



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

via Zoom

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:03 pm by CJ Hoss. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

Andrew Groff, Williamstown

CJ Hoss, RIC Chair, Pittsfield

Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield

Christine Rasmussen, Stockbridge

Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Committee Members Absent

John Duval, BRPC Chair

Kyle Hanlon, North Adams

Malcolm Fick, BRPC Vice Chair

Chris Rembold, Great Barrington

BRPC Staff Present

Laura Brennan, Economic Development Program Manager

Wylie Goodman, Economic Development Senior Planner

Guests/Public Present

Paul Sieloff

Kent Lew

Robert Norcross

Jon Sylbert

David Wasielewski

II. Public Comments

CJ indicated to everyone participating that item four on the agenda would be an open discussion and guests could hold their community sustainability comments until that time. He invited guests to speak on other topics, but no other issues were raised.

III. Approval of August 3, 2022 Meeting Minutes

Eleanor T. made a motion to approve, Sheila I. seconded. No discussion. Minutes from August 2022 were approved via roll call vote, with Sheila I. abstaining.

IV. Community Sustainability

CJ introduced this topic which encompasses challenges being faced at all community sizes in terms of recruiting volunteers as well as recruiting and retaining paid staff positions. This topic was added to the Regional Issues Committee agenda to begin discussions about various components of community sustainability and how BRPC and other partners may be helpful to

communities moving forward. Laura added that BRPC has been hearing from multiples communities regarding concerns around staffing turnover and burnout from people serving on too many volunteer committees. Staff is interested to learn more about specifics and confirm whether these are the core issues or if there are additional primary concerns at the local level. CJ asked if any committee members wanted to start the discussion. None of the committee members volunteered but guest David Wasielewski raised his hand and was recognized by the chair. David introduced himself as chair of the Green Committee in Dalton and representing a consulting group out of Williamsburg. He represents a waste management group that have some new technologies that need to be publicized. As David had done at a previous meeting, he gave a summary of some of the current challenges regarding non-recyclable garbage in the region. Momentum regarding possible solutions has been lacking and his group has been having a difficult time getting the attention of local select boards. He indicated that they want to present information to BRPC first and asked for suggestions around reaching a larger audience. He indicated that he has sent materials to Tom Matuszko and Melissa Provencher but has not yet heard back. Laura B. was unable to confirm whether there have been internal discussions regarding his materials. CJ asked David whether his group has reached out to many municipalities, and David's response indicated that their small group has reached out to as many as they could. CJ followed up to ask whether they have specifically reached out to the City of Pittsfield, David confirmed that he presented to Ricardo Morales but has not heard back since. CJ offered to follow up with Ricardo.

CJ recognized Jon Sylbert, who introduced himself as town manager in Sandisfield and resident in Monterey. He shared that the Berkshire County municipal managers and administrators' group that meets monthly has been discussing the agenda item of Community Sustainability for some time. He expressed concern regarding volunteerism especially in emergency services and town boards. He stated that what they are mostly looking for is data that they can use to educate their communities about issues with continuity across positions. He also expressed concern regarding workforce pipelines to prepare students for potential careers in municipal management. He suggested data to gather includes the number and category of positions, percentage of vacancies, number of positions in each category filled by soon-to-rotate personnel, etc. He also indicated that another topic of the managers/admins group discusses is the hesitancy of select boards to put personnel related costs on the warrant, even when it is for services residents are strongly in favor of receiving. He asked that BRPC help with gathering the data, and that there be an effort towards improving workforce pipelines by coordinating with local schools.

Kent Lew introduced himself as select board chair in the Town of Washington, and agreed that collecting data should be a priority, along with encouraging further, broader public discussion around the issues. He also stated that he feels it is important to formulate what the requests for state engagement might specifically be. Kent expressed the difficulty of explaining to residents the value of professional services received by the community. Lack of willingness to invest in services results in poor services being provided. Although state aid is essentially flat, Washington's operating budget is going up by 16 or 17%. Their paid staff are very part time, and Kent raised the topic of shared services.

CJ asked Laura B. to offer an initial reaction to what had been discussed so far. She thanked Jon for raising the issue of data. She indicated that BRPC is interested in assisting with this and would want to be certain that the process was done thoroughly and that the data points collected would be useful to municipal leadership in making their case both locally and at the state level. She asked that she be able to follow up through a future manager/admin meeting to delve into what specific questions should be asked during a data collection or survey process.

Christine R. serves on the Board of Selectmen in Stockbridge and has experience working in state government as well. She expressed that due to the rural nature of our region, we do not have a large enough voice or enough attention or funding from the state government.

Christine noted that local elections are often decided by local name recognition which can result in inexperienced officials and frustration from residents. She felt that better educating residents and especially students about the roles of local officials would be helpful.

Andrew G. stated that the educational task force from several years ago would be a good model for tackling these issues from a regional perspective. CJ described that when he lived in a 4,000-resident town in New York, they employed a part-time grant writer to secure needed funding because there was no regional interest in shared services.

David Wasielewski suggested that the UMass school of Public Policy may be interested in assisting with a data project. He offered to connect the group with professors in the program.

