

# COMMON GROUND

A NEWSLETTER FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING IN THE BERKSHIRE REGION

## IN THIS ISSUE

### PAGE 1

- Complete Streets Project Updates
- Determination of Need Changes

### PAGE 2

- BRPC Awarded EEA Grants
- Shared Planner Program
- 5<sup>TH</sup> Thursday

### PAGE 3

- Family Reunification Plan Template
- Housing Choice Initiative

### PAGE 4

- New Senior Planner for Community and Economic Development—Laura Brennan
- Community Compacts
- Calendar

## Complete Streets Project Updates

BRPC is continuing its successful Complete Streets work in 2018. This MassDOT funding program gives communities access to technical assistance and potential construction funding for a range of transportation projects related to improving biking, walking, public transit, and traffic safety. BRPC is currently developing or has completed Complete Streets



Prioritization Plans for 10 communities in the county. Completed plans have led to successful construction funding of over \$1.2 million dollars for four communities. The most recent awardee was North Adams, which received \$400,000 to repair sidewalks and install new bike lanes along Beaver St. Additionally, the city has been busy striping new bike lanes along American Legion Drive, and installing shared-lane markings, or “sharrows” on downtown streets using local funding.



complete streets are for everyone

During the fall of 2017, Lenox, Clarksburg, and Sandisfield submitted applications to MassDOT and are awaiting notifications about potential funding. This winter and spring, BRPC staff are working with the Towns of Cheshire and Great Barrington to advance complete streets planning projects. Additionally, the Town of Lanesborough has expressed interest in participating. BRPC is helping the town to craft a Complete Streets Policy, which will allow the town to access potential technical assistance funding, as well as affirm the town’s commitment toward Complete Streets implementation.

For more information, contact Senior Transportation Planner Eammon Coughlin (ecoughlin@berkshireplanning.org or x19)

## Determination of Need Changes

Substantial changes in service and capital expenditures by health care facilities, including hospitals, ambulatory facilities and long-term care facilities, are subject to approval through the Department of Public Health’s Determination of Need (DON) process and usually entail community investments as a condition of approval. New regulations passed in January 2017 simplify these rules and create a standardized, coordinated process for Community Health Initiative (CHI) investments. The new regulations are expected to enhance accountability and reporting, ensuring that funds are contributing to the improvement of community health; standardize mechanisms for strong community engagement and transparency; enhance returns across a community and establish a public health framework that allows DPH to support a social determinant of health and health equity approach to community health investments. A final change dedicates a certain percentage of DON contributions to statewide funds, ensuring that communities that have not historically had access to DON funding (i.e., areas without major medical facilities, such as Berkshire County) would also be able to access community improvement funding.

The DON changes recognize that medical care is only a small part of what determines health, and that social determinants of health—such as housing, education, and employment—can play a much larger role. Based on a comprehensive review process, six DON areas were selected for these community investments: Social Environment, Built/Physical Environment, Housing, Violence and Trauma, Employment and Education. In particular, four issues were pulled from these priorities: Substance Use Disorders, Mental Illness and Mental Health, Housing Stability and Homelessness and Chronic Disease, with a focus on cancer, heart disease and diabetes. These issues were chosen because they are trending negatively, represent issues that are driving mortality and morbidity and health care costs, and are either a social determinant of health or are issues that are sustainably addressed using a social determinant of health approach. In addition, investments from long term care facilities will be directed toward Healthy Aging Initiatives.

While it is impossible to predict the amount of funding that will become available statewide through the Community Health Initiative and Healthy Aging Funds, \$170 million has been spent on DON-related community investments over the past ten years. Using the funding formulas contained in the legislation, and assuming a similar expenditure rate, suggests that up to \$42 million could be made available to the statewide fund and disbursed through a competitive grant process. The competitive process will be overseen by DPH, two State Advisory Boards and a Fiscal Host, to be chosen in the next couple of months.

For more information, contact Public Health Manager Laura Kittross (lkittross@berkshireplanning.org or x32)

## BRPC Awarded EEA Grants

BRPC was recently awarded three separate grants from the Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs to assist several communities in Berkshire County. Summarized, the 3 awarded grant projects are:

