



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Notes

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

via Zoom

I. Call to Order

A quorum was not met for this scheduled meeting of the Regional Issues Committee. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

Andrew Groff, Williamstown
CJ Hoss, RIC Chair, Pittsfield
Malcolm Fick, BRPC Vice Chair
Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield

Committee Members Absent

John Duval, BRPC Chair
Kyle Hanlon, North Adams
Christine Rasmussen, Stockbridge
Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

BRPC Staff Present

Tom Matuszko, Executive Director
Laura Brennan, Economic Development Program Manager

Guests/Public Present

Barbara Alexander, North Adams resident
Linda Dunlavy, FRCOG
Tom Hutcheson, Dalton Town Manager
Kent Lew, Washington Select Board Chair
Paul Sieloff, former Lanesborough Town Administrator
Jon Sylbert, Sandisfield Town Manager
Peter Traub, Cheshire Planning Board
James Garzone, Great Barrington resident

II. Public Comments

There were no comments from the public.

III. Approval of September 28th, 2022 Meeting Minutes

The group was unable to approve minutes from the previous meeting, as a quorum was not present.

IV. Community Sustainability

CJ asked Laura B. to provide an introduction of the meeting topic. Laura explained that invitations had been extended to town managers and administrators, as well as others that

may be interested in the overall topic of community sustainability and exploring shared services and other potential solutions. This discussion is a continuation of the meeting that occurred on September 28th. Laura asked each participant to introduce themselves, including whether they are on the RIC, and what community or organization they represent.

CJ introduced guest speaker Linda Dunlavy from the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, who was invited to talk about what the Council of Governments (COG) is and does in terms of shared services. She stated that it is not their intention to expand into Berkshire County. Franklin County is the most rural in MA with about 72,000 people, 25 towns, one city. The towns have limited capacity with very few planners and very few community development professionals. As such, the region shares a lot of services. Prior to the elimination of county governments, they served in that capacity. The shift changed their financial structure to one of a voluntary membership organization. They also have a variety of municipal service programs that are voluntary and opt-in which act as enterprise accounts within the council's financial structure. This is supplemented by state and federal grants. A COG is voluntary, an association that represents member local governments that are interested in providing cooperative coordination and technical service together. They do not duplicate municipal services, so they work hard to meet needs that communities cannot meet themselves. In their history, the programs that did not work out were in cases when the COG offered a service they thought was needed rather than letting the members indicate a need. Linda shared information about the overall council budget and staffing levels of FRCOG.

Linda shared information about four specific municipal service programs. These are successful because they are responsive to the needs of the communities. It is their hope that the programs also help to reduce costs, but that is not always the case. It does improve quality and professionalism. All of the programs are voluntary and opt-in. Each has a different financing mechanism to suit the situation.

Town Accounting – services are provided to 12 towns, with multiple part-time staff members. Towns pay an average hours of service per week, though this ebbs and flows. This program is unique because all of the towns use the same software, and FRCOG negotiated for towns under 2,000 people to be allowed to use FRCOG's license for the same software. This is still a difficult program to operate, given the part-time nature of the needs, and the isolation of staff going into town halls to work by themselves. There will be an increased need for town government accounting services with pending retirements. FRCOG worked with the Greenfield Community College to develop a certification program and were members of the Lt. Governor's Municipal and Workforce Skills Gap Commission to help address this.

Cooperative Inspection – oldest program, began in 1974. Provide building, wiring, and plumbing, gas inspection and zoning enforcement for 16 towns through multiple part- and full-time staff. Those close to retirement are good hires for this program. FRCOG retains the building permit fees which allows them to charge towns a small, predictable assessment to cover software costs. Fee schedules are uniform across 15 of the 16 towns.

Collective Purchasing – another of their older programs, provide services to 59 municipalities. Biggest section is highway products and services. Another element is that their two procurement officers run procurement projects for municipalities. To be a part of the program, towns pay a bid price based on the population of the town, with the assumption that the higher the population, the more needs you will have. Procurement is charged at an hourly rate.

