



MINUTES OF THE REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, October 27, 2021

Hybrid Zoom Virtual/In-Person Meeting

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:01 pm by CJ Hoss. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

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

Committee Members Absent

John Duval, Chair of BRPC

BRPC Staff Present

Tom Matuszko, Executive Director
Clete Kus, Transportation Program Manager
Melissa Provencher, Environmental & Energy Program Manager
Laura Brennan, Economic Development Program Manager
Wylie Goodman, Senior Planner

Other Attendees

Dr. Ben Tafoya, Director of Division of Local Mandates, Office of the State Auditor (Present via Zoom)
Deanna Ruffer, Pittsfield (Present via Zoom)
Christine Rasmussen, Stockbridge (Present via Zoom)

II. Approval of September 22nd, 2021, Meeting Minutes

The September Meeting Minutes were not approved, following requested edits from Eleanor T. The edits will be made, and revised minutes presented at the November 17th meeting.

III. Municipal Infrastructure Report Presentation – Dr. Ben Tafoya

Dr. Tafoya summarized findings from the 10/5/21 report from Auditor Suzanne Bump's Office titled [Public Infrastructure in Western Massachusetts: A Critical Need](#)

[for Regional Investment and Revitalization](#). Tom M. reiterated the importance of the report confirming what Western Massachusetts' stakeholders have long known about shortages in funding to the region. He expressed appreciation to the Auditor's office for the report findings and subsequent advocacy on behalf of the region.

Dr. Tafoya began his summary by noting that Western Massachusetts faces multiple challenges in demographic and financial health categories (e.g., school-age children, workforce, broadband). The report is informed by the underlying belief that public infrastructure represents an important inroad through which the government can enhance civic and commercial life in the region.

The report is based in part on a survey sent to 101 Western Mass. communities with 45 responses received from representative stakeholders. The survey confirmed three critical infrastructure categories for the auditor's office to address: transportation (roadways, bridges, culverts), public buildings (other than schools), and broadband access.

Major findings from these three categories are noted below:

Transportation:

- The FHWA rated 62% of bridges in the region as being in fair condition and 9% as poor, with roads highly impacted by climate change.
- Communities are highly dependent on Chapter 90 for roadway funding, with 60% of towns' spending on roadway maintenance coming from this source and 30% from local funding.
- Statewide, Chapter 90 provides approximately \$200M in roadway maintenance funding but the real need is \$588M, representing a \$388M gap.
- Other sources of funding (e.g., TIF, MassWorks, and STRAP) are either a) risky for towns to undertake in terms of initial outlay and expense, or b) hampered by the number of applications far exceeding money available for annual awards, and/or c) lack of expertise among local staff.

Municipal Buildings:

- 37 of 45 responding communities identified substantial needs around repair or total replacement of municipal buildings.
- Annual replacement needs were estimated at \$100M.
- Communities across the Commonwealth face this same challenge; it is not unique to Western Massachusetts.
- In Western Mass. the only money received for such work, over a five-year period, was \$160K in federal funding from a USDA program.

Broadband Access:

- Broadband was identified as a primary municipal challenge.
- The State has an aggressive program through MBI to help underserved communities.
- Several communities are still in process in terms of broadband build-out via one of three methods (i.e., as public utility; via partnership with private utility; via partnership with independent utility using wireless).

- Throughput in Western Mass. broadband speeds are just over 50% of the State average.
- Constant changes in technology remain an ongoing concern to ensure the region stays competitive.

Recommendations of the Report:

- Significantly increase annual funding for Chapter 90 from \$200M to \$300M.
- Change the funding formula, as per a recommendation from Rep. Pignatelli, to place more emphasis on roadway mileage, while reducing the formula's calculation that is dependent on population and employment figures.
- Enhance STRAP funding to be a larger percent of MassWorks' allocation and increase flexibility from the current \$1M cap.
- Provide more funding for small bridges and culverts.
- Start a public safety building authority similar to the Commonwealth's school building authority, focused on municipal buildings with regional equity a consideration. Allow funding for repairs as well as new construction with a dedicated funding/revenue stream rather than relying on annual appropriations.
- Continue broadband buildout via MBI and continue funding the required work to make internet access competitive in Western Mass.

Post-Report Follow-Up and Next Steps:

- There have been stakeholder meetings following the report in which Western Mass planning councils have been actively involved.
- As the State considers the historic opportunity of additional Federal funding, BRPC called a meeting of Selectboard members, planners, municipal managers and administrators to draft recommendations with the goal of coordinating with other regional planning agencies.
- In the interim, a comment letter, mirroring the report's recommendations, was sent by BRPC's Executive Director and FRCOG's Executive Director to the MA legislature and Legislative Rural Caucus.
- A more detailed and structured set of Commission-generated comments could be drafted and sent to the legislature to increase advocacy efficacy. Dr. Tafoya noted that time is of the essence for this action.
- The House is still considering recommendations from the Ways and Means Committee for spending ARPA money and State Surplus from the last FY allocated to supplementing ARPA expenditures. There is an amendment from Rep. Mark to add \$50M to Chapter 90 as a one-time supplement. After the House reviews over 1000 submitted amendments, the bill will go to the MA Senate for consideration.

Eleanor T. reviewed the comment letter submitted by BRPC's Executive Director and suggested additional monies be sought for culverts (currently \$200M) and the Clean Water Trust (\$100M). She also suggested additional funding for towns that have a high percentage of State-Owned Land (i.e., PILOT) program that receive extensive public use.

IV. Further discussion of State-Owned Land Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) Report

Tom M. has not yet drafted a comment letter to the legislature addressing bills related to PILOT, which he noted constrains rural towns' ability to raise funds for local schools, as well.

Tom will follow up with the Chair of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission about comments on proposed PILOT and infrastructure legislation changes informed by both Auditor reports.

Tom M. recommended, supported by Dr. Tafoya, that Selectboards send in comments soon, particularly to recommend more funding for Chapter 90 and structural changes to the formula. A dedicated funding/revenue source for municipal building repairs is also critical.

V. Topics for Future Consideration

CJ H. recommended that PILOT be the focus of the November meeting. If another meeting is needed prior to November 17th to address urgent legislative action, this remains an option for the Committee.

VI. Next Committee Meeting Date – November 17th, 2021

Laura will poll Committee members to ensure the meeting can be moved from November 24th to November 17th, given the normally scheduled date's proximity to the Thanksgiving holiday.

VII. Adjournment

CJ H. made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 4:59 p.m. Eleanor T. seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 4:59 p.m.