



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, February 22, 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

John Duval, BRPC Chair, ex-officio, non-voting
Malcolm Fick, BRPC Vice Chair; Alternate from Great Barrington
Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)
Kyle Hanlon, North Adams
Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield
Christine Rasmussen, Alternate from Stockbridge
Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Committee Members Absent

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

Kent Lew, Alternate from Washington, Washington Selectboard Chair
Mary McGurn, Egremont
Paul Sieloff, BMMA Chair
Jon Sylbert, Sandisfield
Brittany Polito, iBerkshires

Tom M. acknowledged the Committee members and other individuals referenced above as present at the meeting.

II. Public Comments

There were no public comments.

III. Approval of January 25th Meeting Minutes

Tom M. read the agenda item and requested a motion on the item. Malcolm F. made a motion to accept the minutes as written. Kyle H. seconded. No committee members had any further comment. The motion passed as follows:

Malcolm F. - Yes
Sheila I. - Yes
Andrew G. - abstain
Kyle H. - Yes

Christin R. – Yes

Eleanor T. - Yes

IV. Community Sustainability

Tom M. introduced the topic as a continuation of the past several Regional Issues Committee meetings and then requested that CJ H. provide an overview of the municipal survey results on staffing and volunteer capacity that BRPC collected over the previous month.

CJ H. explained that the staffing situations in Pittsfield and North Adams are significantly different, so the survey was only circulated to the 30 towns. As of the time of meeting, 21 of the 30 communities responded. CJ H. proceeded to present the raw data results to the Committee. An initial review of the data was provided as well as anecdotal information of concerns related to the lack of volunteers in communities.

Kent L. responded with some of his concerns, primarily that for the most rural communities most campaigns have only one candidate and campaign finance requirements related to filings even when a campaign takes in no funding. Related to paid employees in rural communities, highway employees are leaving Town-employment for the Department of Transportation. As additional requirements are placed on employees related to certifications and licenses, training time and cost is a significant investment difficult to bare for many communities. Discussion ensued regarding the availability of training opportunities for volunteer positions. Tom M. offered the potential for BRPC to provide a one-stop location for training opportunities.

Eleanor T. discussed whether the voice of the smallest communities is being lost as a result of the difficulties in building volunteer capacity and finding adequate training, and questioned whether they are losing ground in the state as a result of this issue. Tom M. was in agreement.

Paul S. commented on the success of the survey, especially when considering the staffing turnover in multiple communities that impacts the ability to respond to this issue. Enthusiasm was conveyed for BRPC providing a centralized inventory of training opportunities. Tom M. commented that BRPC would assess the ability to provide such a tool.

Mary M. stated that the underlying issue in the discussion is the lack of housing and affordable housing, and that until this is dealt with it will be difficult to increase capacity.

Christine R. discussed MAPC and tracking legislative priorities to potentially support locally.

Tom M. referenced the Rural Policy Advisory Commission's priorities for the coming year, and that the Commission tries to represent the interest of all 170 small communities in Massachusetts. An immediate need that requires resolution is the expiration of the temporary changes to the open meeting law that allows for hybrid and remote meetings, which will have a significant adverse impact if allowed to expire.

Jon S. discussed housing and the overall state of the local economy – a more robust jobs market would result in the development of more housing.

Tom M. asked what the plan was for utilizing the data collected in the survey, with an immediate use of presenting this to Town Managers and Administrators.

Jon S. responded that more local awareness was necessary to begin the process of developing advocacy, with the effort increasing to a regional and statewide discussion. Data is needed to back up the argument that communities cannot be run cheaply.

Paul S. raised the idea of inviting Representative Pignatelli to a meeting to discuss the results of the discussion to date and how to bring this message east. Tom M. responded it would be a positive to discuss this further with the delegation.

Malcolm F. talked about education, hiring assistance, and a labor pool and it needs to be approached as a way to retain employees instead of a way to save money.

Tom M. thinks that many municipal officials are learning this, but it is a question of whether voters will understand this as well.

Andrew G. responded that housing is still the significant underlying issue in Williamstown in attracting new candidates.

Tom M. began summarizing the progress made to date in understanding the issues related to Municipal Sustainability. Points of discussion related to Christine Hoyt's offer to gather additional information on Berkshire Community College and the municipal fellowship program. The Massachusetts Municipal Association is also interested in participating in future discussion.

Paul S. followed this up with developing capacity in communities to band together and fund assistant or shared assistant positions to essentially work as a way to build up a roster of potential candidates for positions within the region.

Discussion ensued on the following work that should be done before asking any of the delegation to attend a future meeting.

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 – March 22, 2023 at 4pm

VII. Adjournment

Eleanor T. made a motion to adjourn, Malcolm F. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 5:10 p.m. after a roll call vote.