Cooperative Public Health Services – this program is now serving 15 towns, up from 8 prior to COVID. Health agent and public health nurse services. This program has also benefited from hefty Department of Public Health grants in recent years, and has grown from 2.5 to 5.5 FTE staff.

FRCOG also owns the Franklin County Emergency Communications System, a 13-tower

system that is aging and obsolete. Municipalities paid an assessment for the maintenance of this system. They did not set the assessment high enough to replace the system, so they have been working with the state for two years to assess options.

They are working on an After-Action Review of the COG's and the region's response to COVID. Prior to COVID they did have an Emergency Response program, but (like BRPC) took a much more active role than anticipated during the pandemic, in a wide variety of ways. A consulting team is helping with the review.

They are currently looking at having a shared Conservation Agent. BRPC has tried this previously and it did not work out, and they are interested to learn more. Part time officers are difficult because of the training required and the likelihood of being poached for full-time work. Tom shared that this did occur in Berkshire County sometime around 2005, but was subsidized by a large grant at first, and fees were minimal. When the grant funds were depleted, towns left the program. The program also encountered issues with seasonality of the workflow. FRCOG has closed an Engineering Program in the past for similar reasons. Paul Sieloff contributed that on Cape Cod, there are several towns that merged their health agent and their conservation agent, as a way to combine skills and round out a full-time position.

Tom asked about the process that occurred at the start of the Council of Governments, and whether all 26 communities signed on without resistance. Linda stated that there were three attempts at three charters before all towns agreed. The successful charter went into effect in 1997. It was written so that all towns had to promise membership for 3 or 5 years minimum, and they would also have to give at least 1 year's notice prior to leaving. They have not had any towns actually leave. Tom followed up to ask about who the driving forces were behind the initiative. Linda explained that it was a combination of select board members and the former county administrator. They had already been providing collective purchasing and building inspection, and the towns did not want to lose these elements of county government. Paul Sieloff commented that he thought the concept sounds good for Berkshire County. Tom shared that an effort in the 1990s to form a Council of Governments in Berkshire County was not successful, largely because there was distrust among smaller towns towards Pittsfield, and a sense that they would be shortchanged. Malcolm asked how Franklin County made the decision to become a COG rather than a Regional Planning Commission, and Linda clarified that they are also an regional planning agency. In contrast, Hampshire County had attempted a COG that later went bankrupt and had to be bailed out.

Kent Lew remarked that a lot was lost during the dissolution of county government. Trying to reclaim some of the benefits is worth pursuing, though it may not take the form of a COG. He also commented that financial services are the challenge many towns are feeling most acutely right now and asked for Linda's thoughts on how to ensure such a program is sustainable. She feels it is important to be honest about the real costs, including proper oversight of the program by a manager who is an accountant in order to properly support and serve as a backup for staff. Kent expressed hope that despite past resistance, there may be more willingness to consider shared services given the current staffing crisis that towns are experiencing. Linda also described the challenge of including their federally derived Indirect Cost Rate in their arrangements with the town, which encompasses the true cost of an employee in terms of space, equipment, utilities, etc. Individual small towns rarely know their true cost of employees so there can often be sticker shock.

Tom Hutcheson, who had participated in the shared accounting program when he was a town manager in Franklin County, described some frustration because of the seasonally intense work related to accounting and the pressure this put on the shared accounting staff at certain times of the year. He expressed an interest in exploring sub-specialties such as accounts payable, as a way to recruit a different mix of expertise among shared staff. If a system can be worked out for accounting, there are potential similar ways to address assessing, treasurers, and collectors' positions. There may be a role for a regional organization to

coordinate this and work with Berkshire Community College and other institutions to develop a pipeline.

