



FULL COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES APPROVED January 20, 2022

This was a virtual meeting as allowed by Ch. 20 of the Acts of 2021 suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c.30 sec.20.

I. Opening

A. The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m.

Chair John Duval stated that per the open meeting law, BRPC records all meetings. Others may record the meeting after informing the chair. Any documents presented must be provided to the chair at the meeting. Pittsfield TV was recording.

B. Roll Call

The following Commission members were present:

John Duval – Adams Alternate
Robert Ronzio – Becket Delegate
Ann Krawet – Becket Alternate
Peter Traub – Cheshire Delegate
Mary McGurn – Egremont Alternate
Malcolm Fick – Great Barrington Alternate
Barbara Davis-Hassan – Lanesborough Delegate
Buck Donovan – Lee Delegate
Sheila Irvin – Pittsfield Delegate
Fred Schubert – Richmond Alternate
Sarah Satterthwaite – Savoy Delegate
Sari Hoy – Sheffield Delegate
René Wood – Sheffield Alternate
Nancy Socha – Stockbridge Delegate
Christine Rasmussen – Stockbridge Alternate
Amanda Hamilton – Tyringham Delegate
Don Gagnon – Washington Delegate
Roger Lawrence – Williamstown Delegate
Roger Bolton – Williamstown Alternate
Doug McNally – Windsor Delegate

Staff Present:

Thomas Matuszko – Executive Director
Marianne Sniezek – Office Manager
Kate Hill Tapia – Office Administrator
Chris Brown – Community Planner
Patricia Mullins – Community Development & Housing Program
Manager

Lydia Shulman – Coordinator, Berkshire Public Health Alliance

Others Present:

Brittany Polito, iBerkshire; Pittsfield Community Television

C. Approval of Minutes of November 18, 2021, Meeting

Sheila Irvin moved to approve the draft minutes of the November 18, 2021 meeting. Roger Bolton seconded the motion. There were no comments or discussion. The minutes were approved with a roll call vote and seven abstentions.

Yes:

John Duval – Adams Alternate
Peter Traub – Cheshire Delegate
Mary McGurn – Egremont Alternate
Barbara Davis-Hassan – Lanesborough Delegate
Buck Donovan – Lee Delegate
Sheila Irvin – Pittsfield Delegate
Fred Schubert – Richmond Alternate
Sarah Satterthwaite – Savoy Delegate
Sari Hoy – Sheffield Delegate
René Wood – Sheffield Alternate
Nancy Socha – Stockbridge Delegate
Christine Rasmussen – Stockbridge Alternate
Amanda Hamilton – Tyringham Delegate
Don Gagnon – Washington Delegate
Roger Lawrence – Williamstown Delegate
Roger Bolton – Williamstown Alternate
Doug McNally – Windsor Delegate

Abstained:

Ann Krawet – Becket new Delegate
Malcolm Fick – Great Barrington Alternate
Sarah Satterthwaite – Savoy Delegate
Sari Hoy – Sheffield Delegate
Amanda Hamilton – Tyringham Delegate
Don Gagnon – Washington Delegate
Roger Lawrence – Williamstown Delegate

Tom introduced Lydia Shulman, a new staff member with BRPC's Public Health Program. Lydia is the Coordinator for the Berkshire Public Health Alliance. (She is the contact for septic installer certification.)

II. Comments from the Public

There were no comments from the public.

III. Delegate & Alternate Issues

There were no Delegate or Alternate issues.

IV. Executive Committee Actions

There were no questions or comments on Executive Committee actions at the December 2, 2021, and January 6, 2022 meetings.

V. Ratification of Committee Members

The BRPC bylaws require the Commission to ratify members to various committees. There is a change on the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee, as Michael Coakley, Business Development Manager, will replace Deanna Ruffer, Community Development Director, as Pittsfield's representative. Barb Davis-Hassan praised Michael's abilities and noted that he reached out to her and others when he was new to the position. She was impressed with his desire to learn and listen.

Barb Davis-Hassan motioned to approve Michael Coakley as a replacement for Deanna Ruffer on the CEDS Committee. Fred Schubert seconded. The motion passed with a roll call vote.

