

COMMON GROUND

A NEWSLETTER FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING IN THE BERKSHIRE REGION

IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 1

- *Berkshire MPO-FFY 2020-2024 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)*
- *Regional Investment Database*

PAGE 2

- *Countdown to Census 2020*
- *BRPC Staff Updates*
- *District Local Technical Assistance Requests*
- *Planning for Future Transportation*

PAGE 3

- *Planning for Future Transportation (Cont')*

PAGE 4

- *Berkshire Benchmarks*
- *A Note from Lauren*
- *Calendar*

Berkshire MPO—FFY 2020-2024 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

The TIP is a prioritized, financially constrained, multi-year program for the implementation of federally funded transportation projects in Berkshire County. The TIP, updated annually, implements the region's long-range transportation plan by programming federal-aid funds for transit, highway, bridge, transportation enhancement, bike paths, safety, and air quality improvements.

FFY 2020-2024 TIP Schedule

January 2 - TIP project solicitation letter and data forms to Cities, Towns, MassDOT and BRTA via e-mail (forms due February 1)

February 19 - TAC discussion on project evaluation scores

February 26 - MPO discussion on project evaluation scores

March 19 - TAC discussion on preliminary draft TIP listing

March 26 - MPO discussion on preliminary TIP listing

April 9 - TAC recommendation to MPO

April 23 - MPO release draft TIP for public comments

May 21 - TAC endorsement/recommendation to MPO

May 28 - MPO approval of TIP

For more information, contact Senior Transportation Planner Anuja Koirala
(AKoirala@berkshireplanning.org or x18)

Regional Investment Database

A database of regional investments has recently been built by Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC), representing a significant step for the county in being able to identify investment trends over time and by industry. The project evolved from the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) process, which identifies and prioritizes projects that will have a significant impact on the region. Maintaining the database will streamline the process of identifying emerging projects for incorporation into future CEDS for the Berkshires. Consistent updating to the database will also allow economic development partners throughout the region to access information related to their specific areas of interest or concern. A "web crawler" program created by BRPC intern Alexander Valentini is helping automate the process by collecting information from online media sources about existing and potential new entries.

The Regional Investment Database currently holds over 140 records with project start dates after 2012. New records are added regularly, and existing records are updated on an as-needed basis. Search criteria available for the database include: NAICS Sector, Developer/Organization, Municipality, Investment Type, Investment Status, Start Date, Completion Date, Investment Amounts, Zoning Type, Total Acreage, as well as less quantifiable criteria such as whether the project involves Brownfields work, Historic Preservation, or has a significant Infrastructure impact for the region. We anticipate this new resource will be useful in supporting our ongoing CEDS efforts and applications for assistance through the Economic Development Administration (EDA), as well as benefit parallel initiatives such as the Berkshire Blueprint 2.0, which will be unveiled by I Berkshire in early 2019.

For more information, contact Senior Planner Laura Brennan
(lbrennan@berkshireplanning.org or x14)

Countdown to Census 2020



The 2020 Census is 15 months away, but work is already happening to ensure that Berkshire County is counted as accurately as possible. Census data is utilized for congressional and state representation as well as distributing financial resources from both the state and federal government. Over the coming months, BRPC will be forming a Berkshire County Complete Count Committee. This committee, made up of municipal representatives, social service organizations, educational institutions, and interested citizens, will work on developing an outreach plan for reaching out to populations throughout the county who tend to be undercounted, such as those of low income, young adults, and minorities among other groups.

For more information or to participate in the complete count committee, contact Mark Maloy (mmaloy@berkshireplanning.org)

BRPC Staff Updates

Demonstrating a high level of expertise in their subject areas, Anuja Koirala and Jennifer Kimball were promoted to Principal Planners. Anuja works in the Transportation Program, primarily on transit issues and management of the TIP process. Jennifer works in the Public Health Program and leads opioid abuse prevention efforts.

After 20 years we bid farewell to the retiring Lauren Gaherty. Her work in the Environmental Planning Program will be missed.

