

## Highlands, NJ Post Sandy Study

### Final Report

July, 2013

### **Background and Objectives**

To better understand what the citizens of the Borough of Highlands can do to help local government in terms of process for:

- information flow
- flood mitigation [borough and homeowner]
- completion/timing/costs of flood, zoning and construction permits
- code enforcement, schedule of fees for non-compliance
- next steps to make Highlands more attractive to current and new residents and businesses

### **Data Collection Methodology**

All respondents are 18+ and residents of Highlands. Weights were applied to the data to mirror 2010 Census numbers for the following demographic parameters: gender, age, number of years as a resident, seasonal/non-seasonal residence, presence of children and employment status.

Logistically, an email account [HighlandsNJsurvey@gmail.com] was created for residents to register to take the survey. This double opt in approach was a safe-guard to ensure no single person could take multiple surveys. Each registered email address was sent a unique link to take the survey. The online survey's duration was approximately 15 minutes. The survey was promoted on local websites, a postcard mailing and in businesses across the borough to encourage a good response. Study period was June 17<sup>th</sup> through July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.

### **Action Standard**

This research will be used to provide residents and local government with an understanding of the ideas as well as temperament of the borough going forward. These results will also be shared with FEMA as well as local news outlets.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Respondents have a *strong* need for information and leadership in regard to how to move forward after the storm. They are looking to borough officials and employees to aid them in this process.

Notably, every rating for information provided by the borough to residents is in the single digits for top box (Table 10).

The majority of respondents feel this is a time of great opportunity to help Highlands overcome a host of issues not addressed Pre-Sandy as well as after the storm. They had many ideas for moving forward in Short, Mid and Long term time periods.

## **DETAILED FINDINGS**

### **A. Voluntary Comments - Single, Biggest Issue facing Highlands**

The majority of mentions (81%) focused on four areas as the biggest issue facing the borough: Flood control was cited most (28%) closely followed by Rebuilding (22%), Leadership (18%) and Borough Improvement/Revitalization (13%).

(See Table 1)

### **B. Short Term [within 1 year] Borough Improvements**

Most respondents focused on two issues they feel must be addressed in the Short Term in equal measure: “Help Residents raise their properties” (68%) and “Storm water flood control “(68%).

- No other Short Term improvement had a rating over 38%.
- Notably, only one improvement was significantly deemed “should not be considered” which was “Raise the entire borough” (59%).

(See Table 5)

### **C. Mid Term [1-5 years] Borough Improvements**

Improvements in the mid-term were more even across the listed and volunteered items.

- Nearly half (48%) want to see the Community Center reopened.
- More than one-third (38%) chose “Build new Borough Hall” and “Relocate First Aid/EMS (36%)

(See Table 5)

### **D. Long Term [5-10 years] Borough Improvements**

Not surprisingly, long term improvements had the widest variation of answers with no significant standout.

- Less than one-quarter (22%) want to “Build new Borough Hall”
- No other Long Term improvement had a rating over 19%.

(See Table 5)

### **E. Short, Mid, Long Term Borough Improvements – Voluntary Responses**

A variety of responses with the following Net standouts:

- Short term - Borough Improvement/Revitalization (36%)
- Mid-term - Borough Improvement/Revitalization (21%)
- Long Term – Business Development (14%)

(See Table 6, 7, 8)

## **F. Agreement Statements**

Two-thirds of respondents (66%) strongly agree with the statement “I am concerned that Highlands has not received grants when other municipalities near us have.” Also, notable is the very low top box rating for the following statements:

- “As a resident, I feel my concerns are being heard by borough officials and borough employees” (5%)
- “Post-Sandy Highlands has been represented well by state, county and borough officials” (3%)
- “The interests of both Highlands residents and businesses are well represented by borough officials and borough employees” (3%)

(See Table 9)

## **G. Satisfaction Statements**

Looking at top 2 box, respondents overwhelmingly were satisfied with the following two statements:

- “Helpfulness of neighbors when you were in need” (87%)
- “Borough clean-up effort after the storm” (81%)

Other noteworthy results are the low satisfaction for information from the borough to residents:

- “Information flow from borough officials and borough employees to residents” top box (5%), top 2 box 26%
- “Borough website ease of use and quality of information” top box (0%), top 2 box (23%)

(See Table 10)

## **H. Channels for Highlands News and Events**

Most respondents (88%) get their Highlands news at least weekly (Net) by word of mouth.