Yes:

John Duval – Adams Alternate
Robert Ronzio – Becket Delegate
Peter Traub – Cheshire Delegate
Mary McGurn – Egremont Alternate
Malcolm Fick – Great Barrington Alternate
Barbara Davis-Hassan – Lanesborough Delegate
Buck Donovan – Lee Delegate
Sheila Irvin – Pittsfield Delegate
Fred Schubert – Richmond Alternate
Sarah Satterthwaite – Savoy Delegate
Sari Hoy – Sheffield Delegate
Christine Rasmussen – Stockbridge Alternate
Amanda Hamilton – Tyringham Delegate
Don Gagnon – Washington Delegate
Roger Lawrence – Williamstown Delegate
Doug McNally – Windsor Delegate

VI. Approval of Community Assessments for FY 2023

The BRPC Finance Committee proposed a 2.5% increase in community assessments for BRPC's funding for FY 2023. By law, BRPC must notify municipalities of their assessment amount no later than February each year to be included in city/town budgets. This is the only discretionary funding BRPC receives. The rest is tied to grants or contracts.

Doug McNally motioned to approve the 2.5% increase in community assessments for FY 2023. Robert Ronzio seconded the motion. The motion passed with a roll call vote.

Yes:

John Duval – Adams Alternate
Robert Ronzio – Becket Delegate
Peter Traub – Cheshire Delegate
Mary McGurn – Egremont Alternate
Malcolm Fick – Great Barrington Alternate
Barbara Davis-Hassan – Lanesborough Delegate
Buck Donovan – Lee Delegate
Sheila Irvin – Pittsfield Delegate
Fred Schubert – Richmond Alternate
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VII. Community One Stop for Growth Grant Portal

Tom reviewed the Community One Stop for Growth application portal offered by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development. The portal allows a single application for multiple grant programs. It creates a collaborative review process for grant programs targeting investments based on a Development Continuum. This is an important source of potential grants. It is a good way for a community to engage with state officials and help state agencies better understand community needs.

Doug McNally, Windsor, reported that they got funding for a master plan, and BRPC is helping with it. The site is clunky, but its information can be referenced once a town is in it, and extra points are earned, similar to the community compact.

Mary McGurn said Egremont is entering the portal for the first time. She noted that you could submit five projects by putting in the expression of interest by February 4. If you wait until March, you can only submit two. Zoning and Planning and Affordable Housing are priority topics. They are thrilled and excited about the possibilities and would like to hear from other towns if they have any experience to share.

Doug said the state officials would give specific feedback on applications before submitting them.

René Wood, Sheffield, agrees the portal is clunky, but the help is significant once in it. It was the first time town officials could speak with grant managers who gave feedback on improving the application. The insights helped narrow down what they applied for; they applied for heavy equipment. Only Williamstown (of the Berkshire communities) got a rural development grant. Even though Sheffield didn't get funding, the state staff

gave feedback about the application's weaknesses and answered questions. Sheffield doesn't know if they will apply this year. They don't have a grant writer, and there are a lot of grants to be completed.

Tom said the state managers of the portal acknowledged the feedback that the site isn't easy to use and are trying to improve it.

Doug also noted that the limit on the number of characters for each grant section forces you to answer the questions concisely and submit a good application even if you aren't a professional grant writer.

Barb Davis-Hassan, Lanesborough, asked how towns focus on areas of need. René said their town administrator knows what the needs are and which grants they are likely to be funded. The webinars were helpful. Tom noted that new ones will be posted for this year (not up yet).

This program started at the beginning of 2021. John Duval pointed out that BRPC may benefit if projects include BRPC services. Tom said it has had a positive effect on BRPC and the communities. Windsor's grant is an example with \$30,000 for BRPC assistance and \$2000 for town expenses.

VIII. Housing Discussion

Tom presented the draft Berkshire Regional Housing Strategy that BRPC prepared based on a housing assessment (copy in the meeting packet) conducted with 1Berkshire and a group of housing practitioners. BRPC will rely on the strategy as part of an ongoing emphasis on housing. The housing crisis affects the region in several ways, not just economically.

