



### A Newsletter for Community Planning in the Berkshire Region

Invite others to read Common Ground! Share [this link](#) with your colleagues.



A big thank you and well wishes to **Eammon Coughlin**, Senior Transportation Planner, as he moves to his new role as Community Development Director for the Town of Adams. Eammon started with BRPC as a temporary planner in 2015 and quickly become integral to BRPC and the Transportation Program. We are certain he will be a great asset to Adams.

### Grant Opportunities

**July 12, 2021:** MassDEP announces funding for private, public, and non-profit entities to **replace eligible diesel vehicles and equipment** with more efficient technologies. This is an early replacement program to accelerate retirement of older less efficient diesel vehicles and equipment. <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-diesel-emissions-reduction-act-dera-open-solicitation-grant>. Questions [cayla.paulding@mass.gov](mailto:cayla.paulding@mass.gov).

**July 16, 2021: Revolving Funds for Financing Water and Wastewater Projects**  
USDA Rural Development is accepting grant applications to create revolving loan funds to build and improve water and wastewater disposal systems in rural areas.  
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/revolving-funds-for-financing-water-and-wastewater-projects>

**July 23, 2021: SBA Community Navigators** A new grant funding opportunity is open to states, tribes, units of local government and other non-profit organizations to conduct outreach to underserved businesses. Read more [here](#).

**July 26, 2021: [USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge \(RPIC\)](#)**  
Up to \$3 million in grants to help rural communities create plans to enhance capacity for broadband access; preserve cultural and historic structures; and support development in transportation, housing, and recreational spaces. More information: [RD.RPIC@usda.gov](mailto:RD.RPIC@usda.gov) or page 28526 of the May 27 [Federal Register](#).

**August 16, 2021: NTIA State and Local Broadband Infrastructure Program**  
DOC's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has announced the \$288 million in grant funding for the deployment of broadband infrastructure. More information can be found in the [Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) published on [grants.gov](#). NTIA is also holding a [series of webinars](#) to further inform the public about the program.

Rolling applications: [Community Development Block Grant Microenterprise Assistance](#) for income-qualifying small businesses. More information at above link or via Christie Lewis, 413-442-1521 x 23, [clewis@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:clewis@berkshireplanning.org).

**Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (CLFRF)** for local governments. Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration & Finance Federal Funds Office [memorandum](#) outlines eligible uses. Additional information, is at [Executive Office for Administration & Finance Federal Funds Office webpage](#) and [DLS COVID-19 Resources and Guidance for Municipal Officials page](#). Please contact Tom Matuszko, [tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org) if your community is interested.

### Community Planning

Training for New Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals Members

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission will host a training for new members of Planning Boards and Zoning Boards of Appeals on the evening of **July 29<sup>th</sup>**. The training will include a slideshow prepared by the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative and will be presented by a guest speaker. The guest speaker and time of the training are to be determined. Further details will follow soon so please stay tuned. If you have any questions, please contact Phil Arnold via email at [parnold@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:parnold@berkshireplanning.org).

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## Zoning Changes by Simple Majority Vote

In January of this year, Governor Baker signed Bill H. 5250 which focuses on economic development, housing assistance, and pandemic relief efforts. As part of this new Bill, amendments were made to M.G.L. c.40A: Zoning. Perhaps the most notable change to zoning was allowing certain uses to be adopted by simple majority vote at Annual Town Meeting or by City Council rather than by 2/3's vote. The intent here is to make it easier for a municipality to create diversity in their housing stock. More details of the Bill can be found through the following link:

<https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H5250> Excerpts can be found here: Amendments to 40A, The Zoning Act <https://berkshireplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/40A-Changes-Economic-Development-Bill-12.31.20.pdf>.

