

COMMON GROUND

A NEWSLETTER FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING IN THE BERKSHIRE REGION

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Berkshire County Education Task Force (BCETF)

As we approach mid-calendar year, the Berkshire County Education Task Force (BCETF) is pleased to report ongoing and positive progress. In partnership with BRPC and Berkshires Tomorrow, we have invested funding from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary Education and Barr Foundation to tackle several ambitious efforts including:

- Research, planning and modeling related to K12 district organization
- The Barr Foundation Portrait of a Graduate project (PoG)
- The Berkshire Remote Learning Initiative (BRLI)

Research, planning & modeling: At the core of BCETF efforts is further exploration of the value proposition associated with reconfiguration (shared services, collaboration, and consolidation) of K12 districts across the Berkshires. Recognizing historical and ongoing enrollment decline and limited/stretched resources, our aim is to carefully examine educational quality and municipal and school finance variables in order to better understand possibilities. A team of researchers is actively (and carefully) benchmarking current conditions in our districts/schools in order to evaluate various options (for example - a single Berkshire county district or three sub-regional districts) that can be implemented in order to improve educational access, equity and quality—while controlling future expenses.

PoG: The aim of the PoG project is to support deep research, stakeholder engagement, and discussion leading to a collective vision of what all high school students will know and be able to do by and beyond graduation. The project involves five Berkshire high schools (Taconic, Pittsfield, Drury, BART, and Lee), with a focus on community outreach and engagement. The PoG team is: examining literature and exemplar high schools nationally; diving deeply into our local high school data including postsecondary outcomes; and engaging our community through survey instruments and focus groups. Our work will be highly informed by a large (virtual) community gathering planned for August 20 during which we hope to hear from up to 150 stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives. This will all result in a final work product that articulates a shared vision and maps out steps to actualize these aspirations. If you have not yet, we encourage participation in our current community survey at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Berkshire-community-survey>

BRLI: While BCETF efforts to date have been primarily planning, research and modeling, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us to act. As such, we are leading the development of a county-wide online/remote learning platform (Berkshire Remote Learning Initiative) intended to support consistent and high-quality remote experiences for students, while digitally connecting educators across the Berkshires. In doing so, we will be prepared for the near and long-term as we collectively navigate these turbulent times – recognizing the uncertainty of future timelines/strategies as relate to social-distancing and lasting/intermittent shutdowns. Currently, we have six districts (Lee, Lenox, Berkshire Hills, Richmond, BART, and North Adams) as partners, with several conducting internal review with their stakeholders. BCETF has committed funds for year one through existing and local funding streams, and is actively raising funds through private, grant, philanthropic and state/federal sources for years two and three. The next few months will entail implementation and set-up, intensive training for faculty/staff, and the establishment of a “commons” that will serve as a virtual community space to share/exchange practices, ideas, links and resources.

More information about BCETF can be found at our newly launched website at www.berkshireeducationtaskforce.org, or by contacting the project manager, H. Jake Eberwein at jakeeberwein@gmail.com.



Berkshire County: Housing Overview

Berkshire and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission staff have increasingly heard about several housing issues facing Berkshire County. In response to these concerns, a countywide Housing Needs Assessment is being conducted as an initial step to document current housing conditions which will be incorporated into a Strategic Housing Plan for the Berkshires. This Strategic Housing Plan will address regional challenges which have been magnified by the recent pandemic. The following is a brief summary of housing related data which identifies some key issues throughout Berkshire County.



Berkshire County has a total of 69,393 housing units; 65% of which are single, detached dwellings and 40% of the total units are 3-bedroom homes. The housing stock mostly consists of old homes with 65% of residential structures built before 1970 and 37% were built before 1940. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of occupied housing units in Berkshire County are owner occupied and 32% are renter occupied. Approximately two thirds of the vacant units in the County are for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use.

As of April 2020, there were 581 homes listed for sale with a median listed home price of \$409,000 and an average listed home price of \$670,034. Of the owner occupied homes, 24% experience housing cost burden—meaning housing costs account for more than 30% of monthly income. This figure is roughly double for renter occupied homes (51.4%).

According to the 2018 American Community Survey conducted by the Census Bureau, Berkshire County has a population of 127,328 which is a 5.7% decline from the recorded population in 2000 but the population age 65 and over increased by 22.8% between 2000 and 2018. In 2018, the age 65 and over population comprised just under a quarter of the total population. This means that although the overall population is declining, the older age cohorts are comprising a larger percentage of the total.