- Next highest mention was Highlandsblog (62%).
- And at least one-third (33%) using app.com.

(See Table 11)

**I. Voluntary Comments – What can help the borough residents and officials better deal with the critical issues facing Highlands**

There were several mentions ranging across many areas as outlined in Table 12. Comments ranged from positive to negative and highest Net (34%) was Miscellaneous Mentions. The most notable Net comments were in Leadership Net (18%) and Communication Net (15%).

- No single coded response yielded a measure greater than 7%.
- Under Miscellaneous Mentions Net, the top measure (7%) was “We need to be united/work together”

(See Table 12)

**J. RESPONDENT PROFILE**

**Currently have done/plan to do**

Most respondents that were affected by the storm are rebuilding, applying for aid and lifting their homes or are planning on doing so.

- A stand-out on this question was that no one has/is in the process or plans to walk away from their mortgage (0%)

(See Table 2)

- Notable is the amount of respondents denied assistance from grants/loans SBA (44%), ICC (39%), FEMA (31%)

(See Table 3, 4)

**Demographic Profile**

The data was weighted to 2010 Census numbers for the following: gender, age, number of years as a resident, seasonal/non-seasonal residence, presence of children and employment status.

(See Table 13)

## Detailed Findings

**Table 1** - Q1: What do you think is the single, biggest issue facing Highlands right now?

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>
Flood Control (Net)	28
Flooding/chronic flooding/future flooding	25
Storm water flood control, i.e. redirect drainage	1
Other flood control mentions	2
Rebuild (Net)	22
Rebuild Borough	8
How to deal with destroyed/damaged properties	4
Getting people back in their homes	4
Property care/ cleaning up property	3
Help residents raise their properties	3
Help residents rebuild	1
Leadership (Net)	18
Lack of leadership	6
Too much politics and not enough action	4
Issues with Mayor/City Council/poorly governed borough	4
Corruption/bias in leadership	1
Other leadership mentions	3
Borough Improvement/Revitalization (Net)	13
Taxes/decreased ratables	5
Dealing with/remove abandoned structures/absentee landlords	4
There is not enough being done to promote Highland as a borough to visit	4
Getting financing/enough revenue to develop borough	2
Business Development (Net)	7
Restoring/rebuilding/bringing back businesses	7
Communication (Net)	6
Communication/lack of information being provided	3
Need more accurate information	1
Financial information is not accessible to residents	1
We need to know the final flood map	1
Miscellaneous Mentions (Net)	7
Cost of flood insurance	3
Lack of code enforcement	2
Need to fix the problems that already exist before addressing the raising of the borough	1
We need to look for ways to prevent future damage	0
Other miscellaneous mentions	0
Nothing/No answer	0

**Table 2 - Q2: Which of the following have you done or plan to do?**

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>				
	Done/In process	Plan to do	Do not plan to do	Not sure/Undecided	Does not apply to me
Rebuild your home	43	7	8	3	39
Use savings and/or borrowed money from family/friends	40	5	18	3	34
Apply for FEMA Grant	33	6	18	4	39
Apply for NJ RREM (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation) Grant	28	8	13	9	42
Apply for SBA Loan	25	0	18	8	49
Apply for NJ Homeowner Resettlement Grant	25	8	13	12	41
Apply for ICC NFIP Grant to lift/Mitigate	17	18	13	9	43
Lift your home	8	29	13	10	40
Walk away from your mortgage	0	0	51	4	45

**Table 3 - Q.2a What was the outcome of your loan/grant application?**

	SBA	ICC	NJREMM	NJHRG
<b>Weighted Base</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>25</b>
Status still pending	15	56	100	99
Approved	42	4	-	1
Denied	44	39	-	

