

COMMON GROUND

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REGIONAL ISSUE SPOTLIGHT: HOUSING

In January, the Commission met to discuss regional housing issues with Brad Gordon from the Berkshire County Regional Housing Authority (BCRHA). Nearly every community in the Berkshires was represented, and representatives discussed the challenges and opportunities to vibrant and diverse housing opportunity in their respective communities in response to presented data. Housing is a basic human need, and is an issue that affects all members of the local and regional community. It is also an important aspect of economic and community development. BRPC is working on several housing related projects this year, and is active in an ongoing discussion looking at the challenges to the access of safe, decent and affordable housing. Access to safe, decent and affordable housing has become increasingly challenging for individuals and families. Housing opportunity and diversity (or the lack of) can strongly influence the character of a community and of a region. This month's newsletter insert provides an introduction to housing in the region, and an introduction to the different ways the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission will be working on housing and related issues.

Future inserts will explore specific challenges, opportunities and ongoing community efforts in greater detail as BRPC tackles housing at both the regional and local level. Regionally, the comprehensive plan, Sustainable Berkshires, includes an element dedicated to housing and neighborhoods. Great Barrington and Sheffield are partner communities in a housing study project funded through DHCD's District Local Technical Assistance program. Adams, Pittsfield and Dalton are also addressing housing through DLTA funds, and communities like Becket are addressing housing need through a DHCD Community Development and Block Grant. Housing in the Berkshires is faced with the following challenges. Each challenge is further described with data in the newsletter insert: **Affordability, Availability, Quality, Lack of Variety and Housing Security.**

ONGOING HOUSING EFFORTS AT BRPC

Sustainable Berkshires Housing and Neighborhoods Element: This section of the regional sustainability plan will investigate housing and neighborhoods in the region. Neighborhoods across the region will be evaluated for their sustainability strengths and challenges. Discussion will be centered around such issues as walkability, stability, diversity, proximity to jobs and services, affordability and quality of housing and neighborhoods. Goals and policies in this section will help identify strategies for improving the sustainability of all neighborhoods, regardless of their location and context in the region. Stay tuned for upcoming workshops at the Sustainable Berkshires website: www.sustainableberkshires.org, and like SB on Facebook!

Dalton Housing: BRPC staff will work with the Town of Dalton to complete a technical review of documents relating to the conversion of the Old Dalton High School into affordable housing.

Pittsfield Slum & Blight Report: BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the City of Pittsfield to update and expand a slum and blight study of a select area of the downtown.

Great Barrington & Sheffield Housing Needs Analysis: Staff will provide technical assistance to the Towns of Great Barrington & Sheffield to complete a comprehensive housing needs study for each community.

Adams Workforce Housing Development: BRPC staff will provide assistance to the Town of Adams to develop strategies for increasing the amount and availability of workforce housing in the town.

Becket Affordable Senior Housing and Housing Rehabilitation: Through a multi-year planning process involving sustained and dynamic community input, BRPC has assisted the Town of Becket in setting certain community housing priorities, including addressing the needs of low to moderate homeowners in the rehabilitation of their homes, and addressing the need for safe, affordable senior housing to accommodate the growing number of Becket residents who would like to remain in their hometown and close to their families as they age. BRPC assisted the Town in winning a \$900,000 FY11 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) which targets both of these community housing priorities, as well as undertaking improvements to streets and sidewalks in North Becket Village to encourage pedestrian activity in the village and make it safer and more accessible. Berkshire Housing Development Corporation was procured to manage the housing rehabilitation project, which combines CDBG grant and Town funds totaling \$217,644 to rehabilitate seven or more properties. As part of this same CDBG grant, BRPC is also conducting a feasibility study, looking at the need and demand for safe, affordable housing in Becket and explores the funding, development and operation of such housing. A five member Advisory Committee composed of Becket. BRPC has engaged consultants to perform a market study and engineering schematics, and will conduct a public forum from 1pm to 3pm on March 2nd at the Becket Town Hall to solicit further input from Becket residents. For more information, please contact Patricia Mullins at pmullins@berkshireplanning.org or x 17.

**Public Forum: Saturday,
March 2nd
1:00-3:00 at
Becket Town Hall**



NEW WEBSITE!

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission is very excited to announce the mid-March launching of it's brand new, completely overhauled website. The new website, designed by the same company responsible for the easy-to-use Berkshire Benchmarks website, has incorporated some attractive new design elements and organized the website's structure to make necessary information very easy to access. An announcements and calendar feature will prominently displayed on the home page, making it very easy for visitors to find out when and where their meetings are, and retrieve pertinent meeting materials. Announcements will include funding opportunities, workshop or training opportunities, and news items describing BRPC efforts and initiatives. Focus areas will also be different. Visitors will be able to directly access specific projects and specific reports and documents. The new content management system (CMS) will make maintaining and updating the new website much easier, resulting in a consistently up-to-date source of information and projects. The new website will also have the potential to sync with social media such as Facebook or Twitter, which are useful tools for outreach and promotion in today's largely web-based communications and marketing landscape. Look for it in mid-March! For those subscribed digitally, expect an e-blast inviting you take a look and poke around the new site. For more information, please contact Mark Maloy at mmaloy@berkshireplanning.org or x 29.

