



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, January 25, 2023

via Zoom

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:02 pm by Tom Matuszko. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

Malcolm Fick, BRPC Vice Chair; Alternate from Great Barrington

Kyle Hanlon, North Adams

Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield

Christine Rasmussen, Alternate from Stockbridge

Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Committee Members Absent

John Duval, BRPC Chair

Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)

Chris Rembold, Great Barrington

BRPC Staff Present

Laura Brennan, Economic Development Program Manager

CJ Hoss, Community Planning Program Manager

Tom Matuszko, Executive Director, Interim Chair of Regional Issues Committee

Guests/Public Present

Christine Hoyt Adams Selectboard member, President of the Berkshire County Selectboard Association

Kent Lew, Alternate from Washington, Washington Selectboard Chair

Mary McGurn, Egremont

Paul Sieloff, BMMA Chair

Jon Sylbert, Sandisfield

Peter Traub, Alternate from Cheshire, Cheshire Planning Board

Kathe Warden, Becket Town Administrator

David Wasielewski, Chair of Dalton Green Commission

Sabrina Damms, iBerkshires

II. Public Comments

There were no public comments.

III. Approval of December 7th Meeting Minutes

Malcolm F. made a motion to accept the minutes as written. Sheila I. seconded. Eleanor T. explained she had previously sent edits that Laura B. accepted into the document. A roll call vote was taken and the minutes were approved unanimously.

IV. Community Sustainability

Tom M. explained this meeting is a continuation of multiple past discussions on the topic of Community Sustainability and began sharing a document prepared to summarize the past several meetings. Highlighted were challenges such as an aging workforce, a limited labor pool in the region, and wages offered by communities in the Berkshires. The primary options to address these challenges involve a strategy to recruit, develop, and train candidates; raise municipal wages; and share services between communities to create more attractive employment opportunities. This introduction was followed by an analysis of the aforementioned options, the pros and cons of each, and resources needed to begin testing potential solutions (summary document is attached). Discussion was opened up to the Committee.

Jon Sylbert thought the summary is succinct and plans to share the document with the Sandisfield Select Board.

Kent L. thought the summary provides a good overview of the discussion to date. In his specific experience, there has been a lot of discussion on appetite to raise potential salaries, but also trying to understand at what point do increased salaries actual relate in enhancing the applicant pool. More data is needed to assist communities in understanding this aspect. From the perspective of increasing salaries, many communities feel their taxpayers can not sustain significant increases to the tax levy, which is where most new projects and initiatives are funded. In the past five years this aspect has been exacerbated by Washington's state aid only increasing by 5% during a period of time with the overall tax levy on property owners increasing by 30%. Education is needed to help inform residents of the cost of doing business.

Tom M. responded that education and data are needed, and explained the importance of the proposed survey that will be distributed to municipalities to help better understand the regional workforce.

David W. described recent experiences at UMass Amherst in regards to public policy and government, and most of the focus is state, national, or international, with no focus on local government.

Paul S. felt the summary should include more private sector options that communities can pursue in filling gaps due to the limitations of the municipal workforce in regards to contracting specific services. From an educational perspective, discussions regarding budget increases due to additional staffing or raising salaries can be mitigated from a thorough sales pitch to constituents.

Tom M. opened up the discussion to Christine Hoyt, a member of the Adams Selectboard and President of the Berkshire County Selectboard Association. Christine H. began summarizing discussions with the Massachusetts Municipal Association, and that retention and recruitment is an ongoing concern throughout Massachusetts. The Division of Local Services has a fellowship program focusing on municipal finance positions, with a goal of identifying two students interested in this work at each Community College in the state and tailoring curriculum and on the job training for each fellow. Christine H also mentioned that one area that has not been discussed yet is residency requirements that some communities have for eligibility for employment, and the pitfalls that have been highlighted in communities such as Springfield.

In reference to the summary document, Paul S. highlighted that there are positives to smaller communities employing part-time employees that are full-time elsewhere. Tom M. clarified that the concern that he has raised is the potential viewpoint that the communities employing staff full-time who are working part-time elsewhere are essentially subsidizing the cost of the employee for the smaller communities without a need for full-time staff.

Kent L. responded to this discussion that Washington's Town Hall positions are all part-time and are generally semi-retired or working full-time elsewhere – from his viewpoint, larger communities are not subsidizing their staff. A discussion of part-time vs. full-time pay scales is an unknown in the region at the moment to understand whether the provision of benefits (or not) is factored into full-time/part-time pay.

Jon S. followed that overall, he continues to view the topic as one where education and awareness is the primary focal point at the moment, and the group should continue working towards collecting data and a thorough approach to presenting this problem.

Christine R., Sheila I., and Tom M. all discussed the difficulties in not having a career pipeline within the community as well as limited career opportunities for persons entering the municipal workforce without moving on to a new community.

Discussion shifted to the draft survey prepared by BRPC staff that will be circulated to all 32 communities in the Berkshires. Laura B. described the thought process on creating the survey, the specific information being requested, and feedback received so far. Discussion ensued regarding the difference in size and scale of workforce, and how data will be analyzed to understand how responses will be weighted.

Tom M. directed questions regarding how to encourage as great of a response rate as possible from communities. Discussion ensued, with consensus that the regional selectboard and managers associations would co-sponsor the survey and that some follow up may be required to encourage participation.

Next steps were discussed, including raising awareness of the survey and the importance of as complete of a response as possible from the region and ensuring that the survey is sent to those best suited to respond to the survey, depending on the capacity of each.

Tom M. asked Christine H. if the Massachusetts Municipal Association had done any survey work or data collection regarding this issue. To date, it appears that this is a priority area but it is unclear if much background work has been done.

VI. Topics for Future Consideration

Tom M. referenced that Community Sustainability is planned to continue on as a topic in the near term, but other discussion items would be discussed as needed.

Moving forward, Tom M. informed the group that CJ H. would be the primary staff support for the Regional Issues Committee, with Laura B. will be involved based on the discussion topic.

Next Committee Meeting Date – February 22, 2023 at 4pm

VII. Adjournment

Kyle H. made a motion to adjourn, Sheila I. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 5:14 p.m. after a roll call vote.