**Table 4 - Q.2a What was the outcome of your FEMA grant application?**

<b>Weighted Base</b>	<b>34</b>
Received no assistance	31
Received rental assistance	62
Received rebuilding assistance	13

**Table 5 - Q3: Thinking about short, mid and long term borough improvements, where do you think the emphasis should be placed on the following:**

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>			
	Short-term	Mid-term	Long-term	Should not be considered
Help residents raise their properties (through grants/volunteer efforts)	68	27	1	4
Storm water flood control, i.e., redirect drainage	68	20	7	5
Reopen the community center	38	48	11	2
Replace sewer system	38	35	17	10
Relocate First Aid/EMS	35	36	13	17
Build flood gates	31	25	18	25
Build sea walls	27	30	10	32
Build new Borough Hall	19	38	22	22
Raise the entire borough	6	17	19	59

**Table 6 Short Term - Q.3a What other borough improvements do you feel are imperative?**

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>
Borough Improvement/Revitalization (Net)	36
Dealing with/remove abandoned structures	20
Improve/rebuild parks, beaches	7
Improve/repair streets, sidewalks	4
Use more green technology (wind, solar power)	4
Improve/increase green spaces	3
Improve parking	3
Dealing with destroyed/damaged properties	2
Taxes/stabilize ratables	2
Improve electrical system/put electrical system underground	2
Improve borough image	1
Other borough improvement/revitalization mentions	2
Flood Control (Net)	32
Improve flood control	21
Improve storm sewer system/drainage	15
Build sea walls	3
Stabilize hill/stop hill run off	2
Build flood gates	1
Other flood control mentions	2
Business Development (Net)	21
Attract new business/bring in more businesses	13
Limit rentals/Section 8 housing	6
Develop waterfront/boardwalk	2
Improve/develop downtown/business district	1
Other business development mentions	2
Leadership (Net)	13
Budget/more responsible spending	4
Update master plan	3
Less nepotism/fairness	2
Need new leadership/Mayor/City Council	2
Leaders need to be more proactive/work for the people	1
Other leadership mentions	1
Rebuild (Net)	13
Help residents raise their properties	6
Property care/cleaning up property	5
Help residents rebuild or tear down property	2
Need to build temporary buildings	1
Getting people back in their homes	1
Rebuild the Borough Hall	1



Need to rebuild borough /buildings	1
Move borough hall, borough services to higher ground	1
Refurbish existing buildings	1
Communication (Net)	10
Improve communication/information to residents	6
Improve transparency	3
Improve/update website/have more accurate, up to date information	2
Miscellaneous Mentions (Net)	26
Code enforcement	14
Drugs and crime	4
Government assistance/incentives/relief for homeowner and businesses	3
Merge with another township/share with surrounding townships	1
Improve school system	0
Hire outside people to evaluate situation/future development	0
Other miscellaneous mentions	7
Don't know	2
Nothing/No answer	19

**Table 7 Mid Term - Q.3a** What other borough improvements do you feel are imperative?

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>
Borough Improvement/Revitalization (Net)	21
Dealing with/remove abandoned structures	5
Improve/repair streets, sidewalks	4
Taxes/stabilize ratables	3
Improve/increase green spaces	3
Improve/rebuild parks, beaches	2
Improve parking	2
Dealing with destroyed/damaged properties	1
Use more green technology (wind, solar power)	1
Build a dog park	0
Other borough improvement/revitalization mentions	2
Business Development (Net)	17
Attract new business/bring in more businesses	10
Improve/develop downtown/business district	5
Bring in investors/developers	3
Rebuild (Net)	17
Move borough hall, borough services to higher ground	3
Help residents raise their properties	3
Rebuild the Borough Hall	3
Getting people back in their homes	2