We welcome 4 new planners who started in mid-December. Taylor McAndrew was hired as an Associate Planner in the Public Health Program to primarily assist with Opioid Abuse Prevention work. Caroline Massa was hired as a Senior Planner in the Energy and Environmental Program as a replacement for retiring Lauren Gaherty. She will focus on energy related and hazard mitigation/municipal vulnerability planning. Zachary Fleury was hired as a Planner in the Community Planning Program and will focus on comprehensive planning and land use regulations. Matthew Dovell was hired as a Planner in the Community Planning Program and will focus on municipal services and land use regulations.

District Local Technical Assistance Requests

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) is soliciting eligible projects from its member communities to receive technical assistance under the 2019 District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program. Under this program, BRPC staff provides technical assistance to communities, at no cost to the community, on eligible projects. This is not a monetary grant to communities but a grant of service. BRPC staff is able to provide this assistance through the DLTA fund, an annual grant established via Massachusetts General Laws and supported by our legislators and the Administration.

Assistance requests must be related to broad categories of Planning Ahead for Housing, Planning Ahead for Growth, Community Compact Cabinet Activities or the Housing Choice program. Applications for technical assistance must be signed by the Board of Selectmen Chairperson or Mayor and received at the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission office, preferably electronically, by 5:00 PM on January 10, 2019.

For more information go to the BRPC website <http://berkshireplanning.org/events/announcements/dlta-19-solicitation-and-application> or contact Tom Matuszko (tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org, or x34)

Planning for Future Transportation

Overview:

From early August to mid-November, transportation planning staff at the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) have been asking Berkshire residents for perspective on the condition of the region's transportation network. It comprises physical infrastructure—such as roads, bridges, and sidewalks—along with transportation services—including public and specialized transit. Of particular interest, our transportation team asked the public to help identify segments of the network that pose mobility challenges which restrict access to destinations and services. We asked for ratings on the condition of roadway infrastructure, availability of various transportation components, and assessed support for different regional initiatives.

Berkshire Regional Transportation Plan (RTP):

This most recent transportation survey feeds into our broader efforts to update Berkshire County's RTP. The RTP is a long-range, 20-year planning document providing a big picture of transportation for the county. At its core, the plan identifies current unmet transportation needs and recommends solutions that best address existing gaps. The central thrust is a list of optimal strategies to overcome current deficiencies with scheduled, financially constrained federal and state funded improvement projects. It also looks far into the future and strives to anticipate changes to our transportation infrastructure that will come from technological innovation, shifting demographics, and a warming climate. In order that BRPC accurately reflects unmet transportation needs, identify strategies, and areas for improvement in the updated RTP, we developed a survey to tap the vast wealth of knowledge from everyday network users—the Berkshire public. (Continued on Page 3)

Planning continued:

Survey Results:

Through a combination of outreach strategies and interorganizational collaboration, we received important input from over 700 residents concerning primary challenges and future transportation aspirations. Due to the nature of our survey, the results are not statistically valid based on statistical sampling since it was not a purely random sample. This means that the socio-economic features of survey participants may not evenly represent a statistically significant cross section of the larger Berkshire public. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from our survey results should be understood as a good window, and not a full and representative view, into some of the transportation challenges and aspirations of Berkshire residents.

Survey Demographics:

Examining the demographics of survey participants uncovers the largest share of respondents fall into the young adult range (30-39 years-old) and the senior adult range (60+ years-old). 62% of participants identified as female, 36% as male, and 2% preferred not to self-identify. Relative to census data for the entire county, survey participants further skewed toward having higher educational attainment along with higher annual household incomes. Roughly 70% of survey participants identified earning a 4-year college degree, graduate degree, or higher degree compared to 41% countywide. Just 7% identified earning a high school diploma as their highest level of educational attainment (countywide it's closer to 30%). Additionally, 70% of survey participants identified the total yearly income of all adults living in the household as \$50,000 or more. Only 7% identified an annual household income of under \$20,000.