The paramount housing issue facing Berkshire County is a limited housing stock – limited in several ways. Homes for sale account for less than 1% of all of the housing in the County and the homes that are available for sale come at price points that are unattainable for most. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of jobs in Berkshire County are in service-providing sectors which have an average weekly wage of \$851. Workers at this income level cannot afford to buy homes in the County considering the average listed price of \$670,034.

Housing is not just limited for the prospective home buyer but for renters as well. A quick search on Zillow.com only generates 66 available rentals in the entire county. Apartments.com lists 20 and Trulia.com lists 70. Many of these listings may be advertised on multiple sites but assuming each listing is a different property, that is still a total of only 156 available rentals. The three sites aforementioned are not the only means to finding a rental home but provide a general idea of how limited rental properties are considering there are a total of over 22,200 rental properties in the County. A reason for such a low number of listed rental properties when so many actually exist is explained by how long people tend to rent throughout the County. Roughly a third of all renters have lived in their homes since before 2010 and 77% have lived in their homes since before 2015 meaning there is a very low turnover of tenants.

The limitations with housing greatly affect some the population trends experienced throughout Berkshire County. The consistent increase of median age is partially due to younger people (age 20-40) not having appropriate housing to meet their needs. There is a lack of diversity of the housing stock; the vast majority of homes available for rent/sale are too large and too expensive for a single person or young couple. This has contributed to migration out of the County where more options are available. An increase in development of smaller, more affordable, denser, transit oriented, sustainable homes would appeal to renters and buyers alike at all income levels to provide more appropriate housing which would support the regional workforce and economy. The goal would not be to replace the existing character of the housing stock, but rather to present people with more opportunities to live in the Berkshires.

The countywide Housing Needs Assessment is a data-driven report. This information has been analyzed to help identify pressing issues within the region. The Strategic Housing Plan for the Berkshire will take shape when the data is coupled with a public engagement process to get firsthand accounts of housing issues in the County. That plan will include recommendations supported by an implementation plan to help address housing challenges facing Berkshire County. Stay tuned!

For more information, contact Community Planner Philip V. Arnold (parnold@berkshireplanning.org)

Berkshire County Small Business Recovery Fund

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission has been awarded \$45,000 by the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office through their Small Business Relief Partnership grant program. The Berkshire County Small Business Recovery Fund will provide small for-profit businesses in Berkshire County with emergency assistance in adherence with the parameters set forth by the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office: addressing fixed debt, payroll, accounts payable, lost sales, lost opportunities, and other working capital expenses that could have been recognized had the COVID-19 pandemic not occurred. The focus of this fund will be on fixed costs that cannot be avoided despite the applicant's inability to operate as they did prior to regulations pertaining to non-essential business functions.

A full description of eligibility requirements, along with a link to the grant application, can be found at: <http://berkshireplanning.org/projects/small-business-relief-partnership/>.

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

Shared Streets & Spaces Grant Opportunity

Recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the need for expanding outdoor spaces for people walking, bicycling, and using bus transit to have safe and sufficient space to physically distance themselves from one another. It has also increased the need for restaurants and business activities to relocate outdoors and improve the safety and confidence of customers wary of the coronavirus. In response to this, MassDOT has established the “Shared Streets & Spaces” grant program. Streets, sidewalks, parking spaces and lots are public spaces that – used safely and well – can be re-imagined and repurposed to serve as a key ingredient in the reopening and economic recovery process, as well as to help make our communities more resilient for the future.

Through the Shared Streets & Spaces grant, a \$5M fund has been established to fund quick-launch/quick build projects that promote safe distancing and healthy, multi-modal travel as the economy re-opens. Typical projects would include shared streets and spaces, outdoor dining and commerce, better buses, and safe routes to school. Grants range from \$5K to \$300K. To qualify, projects need to be able to be implemented quickly, flexibly, at low cost, and without major roadway reconstruction. Applicants should consider using inexpensive and readily available materials, such as traffic cones, temporary plastic barriers, flexible delineators, planters, and temporary paint. (Materials purchased using funds from this program become the property of the municipality.) Applicants should also consider how a successful project could eventually be made permanent.