CALL FOR TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

On February 4, 2013, the Berkshire Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) has received solicitation letters for the FY 2014-2017 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). These letters provide important information related to this solicitation including available funding, the application process and the TIP Development schedule. The development of the TIP is a process by which federal transportation funds are allocated to major road, street, highway and public transportation projects within Berkshire County. Projects on local or residential streets do not qualify for federal transportation funds and cannot be considered for the TIP. Municipalities that are interested in submitting or sponsoring projects are required to complete and submit project data forms by March 4, 2013. Project evaluations will then be conducted, followed by discussion and debate by the Technical Advisory Committee and MPO. The schedule includes a 30 day comment period starting at the end of May with MPO approval of the TIP on June 25th. For more information, please contact Anuja Koirala at akoirala@berkshireplanning.org or x18

IMPROVING STREAM CROSSINGS: FLOOD RESILIENT, FISH FRIENDLY

The failure of stream crossings or culverts can have dire financial, public health and safety consequences. Impacts to wildlife are also negative: failed crossings or culverts impede stream passage for wildlife, and can force wildlife on to the road where it is more vulnerable to traffic. Solutions exist, and this is the topic of three workshops held by Bay State Roads. Each workshop will delve into best practices and case studies on replacing road-stream crossings, specifically looking at site assessment, engineering standards, permitting standards, funding and installation. The content of these workshops will assist interested parties in designing crossings with rivers in mind and to meet the Massachusetts Stream Crossing Standards. Each workshop will run from 8:30 a.m to 3:00 p.m, and will include lunch and snacks. Attendees may obtain 1 Roads Scholar credit and .5 CEU credits. AICP credit is pending. Cost for registration is \$20. For more information, or for workshop registration, please visit the Bay States Road website at <http://baystateroads.eot.state.ma.us/workshops/>.

MARCH 13: WESTFIELD STATE UNIVERSITY, Westfield

MARCH 19: BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Pittsfield

MARCH 26: OLVER TRANSPORTATION CENTER, Greenfield

ONLINE BUILDING PERMIT SYSTEM ONLINE AND FUNCTIONING

Seven towns, Becket, Dalton, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Sheffield and Richmond are implementing an on-line system for building permits. This will allow homeowners and contractors to apply for, submit material, pay application fees, schedule appointments and receive approvals on-line. Essentially, for most permits an applicant will be able to go through the entire process without having to go to town hall. This system should dramatically reduce the amount of time it takes for the permitting process. An added benefit for contractors is that they only need to register once and then will be able to process applications in all seven towns. This project was funded by a Community Innovation Challenge Grant through the Massachusetts Executive Office of Administration and Finance. For more information, please contact Tom Matuszko (tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org) or x34.

Make this spring a little greener by signing up to receive your copy of Common Ground via e-mail. Contact Judy Wagner at jwagner@berkshireplanning.org or x 10 to sign up for a copy sent right to your inbox.

SELECTED PROJECTS FOR FUNDING: DLTA '13

BRPC has selected eighteen (18) projects for funding through the Department of Housing and Community Development's District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program. BRPC received twenty-one (21) proposals. Three (3) of the proposals were voluntarily withdrawn by the applicants after discussions with BRPC staff. All applicants should have received an award letter with an identified BRPC lead staff person. If you have not already done so, please contact your identified lead staff person as soon as convenient so work can begin on these important projects. Four of the projects are identified and described in this newsletter's housing spotlight.

Egremont Village Center Zoning

BRPC staff will provide assistance to the Town of Egremont to develop a village center zoning district in order to reduce the instances of non-conformity and allow the continuance of the historic village pattern.

Municipal Performance Measures

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to a group of municipalities to research and develop municipal performance measures to improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of municipal governments.

WiredWest Community Anchor Institutions

BRPC staff will provide assistance to the WiredWest Communications Cooperative, a forty (40) town municipal lighting plant cooperative, to develop a service agreement to allow WiredWest to serve as a service provider to Community Anchor Institutions.

Housatonic River – Rest of River Cleanup

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to a group of municipalities in order maintain an unified an open dialogue with state and federal officials and research the feasibility of creating a compensation mechanism to address economic losses likely to be sustained by certain municipalities as a result of the cleanup.

Regional Brownfields

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to a group of municipalities to complete a regional inventory of potential brownfield sites and carry out other regional brownfields planning activities in coordination with the Berkshire Brownfields Program.

Sheffield Community Development Planning

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of Shef-

field to develop a Community Development Strategy.

West Stockbridge Village Center Zoning

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of West Stockbridge to develop zoning amendments that will reduce the instances of non-conformity in the village area and allow for the reproduction and continuance of the historic village pattern.

Richmond Shores Zoning

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of Richmond to develop zoning amendments that will reduce the instances of non-conformity in a certain neighborhood, while allowing context appropriate development.

Regional Wastewater Study

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to a group of municipalities to identify strategies for inter-municipal cooperation on wastewater treatment.

Cheshire Renewable Energy Zoning Bylaw

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of Cheshire to develop zoning amendments to allow and regulate various types of renewable energy generation facilities.

