



MINUTES OF THE REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE
September 14, 2020
Meeting Held Via Zoom Video Communications

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:01 by CJ Hoss, Committee Chair. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

CJ Hoss, Chair, Pittsfield
Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield
Kyle Hanlon, North Adams
Andrew Groff, Williamstown
Chris Rembold, Great Barrington
Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Committee Members Absent

none

BRPC Staff Present

Tom Matuzsko, Executive Director
Laura Brennan, Senior Planner

Guests Present

Robert O'Connor, EOEEA

II. Approval of May 20th, 2020 Meeting Minutes

Kyle H. moved to approve the minutes of the May 20th, 2020 meeting. The motion was seconded by Sheila I. Eleanor T. provided typographical edits to be incorporated into the final version. The Committee voted to approve the minutes. The results of the roll call vote were as follows:

- Andrew G. – Yes
- Chris R. – Yes
- CJ Hoss – Yes
- Eleanor T. – Yes
- Kyle H. – Yes
- Sheila I. – Yes

III. Resilient Lands Initiative Overview

CJ Hoss welcomed Robert O'Connor to the meeting and everyone briefly introduced themselves.

Mr. O'Connor shared a slide presentation with the group, overviewing the statewide conservation plan for Massachusetts. This plan has a focus on "expanding nature across the Commonwealth to help people". He stated that this is being referred to as an initiative rather than a plan because it will be an ongoing effort over the next ten years, and in

contrast to the previous plan in 2003/2004, is an inclusive vision in the climate change era. Participants looked at how land conservation could be most beneficial to communities. The last statewide land conservation plan had a stated goal of protecting 1,000,000 acres and thus far about 40% of that has been achieved. The steering committee of 40 participants for the current plan included state and federal agencies, conservation agents, municipal and regional planners, non-profits, urban organizations and universities, and did not state an acreage goal. Multiple focus group sessions were held, coordinated by UMass Donahue.

Eight (8) Land Values were considered and served as topics for focus group sessions.

Urban Parks and Public Health
Reducing Climate Impacts to People
Supporting Stable Economies
Forests
Farms
Habitats
Watershed and Water Supply
Outdoor Recreation

Eight (8) Strategies were developed based on the ideas brought forth by participants:

- Improve the health of community residents by providing close-to-home outdoor recreation and preparing communities for increased heat waves and flooding (focus on cooling of neighborhoods with parks/green space);
- Expand the amount of locally grown food, especially in food deserts, and prepare farms for future stress from droughts and floods (includes a Vacant Lots to Farms program);
- Create a new green economy with expanded jobs in local farm and forest products and in building resilient forests and urban canopy and healthy soils that store more carbon (creating 10 new jobs in each of 100 rural communities, as well as a "Lands for People" Law which would incentivize greening of spaces);
- Achieve a significant increase in carbon storage and climate resilience in our forests;
- Expand landscape and watershed-scale conservation and restoration projects via EEA agencies and regional and statewide land trusts and watershed organizations – permanent conservation means constantly improving climate resilience values for people and habitat;
- Protect and restore water supplies, waterways and habitats from increased threats (overlap of high biodiversity areas and drinking water watersheds);
- Achieve a no-net loss of farms and forests by 2030;
- Collaborate with residents and communities about land conservation and restoration as the key to climate change solutions (expanding the diversity of the partnership, creating a website for RLI).

After the presentation, committee members had an opportunity to ask questions and share concerns. CJ Hoss raised a concern regarding availability of land as more and more land is conserved without measures to ensure that housing options for workforce are available, especially in regions with high concentrations of poverty. Funding for water and sewer in rural communities is needed so that people are not priced out. He also felt the aspect of adding jobs in the green economy were important to achieving the strategies of the plan.

Andrew Groff shared that in his community of Williamstown a common concern is farm succession plans and would like to see that be an area of focus moving forward. Mr.

O'Connor responded that the APR program needs to be expanded beyond the federal guidelines to address some situations.

Eleanor Tillinghast stated that she is very impressed with what has been put together, and had questions about Strategy 6 (providing annual payments for implementing best practices for carbon storage and climate resilience) and 7 (annual incentives for verified forestry practices such as thinning, extended rotation, tree retention, etc.). She brought up the alternative of leaving forests intact as older forests absorb more carbon than young forests and wondered if discussions included annual or incentive payments to leave forests intact. Mr. O'Connor described working with the Nature Conservancy on their pilot program in Pennsylvania which includes light-duty and normal forestry as well as setting aside land. There are arguments for both thinning the forests to increase growth or leaving it alone entirely. There are situations where one or the other might be better, depending on the type of forest and its conditions. Eleanor T. asked if landowners that leave forests intact would also be eligible for payments or incentives under the proposed plan. Mr. O'Connor stated that he believes so and will look into it further. Eleanor T. asked that the committee's letter of support include mention of incentives and payment for leaving forests alone, which would be important especially for municipal landowners.

Sheila I. stated that she feels urban green spaces is an important part of this initiative, especially as paved areas are hotter in the summer and susceptible to intense weather in the winter, and we need to balance the need for new housing with urban green space.

Tom M. added comments about affordability, as the Berkshire region relies on our pristine landscape but hardships are created for municipalities when land is taken off of the tax rolls, and benefits for rural communities that might already have significant land conserved should be considered through this initiative. He also indicated that the Housing Choice program which includes incentives for housing development, and the two initiatives should be tied together. Mr. O'Connor replied that Chapter 40 smart growth efforts should also include greening of neighborhoods where housing is being developed. Vacant lots should be considered not only for redevelopment but also green space. Better coordination is needed between agencies.

Chris R. offered congratulations on the program, which encompasses large rural landscapes as well as urban greening on a smaller scale in gateway and other cities. He suggested that Housing Choice, MassWorks, and other state grant programs should incorporate elements of this plan as additional bonus points or incentives would help to advance this initiative. He further suggested that the BRPC letter of support does not need to be too detailed, but that we look forward to working further with EOEEA on the implementation of this plan.

Tom M. asked Mr. O'Connor what would be most useful. Mr. O'Connor suggested that a brief letter that listed areas we would like to focus on in the future would be helpful.

The committee discussed timing for the letter, which will need to be endorsed by the Commission on Thursday evening, September 17th. Review by the RIC will need to occur quickly in order to advance the letter to the Full Commission.

A motion was made by Eleanor T. that BRPC staff draft a letter of general support which also identifies specific topics of interest for further exploration, circulate the draft to the group in time for consideration and endorsement by the Full Commission on Thursday, September 17th. Chris R. seconded, and a roll call vote was conducted:

Kyle H. – yes

CJ H. – yes
Sheila I. – yes
Chris R. – yes
Eleanor T. - yes

IV. Topics for Future Consideration

A number of previously discussed potential topics for consideration were brought up again by committee members and staff:

- Update on Solar PILOT/tax agreement legislation
- Monitoring of upcoming overhaul of RGGI standards
- Recently released Culvert Report
- Middle Mile broadband – contract renewal for Axia
- Transportation Climate Initiative progress

Staff and Committee Chair will regroup later in September or early October to determine which topic if any is most time sensitive and should be placed on the agenda for October.

V. Next Committee Meeting Date – October 28th, 2020

VI. Adjournment

CJ H. adjourned the meeting at 5:09pm.