



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

Background on Charles Kusik

The BRPC inaugurated the Kusik Award in 1996. This annual award is named in honor of the late Charles Kusik, a resident of the Town of Richmond, who for over three decades placed his expert imprint on the zoning bylaws of nearly every town in the Berkshires. He retired at age 82. He and his wife lived in Richmond until shortly before his death at age 91 in 1992.

Charles was an Estonian Diplomat who had first come to the U.S. with his parents in 1921. He held a Master's Degree from New York University and in 1931 completed all of the course requirements for a Doctorate from Columbia University Business School. He served as Estonia's Consul General in New York from 1931 to 1939 and was also in charge of the Washington legation during those years. He returned to Estonia and was working as First Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when Soviet Troops invaded in 1940. He fled with his wife, Mary, who was also of Estonian descent and two children. In need of a job, they moved to Richmond, where he bought a chicken farm on West Street. That provided him with a second career while they raised their family. He became very active in Richmond Civic affairs, most notably serving for 28 years on the Planning Board, where he was instrumental in the passage of Richmond's first zoning bylaw in 1954.

From the formation of the Commission in the mid-sixties, Charles was an active Delegate. In 1967, the Commission consisted mostly of the two cities and the larger towns – who needed Regional Plans in order to become eligible for sewer and water grants and loans. The smaller towns who had no central water supply or sewer systems were slow to adopt zoning and subdivision controls. Many had no Planning Boards until the late sixties. Tyringham was the last town to establish a Planning Board in 1978. The small towns had only rudimentary zoning and some had none at all. The Commission quickly became a resource for people in the Berkshire towns that wanted to plan to control growth. Charles began his remarkable career as "Citizen Planner". He worked as a volunteer and then as the Commission's only paid traveling consultant. (This was a third career, as he happily retired from chicken farming.) He spent countless evenings at Planning Board meetings helping towns to craft Zoning packages that could get through Town Meetings which had been notably resistant to any regulation that came from the outside. But Charles was one of their own, and his extensive knowledge and endless patience helped nearly all Berkshire towns adopt or amend their zoning and amend subdivision regulations. He'll quickly say that what local Boards needed most was a basic "How To" guide for their activities, and so he wrote a large number of manuals, including:

- How a Zoning Board of Appeals Operates
- Non-Conforming Uses

- How to Conduct a Public Hearing
- Notice Requirements
- Special Permits and Variances
- Procedures for Adopting Bylaws

He devised a basic template for a one district zoning bylaw – usually with one-acre zoning (no map required) and a number of by right uses and a number more by Special Permit. Those bare bones have been fleshed out or replaced in many towns, but many towns remain reluctant to adopt bylaws which are more complicated. Because Charles knew first-hand how towns work, he was able to help Boards get their bylaws adopted and help them administer them, almost entirely with local planner and staff.

For many towns, he **was** the Regional Planning Commission and what they saw as the reason for belonging to it, as all communities did by 1979. Charles could talk knowledgeably to Board members and lawyers about zoning problems and questions and there were few cases in the field that he didn't know by heart.

He was honored nationally for his work, receiving an award as a "Citizen Planner" from the National Planning Professional Association. Charles was a night owl, and local Board members knew they could call him as late as midnight and find him working and happy to talk with them. He and his wife had a nap and an early dinner, and then he was set to work far into the night.

He never lost his Estonian accent and when he spoke, he often failed to use articles so that he always spoke about "power of Planning Board" – a power he believed in firmly. He encouraged Planning Boards to stand up for what they believed was right even when it was, as it often was, very unpopular. He taught Boards that they needed town plans and that they needed to participate in Regional Planning activities. When asked after the passage of the first Richmond Zoning Bylaw if he thought people knew what they were voting on, he said. "no, of course not, or they wouldn't have voted voluntarily to restrict their freedom of action with regard to their land, but they will learn that Richmond community will be a much better place with what they voted for tonight." He and the Richmond Planning Board continued to refine that bylaw, but you can still see the bare bones they set for in the 1954 Bylaw.

Berkshire County is a far different place in outward appearance and inward beauty than it would be if Charles had not lived.

Leslie Reed-Evans of the Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation; Donald S. Dubendorf, Esq., of Berkshire Connect; George S. Wislocki and Tad Ames of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council; Mayor Gerald S. Doyle, Jr., and City Council President Thomas E. Hickey, Jr., of the City of Pittsfield; State Representative Peter J. Larkin; Rachel Fletcher of the Great Barrington River Walk and Timothy Gray of Housatonic River Initiative; and Mayor John Barrett, III, of the City of North Adams. The Richmond Civic Association originally underwrote the cost of the Kusik Award.