



REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, July 26, 2023

via Zoom

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:03 pm by Tom Matuszko. The meeting was recorded.

Committee Members Present

Malcolm Fick, BRPC Chair, ex-officio; Alternate from Great Barrington
Sheila Irvin, Pittsfield
Christine Rasmussen, Alternate from Stockbridge
Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Committee Members Absent

Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)
Kyle Hanlon, North Adams

BRPC Staff Present

Tom Matuszko, Executive Director, Interim Chair of Regional Issues Committee
CJ Hoss, Community Planning Program Manager
Ken Walto, Project Specialist

Guests/Public Present

Tom Hutcheson, Dalton Town Manager
Kent Lew, Alternate from Washington, Washington Selectboard Chair
Kathe Warden, Becket Town Administrator
Jon Sylbert, Sandisfield Town Administrator
Paul Sieloff, BMMA Chair

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

II. Approval of May 24 Meeting Minutes

Tom M. read the agenda item and requested a motion on the item. Christine R. made a motion to accept the minutes as written. Sheila I. seconded. No committee members had any further comment. The motion passed as follows:

Sheila I. - Yes
Christine R. - Yes
Eleanor T. - Abstain

III. Community Sustainability

Tom M. introduced the topic as a continuation of the past several Regional Issues Committee meetings and began providing an update of progress made by staff. Part of this introduction was the goal of moving this topic outside of the Regional Issues Committee moving forward to a group focused on this subject, which allows other subject matter to be

taken up by the Committee.

Tom M. introduced Ken Walto to the discussion and provided background on his experience as well as what he has been tasked with moving forward, with the first step being an analysis of the municipal survey that BRPC circulated over the past winter.

Ken W. began a presentation of the analysis he had conducted of the survey results. This review began discussing paid municipal positions. This analysis focused on highlighting positions where more than 50% of respondents reported difficulty filling the position. This was broken into two categories to sort positions that were present in the majority of communities and positions present in a minority of overall communities. Ken W. provided a brief overview of positions that were highlighted as difficult to fill, especially those cutting across all the responding communities. The presentation transitioned into reviewing volunteer positions. Positions were specifically highlighted by those being reported by a majority of communities and in situations where more than 40% and more than 50% reported difficulty in attracting candidates. Ken W. highlighted specific examples that appear to have difficulty in filling positions.

Tom H. mentioned that in the case of paid and volunteer positions, the low response rate in some positions may be because of ongoing stability in the community where no hiring has been needed recently, which would have highlighted the difficulty in present market for paid and volunteer positions.

Ken W. proceeded to share results of the other survey questions which involved understanding the number of full-time positions in communities, current vacancies, terms of vacancies, overall turnover, and anticipated retirements. Further discussion ensued regarding specific qualitative responses from the communities. Two of the more common threads were salaries and benefits were an issue for attracting and retaining staff, and the skills, licenses, and training were also problematic.

Tom M. concluded that the results of the survey largely support previous thoughts and discussion on staffing and volunteer attraction and retention. In addition, these conclusions were shared with a reporter from the Berkshire Eagle, which were included in a recent article on the subject. Also of interest is a One-Stop application was submitted to assist with these efforts, but at the time of the meeting staff had not received a response. Lastly, the previously promised effort to host a regional calendar of training opportunities has finally been wrapped up and embedded into the BRPC website. Tom M. transitioned the discussion into next steps.

Jon S. followed on the subject of procurement, which was not included in the survey. Discussion ensued that most communities don't specifically have a standalone procurement officer and it is embedded into other positions. Tom M. referenced BRPC's attempts to provide procurement services, but to date communities have balked at the cost of the service outside of group goods and services efforts.

Discussion shifted on what to do with the data. Jon S. suggested this is at least two part in the short term – the data collected can be used to benefit budgetary requests at Town Meeting, while also sharing that this data is being presented to the delegation and state officials with requests to help provide solutions. Jon S. also stated bringing data from surrounding communities that provides a broader perspective can assist with framing the discussion at Town Meeting.

Kent L. followed that ongoing public education on the issue is necessary to continue in order to raise awareness to residents of the cost of providing services at an acceptable level. The other side of education is continuing to make efforts to raise awareness of available positions, especially to younger persons. Kathe W. followed on with discussion with not

being able to connect with Berkshire Community College on an internship program.

Christine R. followed that we should be working to funnel information to the Berkshire Eagle and Berkshire Edge to provide more attention on the subject. Additionally, a working group could be communicating to guidance counselors in high schools and community colleges to attempt to flag municipal job opportunities for students. Lastly, this data should be directed to Town finance committees, as they especially need to be aware of these issues moving forward.

Tom M. followed with the question of related to next steps, what is the role of legislators in this issue. Is this a financial request to help subsidize salaries? Kent L. responded at the very least it should be framed as reasoning for the state providing adequate aid increases. The legislature can assist in providing less pressure on local budgets. In the last 5 years, the Town of Washington's costs have increased by 30%, while state aid has increased by 5%.

Tom M. followed as highlighting funding to support internship/training positions to help build capacity in the region and create a pipeline of qualified persons for municipal positions. Kent L. responded that this needs to happen locally to attract candidates that will be focused on the Berkshires. Tom M. asked where this would need to be located – ideally the program would be located in the Berkshires, but a Pioneer Valley location would be close enough to attract local candidates. Sheila I. stated that even if Pioneer Valley was the initial locations, if it was a successful program it could be replicated within the Berkshires. Tom M. offered that this is something that would make sense to be discussed further with neighboring RPA's.

Malcolm F. asked if whether BRPC can be the conduit for renewed shared service discussions given the demand in many responding communities is likely part time. Tom M. responded that BRPC has conducted multiple surveys where the response is a need for shared services, but that the communities have difficulty in agreeing to the specifics. Kent L. responded that the smaller communities need to alter the way of thinking and that this isn't a cost saving measure, but a way to attract and retain qualified individuals. Discussion continued regarding potential certificate and/or educational options as a gateway into municipal positions.

Tom M. stated again that BRPC is committed to providing support to this effort moving forward, but that the conversation is better suited for a different forum. Kent L. stated he thought the regional administrators and managers group could host this discussion moving forward, and the selectmen's association needs to be rejuvenated to also participate. Paul S. responded that BMMA should be participating in the overall discussion moving forward. Tom M. continued that a logical next step would be seeking an earmark to fund a proposal for providing assistance to communities moving forward vs. seeking out grant opportunities.

IV. Discussion of Cannabis Control Commission Proposed Regulations

Tom M. stated that there is an effort for the state to address the Community Host Agreements. CJ H. provided a brief discussion of initial concerns raised by communities and the Massachusetts Municipal Association. It is tough to follow at this time what the real goal and impact of the changes are, but guidance is anticipated to be released in the near term that may shed some light on the subject. Tom M. gauged that this was an introduction to a potential need for the Commission to provide comments.

V. Developing Topic List for Future Consideration

Eleanor T. raised concern of a new solar report that has been released, and the potential impact on Western Massachusetts communities, especially with a conclusion that greenfield development is a less costly than placement on buildings. The committee may want to revisit solar, as there may once again be increased pressure on development in the Berkshires.

VI. Next Committee Meeting Date – June 28, 2023 at 4pm

VII. Adjournment

Eleanor T. made a motion to adjourn, Sheila I. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 5:19 p.m. after a roll call vote.