Raise borough /buildings	2
Property care/cleaning up property	2
Need to build temporary buildings	1
Help residents rebuild or tear down property	1
Refurbish existing buildings	1
Rebuild the community center	1
Need to rebuild borough /buildings	1
Other rebuild homes mentions	0
Leadership (Net)	11
Need new leadership/Mayor/City Council	5
Update master plan	2
Less nepotism/fairness	2
Budget/more responsible spending	1
Make borough financial viable and sustainable	1
Other leadership mentions	0
Flood Control (Net)	10
Improve flood control	4
Improve storm sewer system/drainage	3
Stabilize hill/stop hill run off	3
Build sea walls	1
Other flood control mentions	0
Communication (Net)	3
Improve communication/information to residents	2
Improve/update website/have more accurate, up to date information	0
Miscellaneous Mentions (Net)	18
Merge with another township/share with surrounding townships	8
Improve school system	4
Government assistance/incentives/relief for homeowner and businesses	3
Code enforcement	3
Hire outside people to evaluate situation/future development	1
Borough needs to obtain/maintain flood insurance	1
Other miscellaneous mentions	1
Don't know	2
Nothing/No answer	28

**Table 8 Long Term - Q.3a** What other borough improvements do you feel are imperative?

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>
Business Development (Net)	14
Attract new business/bring in more businesses	7
Develop waterfront/boardwalk	3
Improve/develop downtown/business district	2
Other business development mentions	3
Flood Control (Net)	11
Improve storm sewer system/drainage	6
Improve flood control	5
Build sea walls	2
Build flood gates	2
Stabilize hill/stop hill run off	1
Borough Improvement/Revitalization (Net)	11
Taxes/stabilize ratables	4
Improve/increase green spaces	2
Dealing with/remove abandoned structures	2
Use more green technology (wind, solar power)	1
Improve/rebuild parks, beaches	1
Build a dog park	1
Improve borough image	1
Develop borough to attract visitors	1
Improve/repair streets, sidewalks	0
Rebuild (Net)	9
Raise borough /buildings	6
Help residents raise their properties	3
Leadership (Net)	5
Need new leadership/Mayor/City Council	3
Make borough financial viable and sustainable	1
Don't know	1
Miscellaneous Mentions (Net)	16
Merge with another township/share with surrounding townships	7
Government assistance/incentives/relief for homeowner and businesses	3
Improve school system	2
Borough needs to obtain/maintain flood insurance	1
Hire outside people to evaluate situation/future development	1
Code enforcement	1
Other miscellaneous mentions	3
Nothing/No answer	46

**Table 9** - Q.4 Using the scale below, please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.  
 [Strongly Agree, Somewhat agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree]

Base: Total Respondents	(103)				
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I am concerned that Highlands has not received grants when other municipalities near us have	66	14	16	1	3
I would allow the Army Corps of Engineers to take soil borings on my property in an effort to help the borough's flood mitigation	62	16	18	0	3
I support the borough rebuilding using "green" infrastructure guidelines"	54	20	22	-	3
Political Party lines influence decisions at the local level	42	31	24	1	2
I am willing to make sacrifices in order to help the borough get rebuilt	41	34	11	7	7
Highlands should join Toms River and fight the Biggert Waters Act (Higher Premiums for Buildings Below the Base Flood Elevation and Pre-FIRM and Grandfathered Rates Phased-Out)	33	14	28	14	11
Highlands should fight the new flood ratings if they are adopted by the state	25	25	22	13	15
If I offer to volunteer my professional time/knowledge it would be received positively by local officials	11	6	29	26	27
As a resident, I feel my concerns are being heard by borough officials and borough employees	5	15	13	24	44
Post-Sandy Highlands has been represented well by state, county and borough officials	3	18	9	24	46
The interests of both Highlands residents and businesses are well represented by borough officials and borough employees	3	12	13	24	48