If your town or city has adopted, or intends to adopt, new zoning by simple majority vote, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission is requesting that you contact us to inform the Commission of the changes. Please contact BRPC's Executive Director, Tom Matuszko, via email at [tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org)

## Data & Information Services

### Update on Berkshire Benchmarks

The Berkshire Leadership Impact Council (BLIC) has hired BRPC to update the Berkshire Benchmarks website and develop regional indicators. Over the last eight months, BRPC has been working with community organizations and individuals representing eight sectors to develop a draft list of indicators. These sectors are Economy, Education, Environment, Health, Housing, Government, Social Environment, and Transportation. These draft indicators are available for review by the public. As we gather the data for each indicator, we will be reconvening the sectors to review the data and prioritize the indicators. These indicators will then be approved by BLIC and form the foundation of an annual State of the County Report. In addition, the Berkshire Benchmarks website will be redesigned to include an easier to use data clearinghouse and interactive display of the indicators. The updated website, the State of the County Report, and a bi-annual convening on the state of the Berkshires will occur in late winter/early spring 2022. This work is supported by Berkshire United Way. For more information, contact Mark Maloy, [mmaloy@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:mmaloy@berkshireplanning.org).



## Economic Development

### Berkshire Economic Recovery Project - Recovery Project Support & Technical Assistance

As part of the [recently-awarded EDA investment](#) in economic recovery and resilience in Berkshire County, BRPC is able to arrange for technical assistance to municipal staff in a range of topics, including (but not limited to): increased access to online payments and services for your residents and businesses, improved and expanded tools to communicate with your residents and businesses, information about available funding sources for municipalities, and review and revision of policies which affect economic recovery in your community.

For more information about either of these opportunities, or to suggest a technical assistance topic you believe would be helpful for municipal leaders in Berkshire County, please contact Economic Development Program Manager Laura Brennan at [lbrennan@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:lbrennan@berkshireplanning.org).

## Environmental & Energy

### MEPA Regulatory Review

The Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) office within the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) conducts the MEPA Review Process for certain development projects. The MEPA review process provides meaningful opportunities for public review of potential environmental impacts of certain projects for which certain actions by state agencies are required. It requires state agencies to study the environmental impacts of projects requiring state permitting, financial assistance or land disposition, and to use all feasible measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate damage to the environment or, to the extent damage to the environment cannot be avoided, to minimize and mitigate damage to the environment to the maximum extent practicable.

The MEPA office is conducting a regulatory review. An update on MEPA's regulatory review effort was published in the June 23 Environmental Monitor, and is available on the [MEPA website](#). Public presentations on the status of the MEPA regulatory review effort will be held on July 14, 2021 (see [MEPA website](#) for details). A power point presentation summarizing the effort is available [here](#). In addition, the MEPA office issued two revised protocols concerning [climate change adaptation](#) and [environmental justice](#) (EJ) public involvement requirements. The MEPA office is accepting comments on the EJ protocol at [MEPA-regs@mass.gov](mailto:MEPA-regs@mass.gov) until July 30, 2021. The MEPA office is continuing to hold stakeholder meetings in Summer/Fall 2021, and plans to open a formal rulemaking process under G.L. c. 30A in Fall 2021.

Members of the public can subscribe to receive notices of ongoing updates of by sending a blank email to [subscribe-mepa\\_reg\\_review@listserv.state.ma.us](mailto:subscribe-mepa_reg_review@listserv.state.ma.us). Please ensure that both the subject line and the body of the email are blank and that the email does not contain an automatic signature or the email address will not be added to the listserv. BRPC Contact: Melissa Provencher, [mprovencher@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:mprovencher@berkshireplanning.org).

## Public Health

### COVID-19 Emergency After-Action Report and Improvement Plan

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission's Public Health Program received a grant from the Western Region Homeland Security Advisory Council to develop a scope of services to guide a consultant in conducting an After-Action Report and Improvement Plan (AAR/IP) process for the COVID-19 emergency.

The focus is on things we can change in Western Mass at the local, county and regional levels to improve our response to the next public health emergency. We will be looking at everything from planning and plans to communications and vaccinations. We want the consultant to capture the essential issues and identify doable improvements such as moving our local public health infrastructure into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

During this planning process, we will ask responders to focus on very specific things:

1. Who should we talk to while *developing* this scope of services?
2. Who should the consultant be sure to talk to?
3. What are the priority issues the consultant should be sure to include in their process?
4. What questions do we want this report to answer?

BRPC will not be eligible to respond to the RFR for the AAR Consultant, given our role in developing the scope of services, but we expect to be vital participants in the AAR/IP process. The RFR will be announced around October 2021. The work will likely begin December 2021 and finish by June 2022. Contact Allison Egan for more information, [aegan@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:aegan@berkshireplanning.org).

