forwarding this recommendation to Council. With a unanimous vote, the Council accepted this recommendation and designated the property as a redevelopment area. The Borough Planner will now craft a report outlining the Borough's vision for the property - serving as a starting point in any future negotiations.

The redevelopment study was initiated at the request of the property owner who, seeing this looming vacancy, feels it may be a viable site for a data center. All costs of conducting the study were covered by the owner. Any such future use (data center or otherwise) would still require consistency with the redevelopment plan, successful negotiation with the Borough, and successful site plan review by the Planning Board.

In reviewing the site and study, it was also noted that the Planning Board recommends any future redevelopment plan advocate for extension of Hightstown's greenway. This would

connect the greenway directly to Mercer St and other future trails (Union Transportation Trail extension and the John Bull Trail), which are being developed by Mercer County.

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Retail Cannabis

The Council unanimously approved clarifying changes to its recently-adopted retail cannabis ordinance. These changes revise the timeline for zoning permit issuance (ten business days, from five calendar days) and the applicant appeal window (twenty calendar days, from five calendar days).

The changes also resolved ambiguity on the zoning for “Downtown Gateway” and “Highway Commercial”-zoned properties, which were recently re-zoned as part of the Borough’s affordable housing plan. That re-zoning expanded the property’s allowable use, to include mixed-use residential/commercial development. Council’s vote tonight clarifies that retail cannabis is not excluded as a potential commercial use on these properties.

Lastly, a due date for all retail cannabis applications was set for 4PM on October 1st, 2025. The Borough’s Cannabis Advisory Committee will then review all complete applications and forward its licensing recommendations to the Borough Council - who then must act within 45 days. Following approval by Council, business owners must then obtain site plan approvals and variances (if applicable) from the Borough’s Planning & Zoning Board, as well as finalize their licensing with NJ’s Cannabis Regulatory Commission.

Prior to the vote, Mayor Bluth invited an open discussion from Council on whether October 1st was a proper cut-off date. Council members Jeet Gulati and Joe Cicalese asked clarifying questions about the application process, after which all supported the Oct 1st date.

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Bus Service

Hightstown agreed to renew a shared services agreement with East Windsor Township, jointly funding bus services. Hightstown will contribute \$2,180 towards a total \$50,000 local share of costs (with other funds coming from higher levels of government, such as Mercer County). The two municipalities will cooperate in providing transportation for senior citizens and handicapped individuals. They will also seek to contract with a bus operator for weekday commuter bus service to Princeton Junction train station, with stops in both Hightstown and East Windsor.

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Other Business

- A final vote was taken to approve changes to the financing of Maxwell Ave road improvements, as previously detailed in the July 7th meeting.
- The Council approved a resolution supporting America's 9/11 Ride, which will pass through Hightstown on Saturday, August 16th.
- Hightstown Engine Company No. 1 received a donation of a 1993 Ford Van from Allentown's fire department.

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Clerk's Report

The 2025 budget public hearing will be held on August 4th, and the introduced budget has been posted to the Borough website for public review.

The 2024 audit has commenced, completion of which will bring the Borough fully up to date on its financial statements, under their new CFO.

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Council & Committee Reports

Councilman Cicalese reported on the latest Fire Dept meeting, and thanked Borough resident Scott Castor for offering his photography services to the company, photographing the members. Eight firefighters received dive training.

The fire company is also asking for their second floor hall to be referred to as the "Milton Cunningham Civic Center," its existing name. The company will be working to obtain a new plaque identifying the hall by name, as the original plaque is no longer present.

Councilman Gulati reported that the Housing Authority held its final meeting with its outgoing executive director. The housing is 100% occupied, and the new executive director is working to shape the future budget. Significant factors include rising water service costs and an uncertain future for federal government funding. All units were recently re-piped, and the project came in under budget.

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Executive Session

The meeting moved into a closed session where the Council discussed contract negotiations on three topics: Police Substation, Personnel, and East Windsor (Stockton St).

Want to share this recap or read past meeting notes? Head to <https://www.hightstowndemocrats.com/council-recaps> for a full archive.