Tom Matuszko described the existing Berkshire Public Health Alliance as a very successful model which was built over many years and is based on historic collaboration. One of the ways BPHA has modulated the "feast or famine" aspect with this program has been by getting a lot of part time nurses and inspectors on board, often retirees, to call upon when needed. He also indicated that BRPC would be willing to lead an effort to investigate possible shared services arrangements, which may or may not include the formation of a COG. However, BRPC does experience some of the same distrust from small communities that had been directed at the former county government, especially when it comes to the professionalization of salaries. Conversations around regionalizing specific roles and sharing staff for Conservation Agent responsibilities, for instance, have come to an impasse when BRPC's salary structure is involved. Tom indicated that the managers and administrators would have to become more unified in advocating for a shared system without undercutting one another. Paul S. described the Shared Economic Development Planning program that seems to be working as an opt-in system. He believes we will see more willing participants than in the past. Tom explained that some positions work better than others in this model – the SEDP program covers only part of Economic Development staff salary, and the remainder of the full-time role needs to be filled with other projects. Kent encouraged communities to keep this conversation active to increase understanding and engagement with shared services as a solution to current challenges.

The group discussed the pros and cons of salary surveys as part of a larger data collection effort to help guide conversations. One of the primary concerns around such a survey is that it provides information to help towns poach staff from one another. It also can lead to some municipal officials advocating for lowering wages if they feel their employees are being paid too high in comparison with neighboring or similar towns. Franklin County does regularly conduct a salary survey and acknowledged that some poaching does happen. However, it has also been used to make clear when a town is not offering a competitive salary for an open position and needs to adjust. Results are available on FRCOG's website. The process was difficult to set up initially and poses a challenge each year in terms of garnering participation.

Jon Sylbert shared that Monterey does a salary survey of about eight neighboring towns each year. He feels that poaching may not be as big an issue as sometimes described, since most small towns are not in the position to raise their salaries anyway. He believes we should pursue this and prefers it be done more regionally rather than amongst a small number of communities.

The group agreed that it would be helpful to gain a better understanding of the charter approval process that FRCOG went through. The former county administrator is now one of the regionally elected council members, and Linda D. offered to connect us with him. Tom M. suggested that he be invited to attend the next Regional Issues Committee meeting to describe the process.

Jon S. discussed gathering data as a method of helping to better articulate the challenge to elected officials and residents that a staffing crisis exists, and creative solutions are needed. He indicated that the data project should be approached as first and foremost to be about making the case for regionalization of services, and individual towns should not expect to use the data individually to adjust pay rates for specific roles. He does not feel that BRPC will be viewed as acting in a dominating manner in this project. Kent L. added that this should be framed as an effort to capture the real cost of municipal services across the county, and more specific purposes can be discussed later. Jon S. followed that the data could be collected over the course of six months to a year, and that towns should not expect to see it in its raw form, which may help some with their willingness to share information if it is going to be reported back in aggregate. Tom M. indicated that he looks forward to advancing this concept and that

another aspect we need to fully uncover through the surveying is the crisis aspect of hiring and long-term vacancies, rather than only salaries. Jon S. agreed and stated that the salaries were in fact less important than being able to articulate the issues around hiring and vacancies.

Paul S. expressed a willingness to encourage participation among the Berkshire Municipal Management Association. He also agreed that an assessment of needs rather than only a salary survey would likely be better received. Jon S. suggested that the salary portion should be done last. Tom M. has been invited to an upcoming Berkshire Municipal Management Association meeting in December, at which Bob Dean of FRCOG will do a similar presentation to what Linda D. presented today. Tom M. urged a very specific ask be made of the managers and administrators to participate in and be supportive of this process, with active engagement in the survey development.

VI. Topics for Future Consideration

CJ indicated that this topic would be revisited in future meetings, and it was agreed to invite the former county administrator from Franklin County as a future guest speaker.

Next Committee Meeting Date – either December 7th or 14th, 2022

VII. Adjournment

The discussion ended at 5:27 p.m.