## Regional Initiatives & Services

### Legislative Redistricting

After the release of the U.S. Decennial Census, Massachusetts is constitutionally mandated to change its House, Senate, Governor's Council and Congressional district boundaries to accommodate shifts in population and provide equal representation to its citizens.

Berkshire County is facing several challenges when it comes to re-districting. Overall, the

population of the state has increased, meaning that the populations of all the districts in the state will need to increase. The population of Berkshire County has been declining for the past several decades. The Census count occurred in 2020. While there may have been a recent increase in the county's population related to the COVID pandemic it will not likely be reflected in the Census numbers. Hence, it is likely Berkshire County's population will stay level or decline. This will contribute to the legislative districts needing to increase in size to pick up population from more communities. Berkshire districts can only expand to the east. The Berkshires' Congressional and Senate districts will likely include more non-Berkshire municipalities.

The potential exists for the Berkshires to lose a Representative District. The Special Joint Committee on Redistricting is tasked with studying and proposing new districts to be used for the 2022 elections. Although the final Census data is not expected to be released until the end of September, this Committee anticipates receiving initial community Census results in the middle of August to prepare proposals for public review by the end of September. The Committee needs to finalize its work with legislation approved and presented to the Governor for his approval by late October / early November 2021. This date is mandated by a constitutional timeline requirement that perspective Representatives must live in a district at least one year prior to the election. For more information, contact Tom Matuszko, [tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org](mailto:tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org).

## Transportation

### Partners collaborate on county-wide volunteer driver program



After years of planning, **Wheels for Wellness**, a volunteer driver program serving all of Berkshire County, offered its first ride on June 1. A collaborative effort among the City of Pittsfield RSVP program (RSVP), Berkshire Community Action Council (BCAC), Berkshire Interfaith Organizing (BIO), Berkshire Fallon Health Collaborative, Community Health Programs, and Berkshire Health Systems, Wheels for Wellness was originally set to launch in April 2020. Collaborating agencies delayed their timeline due to the

pandemic but maintained contact through bimonthly check-ins and in March 2021 - with an eye toward helping county residents access vaccine appointments - determined they were ready to plan for launch. They recruited 20 drivers, conducted outreach to riders, and in their first three weeks offered nearly 40 rides.

The idea of Wheels to Wellness emerged from a shared desire among BCAC, BIO, and the health systems to address the transportation barriers experienced by rural residents in Berkshire County. Inspired by a South County volunteer driver program run by Volunteers in Medicine Berkshires, they decided to pursue a volunteer transportation model and brought in RSVP, which already offered a volunteer driver program within the City of Pittsfield. RSVP agreed to administer the day-to-day operations, BCAC offered to play the role of fiscal sponsor for donations or grants, and BIO and the healthcare partners agreed to assist with recruiting volunteers, outreach to riders, and fundraising. "Each partner was willing to take on the role they needed to play to make this work, and every partner has been committed and engaged," highlights Jeff Lowenstein, Director of Community Planning at BCAC.

In order to address as many transportation barriers as possible, Wheels for Wellness has very few eligibility or trip restrictions. Because RSVP is a program for older adult volunteers, volunteer drivers must be between ages 55 and 79. Volunteers drive their own cars, must show that they have insurance and a clean driving record, and must be fully immunized against COVID-19. Anyone age 18 or older can request a ride. Understanding that demand for rides might outstrip supply of drivers, the partners developed a plan for prioritizing trips, with vaccine appointments at the top, followed by other medical appointments, access to social services, and then other destinations more broadly related to wellbeing. "This program does a really good job of making use of our county's assets. In the Berkshires, we tend to focus on what we don't have, but what we do have is an older population, a very high rate of car ownership, and a very strong regional culture around looking out for each other," says Lowenstein. Next steps include a billboard campaign to recruit additional riders, and an ongoing focus on recruiting more drivers.

**Volunteer Drivers are needed to make this program a success!** Berkshire County drivers ages 55 to 79 are welcome. If you would like to be a Volunteer Driver and make a difference to Berkshire County communities or want to book a ride, please call **413-395-0109** or visit <https://www.wheelsforwellness.net>.