Jon Sylbert stated that he felt the legislature takes a very hands-off approach and used the potential regionalization of school districts as an example. This is in contrast to places like Maryland and Maine, which legislated regionalization. He also brought up the issue of tax rate vs. single family tax bill, stating that the tax rate is irrelevant and what matters are the budget and the average single family tax bill. The topic is discussed and debated each year in his communities. Jon S. reinforced the need to talk about shared services as brought up by Kent L. earlier in the meeting. Emergency service personnel are being poached from one town to another, which poses major safety concerns. Response times for ambulances may be another metric to include in a data project.

CJ asked about existing or past successful shared service scenarios to use as examples. Laura agreed that understanding examples of what types of shared services would be appealing would be helpful in determining some next steps. Kent L. brought up the pending intermunicipal agreement with Middlefield for a shared town administrator. Washington has never had an administrator; responsibilities have fallen to select board members and especially the chair. Parochialism and provincialism pose threats to the success of this proposed plan, and shared service arrangements in general. Kent also raised the possibility of trying to centralize financial services. This would have the advantage of continuity of services and provide a strong position for attracting talent to full-time, benefited positions. However, such a system does not offer cost savings to the small towns who may participate, other than through the savings of expenses related to frequent recruitment and training. FRCOG offers shared accounting services in Franklin County, and Kent sees this as a good example to emulate in the Berkshire region. Laura B. asked what other types of positions the attendees may feel could fit into a shared services model. Andrew G. provided a link in the meeting Chat and indicated that FRCOG offers a range of other services. CJ indicated that conservation agents and planners are other positions that may be applicable. Andrew G. shared some of his experiences offering shared services to Lanesborough from Williamstown. David W. shared that issues in larger towns such as Dalton closely reflect the kinds of issues that Kent described in the very small town of Washington. David indicated that MAPC may have shared services examples to consider.

CJ asked the group for input about whether the types of positions are elected or appointed makes a difference in terms of willingness. David W. indicated that elected positions are harder to fill. CJ asked what it takes to make changes to which positions are elected. Jon S. stated that those changes are usually through Bylaws. There is also a distinction between paid elected positions, and unpaid elected positions. He agreed that it is less and less attractive to run for local office. Busy schedules also play a part, and people with not enough time on their hands can be unproductive on boards, which presents other challenges. Andrew G. reflected that the smallest towns have a problem creating sustainable full-time positions. The ability to offer competitive pay impacts communities of all sizes, and the broader labor market issues are impacting everyone, even larger, wealthier communities. Williamstown currently has four open positions that have been vacant and posted for several months, which in the past would have been highly competitive and filled quickly. He again advocated for studying all of these issues carefully and seeing how all of these problems intersect.

Paul Sieloff introduced himself as representing the Berkshire Municipal Management Association, which meets monthly. He added to the list of challenges the need to recruit people into the county. He spoke enthusiastically about shared administrators as described by Kent. Paul mentioned the previous arrangement between Lee and Lenox which ended about a year ago. Wendell and New Salem also had an arrangement for some time. Paul shared that Lanesborough currently has an opening for an administrator and shared that Lanesborough has reduced the number of elected positions from 8 to 3 or 4 over the course of several years. Paul shared the example of Monroe County in New York has coordinated shared assessment services and he sees this as another good example to research. Paul also shared with the group an overview of the Shared Economic Planner program that already exists at BRPC. Laura followed up that it has been a successful program with five communities currently participating. Paul has reached out to FRCOG to learn more about their model and feels that contracting out to the private sector should not be overlooked as a possible solution, especially as an alternative to trying to recruit someone new into the region. Representative Pignatelli has participated in one of the BMMA meetings on this topic and is willing to pursue state funding for a training program or other tactic.

Kent L. commented that recruitment to the area and issues with housing availability has been an issue in several communities. Residency requirements in some municipalities make that even more difficult, as occurred in Williamstown. In terms of which positions would be most fitting for shared services, Kent indicated that his focus on finance-related roles is because they do not cover as much policy or other nuanced elements as some roles, but rather require skillsets that tend to be more transferrable from town to town. He agrees that skilled positions need to be converted to appointed rather than elected as often as possible. In other instances, he feels committee positions should remain elected. Supporting board members in terms of training for their responsibilities is critical. Instituting a circuit rider system could allow for expertise to be shared and provided on an as-needed basis, while still maintaining the local participation on boards and committees.

Jon S. again urged that data be collected to support town managers and admins in making their case. He also has noticed a lot of frustration among volunteers in adhering to Open Meeting Law, and this is another area in which training and support is needed.

David W. asked whether BPRC would provide this kind of forum for other kinds of issues, such as convening all Green Committee Chairs, Town Managers, Conservation Commissions, and other committees. He felt that a lot of local groups are “reinventing the wheel”, and would benefit from facilitation. CJ indicated that BRPC already does serve this role among historical commissions and others. Laura confirmed that there is some precedent regarding specific groups, but not for each type of standing board or committee that a municipality may have. Staff capacity and funding would be hurdles in doing so, although Laura expressed appreciation for the concept, as the efficiencies that come out of such discussions are extremely valuable.

VI. Topics for Future Consideration

CJ indicated that we are likely to address this same topic for at least one additional session. Laura stated that a survey could not be developed in time for the next meeting, but that she would connect with some attendees to begin exploring some draft questions to include.

Next Committee Meeting Date – October 26th at 4pm

VII. Adjournment

Eleanor T. made a motion to adjourn, Sheila I. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 5:26 p.m. after a roll call vote.