- Town of Lanesborough—Berkshire Mall. Since it's construction in 1988, the Berkshire Mall has, on average, lost tenants over time, including most of the anchor stores such as Best Buy, JC Penny's, Macy's and Sears. By 2018, the only anchor store left will be Target, which is separately owned by the company. With only one anchor store remaining and many other smaller tenant spaces vacant, the longevity of the mall in its current form is in doubt. The decline of malls is not unique to Berkshire County, and many malls across the country are experiencing the same fate.
  - With the EEA grant, BRPC staff will work with the Baker Hill Road District, architects, engineers, the business community and the Town of Lanesborough to develop ideas for redevelopment of the site. The current conditions at the mall will be thoroughly assessed, including the capacity of the existing utilities, and the structural quality of areas within the mall. The Town's zoning bylaws will also be reviewed to determine whether changes should be made to the local regulations to encourage redevelopment. During the project, staff will research examples of successfully repurposed malls across the country and determine which aspects may be appropriate for the Berkshire Mall site. The final report should provide a very complete assessment of the mall and offer several recommendations for potential redevelopment. It's possible the final recommendation will include several plans to be implemented simultaneously.
- Town of Cheshire—Creation of local bylaws: This grant will focus on developing several local bylaws in order to implement the goals of the Town's Master Plan, which was adopted in 2017. Cheshire and BRPC will work together to determine whether bylaws should be created to address senior housing, apartment buildings, decreasing residential lot sizes and building setbacks, and residential cluster development. The overall goal is to implement the Master Plan in a way that addresses the needs of the community and in an environmentally-sustainable manner. It's possible that some goals and not others will be implemented through new bylaws.
- Towns of Sheffield & Egremont and the City of North Adams—Creation of local bylaws: This grant will have a similar focus to that of Cheshire, but with an emphasis on senior housing. The housing stock of each community will be assessed, and bylaws modeled to allow a variety of options for seniors to age in place. Again, the proposed bylaws should address this community need, while doing so with an eye toward the environment.

For more information about BRPC Awarded EEA Grants, please contact:

Senior Planner Christopher Gruba (Cheshire) ([CGruba@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:CGruba@berkshireplanning.org) or x12), Senior Planner Laura Brennan (Lanesborough) ([LBrennan@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:LBrennan@berkshireplanning.org) or x14), Public Health Manager Laure Kittross (Senior Housing) ([LKittross@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:LKittross@berkshireplanning.org) or ex 32)

## Shared Economic Planner Program

The Shared Economic Planner program is now in its second year, and allows each participating town to access services and assistance that fit their specific needs and budget.

Many participating towns have requested assistance with creating a more supportive and welcoming environment for businesses and residents. This can range from increasing access to important information and forms online through the town's website to promoting the town as a good place to live and work through a variety of marketing channels.

At other times, grant applications and collaborations with neighboring towns will be the focus. All municipalities in Berkshire County are invited to contact BRPC to learn more about the Shared Planner program.

For more information on the Shared Planner Program contact Senior Community & Economic Development Planner Laura Brennan ([lbrennan@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:lbrennan@berkshireplanning.org) or x14)

## 5<sup>TH</sup> Thursday Dinner

On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017 BRPC held its 5<sup>th</sup> Thursday Dinner, this dinner had the topic of: "What's Happening in Berkshire Communities". It had a panel of local planners to talk about the key planning initiatives in their communities. The panel included Larysa Bernstein from North Adams, Andrew Groff from Williamstown, CJ Hoss from Pittsfield, Gwen Miller from Lenox, and Chris Rembold from Great Barrington. They discussed what some of the current planning activities happening in their communities and describe some of their recent successes and some of the challenges that they face.



Image (above): From Left to Right: CJ Hoss - Pittsfield, Chris Rembold - Great Barrington, Gwen Miller - Lenox, Andrew Groff - Williamstown, and Larysa Bernstein - North Adams

## Family Reunification Plan Template

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, in partnership with The Franklin Regional Council of Governments and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, has completed development of a Family Reunification Plan Template. This template, produced through funding from the Western Region Homeland Security Advisory Council (WRHSAC), was developed based on research conducted locally in Western Massachusetts with over 70 organizations that deal with children, and best practices from across the nation.

WRHSAC is engaged in a multi-phase project to address the needs of children in disasters, both natural and human-made, and seeks to address gaps regarding children's needs in emergency preparedness planning, disaster response, and disaster recovery in the region.

Children have unique needs when disaster occurs, and when compared with adults, have a higher likelihood of experiencing the physical and psychological impacts of trauma after a disaster (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). Children are away from their families for dozens of hours per week if they are enrolled in day care centers or schools. For example, approximately 12 million infants and toddlers attend pre-school on a regular basis (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009).

Emergencies are stressful, and it can be difficult for those involved to think clearly about what specific actions should be taken to ensure the safety of children in their custody. Development of a Family Reunification Plan enables organizations and their staff to follow established procedures immediately upon notification of the need to set up a Family Reunification Center (FRC) to ensure that children are cared for and returned to their families as soon as possible. In addition, development of a plan may reduce an organization's potential liability if the process does not go as smoothly as planned.

Currently, there are no federal requirements for schools and other organizations that host children daily to have family reunification plans as part of their emergency preparedness preparation (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Fourteen states in the U.S. (not including Massachusetts) require that school emergency plans include protocols for family reunification (Save the Children, 2010), and the U.S. Dept. of Education highly suggests that schools and daycare facilities have emergency preparedness plans in place (Schools and Terrorism, 2004).