Key issues include:

- a shortage of all types of units
- resistance to housing developments
- limited municipal capacity (lack of planners, outdated regulatory framework, and inadequate public utilities)
- mobilization of developers
- housing insecurity and stigma of homelessness
 - a county-wide issue, not just Pittsfield's
 - made worse by COVID-19
- poor quality housing stock due to age
 - 30% code compliance rule is a disincentive

Strategy actions with some details:

- Educate the public about housing needs and opportunities
 - Develop a network of people to support housing development in each community
 - Engage employers
 - Establish a Regional Housing Task Force
- Support municipalities with tools to focus on housing issues
 - A regional housing rehab program
 - Attorney General's Abandoned Housing Initiative

- Homeless Plan (revitalize plan from 10 years ago)
- Advocate for Housing Programs relevant to the Berkshires (rural communities)
- Immediate actions:
 - 1Berkshire, BRPC, and Berkshire Housing Development Corporation as lead entities to advance this agenda with funding from an earmark by Representative Marks.
 - Increase involvement of underrepresented groups
 - Collect better data
 - Identify models of what works in other communities

Chris Brown, BRPC Community Planner, presented a "snapshot" case study of entry-level teachers, what they earn and what their housing options are. He looked at Pittsfield, North Adams, and the Berkshire Hills school districts' starting salaries. He determined a housing budget and reviewed housing options based on cost and available apartments and homes.

He reviewed data on the construction of new housing units in the county, noting that it is 80% less than 80 years ago in 1940. This is happening across the U.S.

The North Adams master's degree-level teacher who could afford a \$150,000 home would need 27 months to save the \$5000 for a down payment (in addition to MassHousing's \$15,000 down payment grant).

Tom opened the discussion to Commission members asking what the most important thing to do to address the housing crisis is and how we build a coalition to do it?

Doug McNally was a public school principal in Pittsfield schools for 30 years and taught at MCLA for 10. Housing is not a new issue. He had trouble recruiting teachers years ago. He agrees that there needs to be a public education program. He is also on the Workforce Board, and employers cannot recruit because entry-level workers cannot afford to live here. He agrees that Pittsfield and North Adams cannot figure this out alone. Windsor and other small towns need to be part of the affordable housing solution.

Fred Schubert asked about representation and involvement from major employers. Tom said 1Berkshire represented those interests who are part of their board. It was acknowledged that employers could be more directly involved, which is one of the strategies.

Christine Rasmussen shared that Stockbridge failed to pass an open space residential space by law. She suggests developing credible resources that can be shared readily through media sources to counter the anti-development anti-change voices in communities. The group that fought the by law change published a bi-weekly newsletter that was not factual, and there was no human resource to counter it. We need people to understand that we cannot

have the people we need in our community because we are unwilling to look at alternatives. They have a 300-acre parcel proposed for development, and given the town's response, the developer doesn't want to even work with Stockbridge. We need to bring people to the point where they can say yes.

René noted that housing is a complex problem with many facets that vary by community. Every campaign needs to have a real person and faces attached so that it is about neighbors and humans, not just words. Chris's teacher examples were shocking. Sheffield is just starting a housing production plan with Chris's help. It is an overwhelming issue. We need to build up the non-profit non-town housing development organizations that have the expertise to work with any town and not reinvent the wheel.

Chris volunteered his story as a new BRPC employee moving to the area from NY. There are two houses in Pittsfield and a few in North Adams. The issue for him is more availability vs. affordability. This is not the first place he has been priced out of in the past few years.

Amanda Hamilton, Tyringham, noted the dynamic of differences between different parts of the county. It isn't fair that Pittsfield and North Adams shoulder the affordable housing burden. Christine said the southern Berkshires have a severe NIMBY (not in my backyard). She agrees we need to put a human face on housing affordability and attracting people. Some people state they don't care about local schools because their children go to private schools and have loud voices. She was excited to make linkages and coalition with others here who face these issues.

Barb noted the impact social media can have to separate fact vs. fiction. A Facebook page with administrators that can supply accurate information lasts longer than print. Interestingly, some rural communities have land but not public utilities. That happened in Lanesborough years ago when development was seen as a burden on the school district, increasing class size and more costs and taxes. Sadly, you have communities with lots of space, but some planners and powers-that-be don't want to see development. Lanesborough could bring sewer up from routes 7 and 8. Barb sits on the Rental Housing Board and works in the real estate industry and said the crisis is horrific. Developers have so much opportunity to build mansions in the southern part of the county with less risk; there is no incentive.

Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield, said we need to educate people what affordable and workforce housing means and what it can look like besides large apartment buildings. Habitat for Humanity in Pittsfield is a model. Maybe the infrastructure bill is an opportunity to put in city sewer and water.