More information on Shared Streets and Spaces grants and technical assistance, as well as a resource library about shared streets and spaces, can be found at: <https://www.mass.gov/shared-streets-and-spaces-grant-program>

For more information or application assistance, contact Transportation Program Manager Clete Kus
(CKuc@berkshireplanning.org)

Commonwealth Places COVID-19 Response Round: Resurgent Places

MassDevelopment has announced a special round of funding specifically to help community partners prepare public space and commercial districts to best serve their population during communities’ economic recovery efforts. Eligible projects will comply with the Commonwealth’s Reopening Massachusetts plan, and may include outdoor seating spaces, sidewalk retail venues, partitions to support social distancing, and more. Municipalities are not eligible for this funding, but non-profits and community groups are—please inform your contacts at local chambers of commerce, cultural districts, libraries, community centers, etc. MassDevelopment will be making awards of up to \$25,000. Up to \$10,000 per project may be awarded as an unmatched grant; awards greater than \$10,000 must be matched with crowdfunding donations. Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis until July 31, 2020. More information and a link to the application are available here: <http://massdevelopment.com/commonwealthplaces>

Ridesharing in Massachusetts and in the Berkshires

In Massachusetts, the Transportation Network Company (TNC) Division of the Department of Public Utilities oversees rideshare companies, such as Uber and Lyft, rideshare services, and rideshare drivers throughout the state. Massachusetts law requires rideshare companies to share data with the Commonwealth. TNC’s pay an assessment of 20 cents per ride that is distributed among cities and towns, the Massachusetts’s general transportation fund, and Mass Development to assist small businesses operating in the taxicab, livery, or hackney industries.

Since 2017, the TNC Division has been collecting rideshare data for the state. Recently released 2019 data shows that TNC’s provided 91.1 million rides in Massachusetts, approximately 12% more than in 2018 and 40.6% more than in 2017. The increase occurred throughout the state, in towns and cities of all sizes and types. In 2017, assessments collected from TNC’s amounted to more than \$12 million in MA. More than \$16 million was collected in 2018, and more than \$18.2 million was collected in 2019.

Revenues generated through the TNC assessment and distributed to towns and cities vary widely. Most Berkshire municipalities receive small monetary sums – funds that are typically “banked for future use in accordance with the statute.” Other municipalities use these funds for pedestrian improvements such as crosswalk signalization upgrades or engineering work on bike path and/or complete streets planning efforts. For more information about Massachusetts’s TNC data and how your municipality allocated funds it received from rides taken in 2017 and 2018, please visit the state’s Department of Public Utilities website at <https://tnc.sites.digital.mass.gov/>.

The number of TNC’s providing rides in Berkshire County amounts to a very small proportion of all rides provided throughout the state. In both 2017 and 2018, TNC’s providing rides in Berkshire County accounted for 0.02% of all rides in the state. That’s 16,871 trips in Berkshire County during 2017, compared to the 64.8 million trips statewide – and 16,874 trips in the county during 2018, compared to the 81.3 million rides provided across the state that year. There was a slight increase in 2019 – with the Berkshires accounting for 54,223 trips of the total 91.1 million rides provided across the state (0.05% of all rides). In Berkshire County, the highest number of ‘trips started’ for the past 3-years are seen in central (Pittsfield, Dalton) and south county (Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge) with the addition of Lanesborough, North Adams, and Williamstown to the north. From 2018 to 2019, ‘destination trip’ data show the same municipalities listed above as receiving the greatest share of these trips, with slight variations.

For more information on categories of data collected and/or for specific TNC data for your municipality, please contact Transportation Planner Justin Gilmore at JGilmore@Berkshireplanning.org.



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BRPC COVID-19 Update

While the COVID-19 crisis continues to disrupt all aspects of life—health and safety, work, entertainment, family events, commerce, travel, etc.—the partial re-opening has somewhat lessened that disruption for us. The BRPC office is partially open. A limited number of staff who choose to are in the office daily. As of June 22nd up to 10 staff are allowed at the same time. By prior appointment, small in-person meetings are allowed—still maintaining the appropriate physical separation. However, most of the BRPC staff is still working remotely and we are still conducting BRPC meetings virtually.

Sadly, the economic disruption continues. Staff has continued to look for funding for economic relief. In addition to the Small Business Recovery Fund highlighted in this newsletter, we are seeking funding for micro-enterprises that meet low to moderate income levels and funding to provide technical assistance to businesses and municipalities to allow them adapt to the changing times and to build resiliency if this crisis continues or magnifies.



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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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July 7 - Environmental Review Meeting, 4:00 pm

July 16 - BRPC Executive Committee meeting, 5:00 pm

July 16 - BRPC Full Commission meeting, 6:00 pm

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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!