Transportation Challenges:

Looking to transportation challenges, factors such as age, income, and distance to public transit facilities heavily influence access to transportation services. Our land settlement pattern is consistent with rural, sprawl type development—with many households located in isolated pockets, often separated from downtown areas by long-distances/hilly terrain. Among the challenges that we asked residents to rate (condition and availability), the top five include: (1) sidewalk condition or availability prevent me from walking more; (2) lack of bike paths or bike lanes prevent me from biking more; (3) having my opinion be heard when transportation decisions are made by local leaders; (4) BRTA bus not available when I need it; and (5) BRTA bus not available where I need it. Comments further discuss barriers to finding employment based/affordable transportation alternatives.

Desired Changes and New Services:

Among the responses we asked participants to choose from, the top five desired changes and/or new services that would make travel easier, and received the largest share of support, include: (1) increased BRTA fixed route bus frequency and include night/weekend service; (2) BRTA bus service in more locations; (3) having more taxis, or Uber or Lyft rideshare vehicles; (4) access to low-cost auto repair and maintenance service; and (5) Having a reduced fare when using Uber, Lyft, local taxis, BRTA bus, etc. Comments received also express a desire for improved interstate access, particularly from north county, and a desire to have more options for transporting residents/tourists to and from cultural venues such as Tanglewood and MASS MoCA.

Support for Regional Initiatives:

Many survey respondents voiced support for having more passenger train connections between the Berkshires and places such as Springfield, Boston, Albany, and New York City. Residents that support more regional passenger connections often acknowledged that these connections would enable greater access to different employment, educational, and recreational opportunities. The Berkshire Flyer, the proposed weekend train service that would bring tourists from NYC to Pittsfield, received high marks. Other, more general initiatives that received broad support include improving roads to make walking and bicycling safer and easier, expanding and constructing new bike trails, and again, increasing BRTA's fixed route bus frequency and include night/weekend service.

What's Next?

As we continue to analyze survey results, our transportation team will be assessing improvement ideas and desired changes identified by the public and matching these against proposed and planned improvements that will ultimately be listed in the updated RTP. Fortunately, work to address some of these challenges is already underway. Preparations are being made to study the feasibility of establishing a Transportation Management Association (TMA), the focus of which is to ensure reliable, affordable transportation for employees traveling to work. A pilot run for the Berkshire Flyer weekend train service is on track for rollout in Spring 2020. BRTA has launched a transit-ridership survey to help identify the specific hours/route enhancements that might be realized with additional funds which will benefit those working/studying late into the night/over the weekends. BRPC expects to have a draft version of the updated RTP ready for Spring 2019. The draft plan will be made available for a 21-day public comment period, after which the Berkshire MPO will consider and subsequently endorse the updated plan.



Image (above): Berkshire Flyer Site Visit

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



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Berkshire Benchmarks

The data clearinghouse on the Berkshire Benchmarks website (www.berkshirebenchmarks.org) has recently been updated to include data from the 2013-2017 US Census American Community Survey. If you haven't visited Berkshire Benchmarks in a while, go check it out for a comprehensive clearinghouse on regional and municipal data.

For more information, contact Mark Maloy (mmaloy@berkshireplanning.org)



A Note from Lauren

As many of you may know, I am retiring from BRPC as of Dec. 31st. I want to take this opportunity to say how much I've enjoyed working with all of you—municipal staff, board members, and non-profit organizations—across Berkshire County during the past 20 years. It has been an honor and inspiration to work with so many volunteers who are devoted to their communities and their environment, and who tirelessly donate their time to make the Berkshires the great place we call home.

Melissa Provencher, my colleague and team member of 19 years, will continue to provide assistance in environmental and energy planning and implementation. She may be the quiet one on the team, but be assured—she has the vision and skill to continue to steer the program in the right direction. If you haven't worked with Melissa and want to introduce yourself, her email is mprovencher@berkshireplanning.org.

Lastly, I want to thank Tom and Nat for hiring me in the first place. It just goes to show that you never know how things will work out when you hire an intern...

Until our paths cross again,
Lauren Gaherty

CALENDAR

Be sure to check out our online calendar for updates, cancellations, recently posted events and agendas. berkshireplanning.org/events/calendar

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January 3 - BRPC Executive Meeting, 4:00 pm

January 10 - BRPC Commission Meeting, 7:00 pm

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February 7 - BRPC Executive Meeting, 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 today to subscribe!