We need to see positive examples of where we can do it on a positive scale. Sarah Satterthwaite, Savoy, noted that building energy-efficient houses costs a little bit more than building to code. So in the scheme of housing expenses, you come out ahead. Old housing stock needs to be upgraded so utilities

don't cost so much. Climate change has always been underestimated and should be addressed as part of the housing.

Chris pointed out that the Berkshires' most likely effect of climate change is that people will move away from the coastline. There is already a crush of people moving from urban areas because of affordability. Rising sea levels will bring more. He reiterated that people resist housing development because they react to "affordable." We should stop saying that. People who want to age in their community but not necessarily in their homes need a similar housing unit to a college graduate.

Robert Ronzio, Becket, stated that COVID-19 increased house prices and the number of short-term rentals, reducing the housing stock for those that need it. He taught school for 38 years. Development can challenge school systems. Sherwood Forest has substandard housing that makes the 30% rule difficult. He pointed out that most teachers are part of a two-income household, and police officers earn about \$70,000 a year.

Bill Cameron is leading a Berkshire county education task force looking at the lack of enrollment, and due to that, districts will be dysfunctional within ten years. If this problem isn't addressed, families won't want to live here because the educational system isn't viable.

Amanda noted that Tyringham has properties, but they are \$1 million or more. These are not going to help a teacher or police officer. She argues that affordable and available are not always interchangeable.

Tom thanked everyone for a valuable conversation that reinforced some issues. Suggestions included: to get more buy-in from employers, "put a face on the issue" and develop a Facebook page, don't ignore climate change, find models, and consider dual incomes being a few of them. The next steps include forming a coalition and perhaps an annual summit.

John Duval, Chair, Adams, suggested that success stories be presented at the next meeting. He has been on the Select Board for eleven years, and it has taken that long to get one project in the works. The company he works for has posted 22 engineering-type jobs in the last two days; all of those employees will need housing.

The Commission Development Committee is working on how to go forward with this topic.

IX. Executive Director's Report

A. Office Update

Construction has begun on the BRPC office expansion. The earliest staff would move in is the end of February / early March. The requirement that staff work at least two days in the office is still suspended due to the Omicron surge. Most staff continue to work from home. Tom will likely continue to relax the in-office requirement until the end of January, or the surge slackens.

B. Staff Update

Andy Ottoson has been hired as a Public Health Planner. He will primarily work in the Substance Use Disorder program. Jennifer Scott is new as an Epidemiologist in the Public Health Program.

C. District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA)

BRPC finally received the DLTA contract. No notice to proceed yet.

D. Question for the Candidates

Massachusetts will be electing a new Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Auditor in the fall. As the state's top Administrative leaders, they will set much of its legislative and funding agenda. BRPC wants to be sure these candidates are aware of and respond to the needs and issues from the Berkshires. Therefore, BRPC solicited questions for consideration to present to the candidates. Go to <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YVWK7TR> to submit a question. Submissions were due February 1, 2022.

E. Passenger Rail

The Surface Transportation Board (STB) will decide if CSX can acquire Pan Am. As part of the decision-making process, hearings were held the week of January 10. BRPC staff have been following the filings with the STB. Immediately in advance of the hearing, there were numerous filings, including one related to the Berkshire Flyer (attached.) While details still need to be finalized, this is a positive sign, as is the potential for west-east passenger rail. There are no plans to create new stations.

Doug and Sheila are on the BRTA board. We need to be ready to address how they get out of the intermodal center once the train brings people to Pittsfield. BRPC staff is working on that with BRTA staff.

F. Other - none

X. Adjournment

Fred Schubert made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Malcolm Fick, unanimously approved. Adjourned at 8:57 p.m.

Materials distributed or presented during this meeting:

- Agenda
- Draft Meeting Minutes November 18, 2021
- Executive Committee Actions Memo for December 2, 2021 and January 2, 2022
 - BRPC Committee Memberships FY22
 - BRPC FY23 Assessment Recommendation
 - Berkshire County, Housing Needs Assessment 2021 Draft
 - Executive Director's Report
 - Andy Ottoson Resume
 - Jennifer Scott Resume
 - Question Solicitation for State-wide Candidates
 - CSX Pan Am Acquisition Documents