The Family Reunification Plan Template and Checklist is available for public use and free of charge. The Template and Checklist can be found at [wrhsac.org/projects-and-initiatives/family-reunification-plan-template/](http://wrhsac.org/projects-and-initiatives/family-reunification-plan-template/). BRPC is currently in the process of developing online training modules to assist organizations in adopting the Family Reunification Plan into their existing emergency plans.

For more information about the Family Reunification Plan Template please contact  
Public Health Planner Allison Egan ([aegan@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:aegan@berkshireplanning.org) or x36)

## Housing Choice Initiative

In December 2017, the Baker Administration announced its Housing Choice Initiative, a comprehensive new initiative designed to increase housing production across the Commonwealth. This initiative creates a new system of incentives and rewards for municipalities that deliver sustainable housing growth; creates a new technical assistance toolbox; creates a Small Town Housing Choice Capital Grant Program; and proposes legislative zoning changes. The Housing Choice Initiative aims to provide more than \$10 million in incentives, grant funding and technical assistance per year, and establishes a new goal of creating 135,000 new housing units by 2025.

Modeled after the successful Green Communities program, the Housing Choice Initiative will provide a powerful new set of incentive-based tools for local governments. It will reward communities that are producing new housing units and have adopted best practices to promote sustainable housing development, use land efficiently, protect natural resources and conserve energy, with a new Housing Choice designation. Cities and towns that receive the Housing Choice Designation will be eligible for new financial resources, including exclusive access to new Housing Choice Capital Grants, and preferential treatment for many state grant and capital funding programs, including MassWorks, Complete Streets, MassDOT capital projects and PARC and LAND grants.

The Housing Choice Initiative also introduces new and better coordinated technical assistance for municipalities to reach housing production goals and pursue a Housing Choice Program Designation. Another part of the Housing Choice Initiative is proposed legislation to amend the Zoning Enabling Act. This legislative proposal, *An Act to Promote Housing Choices*, would allow cities and towns to adopt certain zoning best practices by a simple majority vote, rather than the current two-thirds supermajority.

Starting in FY 19, the Small Town Housing Choice Capital Grant Program will provide an estimated \$1 million in capital grant monies, and increasing with gaming revenue growth thereafter, through a competitive grant program. Towns that have a population of less than 7,000, have a Community Compact and do not have a moratorium for new housing will qualify to apply for this grant program. For more information go to [www.mass.gov/housing-choice-initiative](http://www.mass.gov/housing-choice-initiative).



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## Community Compacts

All but three Berkshire cities and towns are eligible to sign up for Community Compacts at this time. Florida, Hancock, New Ashford, Peru and Savoy have never taken advantage of this program which has proven useful in a large number of other municipalities. In addition, the 24 communities who signed up in 2016 are potentially eligible to sign-up for up to two additional commitments and receive assistance, which takes the form of grant funding or direct technical assistance for those. The only towns who are not eligible at this point are Dalton (who just entered into a new Community Compact) and Lanesborough and Windsor who signed their Community Compacts in 2017.

## New Senior Planner for Community and Economic Development—Laura Brennan

Laura joined BRPC in November of 2017 as the Senior Planner for Community and Economic Development. Her role includes management of the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) program, as well as serving the four municipalities currently participating in a Shared Economic Planner contract with BRPC.

Laura's background includes non-profit management experience in the areas of marketing, operations, programming and development. Prior to joining BRPC, she served as the Director of Client Services at 1 Berkshire, the region's economic development and marketing organization. She has also worked as the Director of Operations and Marketing at Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, MA. Laura volunteers with Habitat for Humanity and Berkshire United Way. She is a graduate of Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA, and of the Berkshire Leadership Program ('08).

## CALENDAR

Be sure to check out our online calendar for updates, cancellations, recently posted events and agendas. [berkshireplanning.org/events/calendar](http://berkshireplanning.org/events/calendar)

Many thanks to Shannon Zaleski for her good work as BRPC's Office Administrative Assistant. Shannon has taken advantage of a good job opportunity and, as of December 15<sup>th</sup>, has left BRPC. We wish her the best of luck.

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**January 4 - BRPC Executive Meeting 2018 4:00 pm**

**January 18 - BRPC Commission Meeting 7:00 am**

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**February 1 - BRPC Executive Meeting , 2018 4:00 pm**

Remember to check our inclement weather hotline to learn the status of a meeting at (413) 442-1521 X 15



Please consider receiving an e-newsletter—saving trees and energy costs in our region and beyond. E-mail [officeassistant@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:officeassistant@berkshireplanning.org) today to subscribe!