**Table 10** – Q.5 Using the scale below, please indicate your level of satisfaction with each item.

Base: Total Respondents	103				
	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Helpfulness of neighbors when you were in need	64	23	10	2	1
Borough clean-up effort after the storm	44	37	3	8	8
Police response/presence	33	21	25	11	9
Time between submitting permits and permit approval	11	11	53	10	15
Ease of process for submitting permits needed	8	15	43	17	17
Information flow from borough officials and borough employees to residents	5	21	11	21	42
Building code enforcement	2	12	30	21	35
Borough website ease of use and quality of information	0	23	15	22	40

**Table 11** – Q.6 How often do you get your news about Highlands happenings and events from each of these sources?

Base: Total Respondents	103				
	Daily	A few times a week	Weekly	Less often than weekly	Never
Highlands Blog	31	21	10	20	22
Word-of-mouth	26	33	29	13	2
NJ.com	7	7	11	36	43
Asbury Park Press (app.com)	5	9	17	33	39
Electronic message board outside the old firehouse	4	9	17	37	36
Local TV - News 12NJ	4	4	5	26	64
Asbury Park Press (paper)	3	5	11	27	57
Star Ledger (paper)	3	1	5	21	73
Local Radio	2	3	5	18	75
Ahherald.com	2	8	7	24	62
HighlandsNJ.com	1	4	24	49	24

**Table 12** – Q.7 What can help the borough residents and officials better deal with the critical issues facing Highlands?

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>(103)</b>
Leadership (Net)	18
Too much politics and not enough action	5
Corruption/bias in leadership	3
Lack of leadership	3
Need new leadership/Mayor/City Council	3
We need our leadership to work for us	2
Issues with Mayor/City Council/poorly governed borough	2
Leaders need to lobby/find funding	2
Communication (Net)	15
Communication/lack of information being provided	6
We need more up to date information on website	4
Need more transparency	2
Need more accurate information	1
Financial information is not accessible to residents	1
We need to know the final flood map	1
Other communication mentions	0
Flood Control (Net)	2
Storm water flood control, i.e. redirect drainage	1
Replace sewer system	1
Other flood control mentions	0
Rebuild (Net)	2
Help residents raise their properties	1
Help residents rebuild	0
Property care/ cleaning up property	0
Other rebuild mentions	1
Borough Improvement/Revitalization (Net)	2
There is not enough being done to promote Highland as a borough to visit	1
Other borough improvement/revitalization mentions	1
Business Development (Net)	1
Restoring/rebuilding/bringing back businesses	1
Miscellaneous Mentions (Net)	34
We need to be united/work together	7
Be more open minded/allow people to have a bigger say	6
We need to move forward/make changes	3
We need to focus on tax paying residents	2

Look at the big picture/what is best long term	2
Need to fix the problems that already exist before addressing the raising of the borough	2
We need to look for ways to prevent future damage	2
Cost of flood insurance	1
Merge with another township/share with surrounding townships	1
Lack of code enforcement	1
Fair allocation of funds	1
Other miscellaneous mentions	5
Nothing/No answer	46

**TABLE 13 - Demographics**

<b>Base: Total Respondents</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>2012 Census Numbers are in Parentheses</b>	<b>Weighted Total</b>
	(103)
	%
<b><u>Gender</u></b>	
Males (50)	50
Females (50)	50
<b><u>Age * no 18-24 took survey</u></b>	
25-44 (41)	41
45-64 (43)	44
65+ (15)	15
<b><u>Number of years lived in borough</u></b>	
Less than 10 (58.6)	59
10 years or more (41.4)	41
<b><u>Location in borough *not weighted - counts from tax map units</u></b>	
Downtown – Below Route 36 (72)	80
On the hill – Above Route 36 (28)	20
<b><u>Own/Rent *not weighted due to low Rent base</u></b>	
Own (69)	90
Rent (31)	10
<b><u>Seasonal Property</u></b>	
Yes (8.8)	9
No (91.2)	91
<b><u>Average number of HH members *not weighted (1.92)</u></b>	2.1
<b><u>Presence of children under 18 in HH (15.7)</u></b>	20
<b><u>Employment</u></b>	
Employed (65.5)	66
Not employed/retired (25)	25
Unemployed (9)	9