Dalton Solar RFP

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of Dalton to identify and procure a solar developer to install a solar photovoltaic system on municipal property.

Lee/Lenox Sign Bylaws

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Towns of Lee and Lenox to develop zoning amendments to the respective town's sign bylaws.

North Berkshires Shared Cultural Calendar

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to a group of municipalities to research, identify and implement a shared online calendar system for the posting of events in the North Berkshire region.

Otis Community Development Planning

BRPC staff will provide technical assistance to the Town of Otis to plan for the expansion of its existing sewer and water infrastructure and to complete an inventory of municipal properties. For more information, please contact Brian Domina at bdomina@berkshireplanning.org or x 14.

ADVANCED TOOLS FOR AND TECHNIQUES FOR PLANNING AND ZONING

On Saturday, March 16th, planners, municipal officials and other interested professionals have the opportunity to attend the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative's 12th Annual Conference. Hosted at the Hogan Conference Center at Worcester's Holy Cross College, the conference will include some very interesting panels, including 'Creative Approaches to Achieve Your Affordable Housing Goals Using CPA', 'Hazard Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change'; and Planning and Zoning for Medical Marijuana'. Experts from around the state will be sharing their large caches of experience and knowledge in planning and zoning. The registration fee is \$50. Breakfast and lunch are included. AICP credit is pending. For more information, or to register, please visit the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative's website: <http://www.umass.edu/masscptc/>.

DCR DAY OF PARK SERVICE: APRIL 20TH, 2013

Stay tuned for the Department of Conservation and Recreation's Park Serve Day, where volunteers from the Berkshires to Cape Cod help get parks, beaches and trails

ready for the spring and summer season by planting trees, flowers and shrubs and picking up trash. Keep checking the DCR website for updates: <http://parkserv.env.state.ma.us/>. **Pick a park, give a day and make a difference!** A local park spruced up during last year's was Ashuwillticook Rail Trail.

KEEP BERKSHIRES FARMING PANEL SERIES

On January 19th, Keep Berkshires Farming kicked off a panel series with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities for slaughter and meat processing in the Berkshire region. This series continued into February with a workshop on Opportunities for Value-Added Processing for Berkshire County Farmers. On **Monday, March 11th**, participants are welcome to come and listen to Noah Fulmer of Rhode Island Fresh discuss his business model and success in connecting farmers to the marketplace,

and John Waite of the Franklin County Development Corporation's Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center discuss his business model at the **First Baptist Church of Pittsfield at 88 South Street**. From **7:30-9:00 p.m. On Monday, April 8th**, come and listen to Kelly Erwin, Brian Gibbons, Ted Dobson and Amy Cotler discuss the opportunities and barriers to getting more local food into institutional cafeterias, also at the **First Baptist Church from 7:30-9:00**. They represent the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, Berkshire Organics, Equinox Farm and the Massachusetts Farm to Table Cookbook.

MEDICAL MARIJUANA

Since the ballot initiative allowing for the legal use and purchase of medical marijuana passed in November 2012, the Massachusetts Department of Health (DPH) has been in the process of developing regulations. DPH has until May 1, 2013 to issue these regulations, and will not issue registration cards or allow medical marijuana treatment centers to open until regulations are active. DPH is partnering with diverse stakeholders to develop the regulations, and a listening session for Western Massachusetts has been scheduled for **February 27, 2013 at Holyoke Community College beginning at 1:30 PM**. The listening session is an opportunity for the public to provide formal comments. Stakeholders included in the formulation of the regulations will include those from public safety, the medical community and municipal governments.

The language of the ballot initiative sets the framework for the legalization of medical marijuana and assigns to DPH the task of providing the details. Until these details are known communities are left dealing with the uncertainty of what might happen. In response to this uncertainty, some communities have adopted temporary moratoriums, others have banned the use outright and still others have adopted bylaws to regulate medical marijuana treatment centers. Depending on the public sentiment in your community one of the aforementioned actions may be entirely appropriate. BRPC staff can provide examples of the actions that other Massachusetts communities have taken.

The legalization of medical marijuana is a topic of interest for the BRPC Regional Issues Committee. One of the important regional issues raised by the medical marijuana ballot initiative is whether the DPH regulations will impact a municipality's Home Rule Authority to determine for itself the location and types of land uses within its municipal boundaries. The Regional Issues Committee will also likely review how other states and communities have dealt with the legalization of medical marijuana. For more information, please contact Brian Domina at bdomina@berkshireplanning.org or x 14.

CALENDAR

All meetings held in BRPC office unless otherwise noted.

MARCH

- 2nd: Becket Public Forum: Senior Housing
- 7th: Executive Meeting, 4:00
- 16th: CPTC 12th Annual Conference, Worcester
- 19th: Rivers and Streams Crossing Workshop, BCC, Pittsfield, 8:30-3:00
- 21st: Full Commission Meeting, (Delegates and Alternates) 7:00
- 26th: MPO Meeting

APRIL

- 4th: Executive Commission, 4:00
- 20th: DCR Day of Service

Spring: Right Around the Corner?



Photo Credit: Gwen Miller