



## **REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes**

Wednesday, November 29, 2023

*via Zoom*

### **I. Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order at 3:37 pm by Christine Rasmussen. Roll call was taken and the meeting was recorded.

#### Committee Members Present

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

#### BRPC Staff Present

CJ Hoss, Community Planning Program Manager  
Tom Matuszko, Executive Director  
Ken Walto, Project Specialist

#### Other Persons Present

Casey Pease, Constituent Service Director, Office of Senator Paul Mark  
Peter Traub, Delegate from Cheshire

### **II. Approval of October 25, 2023 Meeting Minutes**

Christine R. read the agenda item and requested a motion to accept the minutes as presented. Kent L. and Eleanor T. each requested clarifying changes within the text. Christine R. made a motion, incorporating the requested changes. Kent L. seconded. The motion passed as follows:

Sheila I. - Yes  
Christine R. - Yes  
Eleanor T. - Yes  
Kent L. - Yes  
Andrew G. - Yes  
Kyle H. - Yes

### **III. Energy Policy in Massachusetts**

CJ H. introduced the topic. The Committee has noted during past sessions that there is considerable activity at the state legislative and executive levels regarding energy infrastructure and electrification/decarbonization efforts. This includes the Governor's creation of the Commission on Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting, House bill H.3295, and Senator Paul Mark's bills S.2148 and S.2150. The Committee has invited Casey Pease from Senator Mark's office to provide some clarity on these actions and proposals.

Tom M. said that while the Committee supports the Healy administration's ambitious decarbonization goals, it is also committed to protecting Berkshire County's natural resources and maintaining some local control over project siting and development.

Casey P. said that one of the best ways to evaluate pending legislation is to look at how many sponsors and cosponsors it has. For instance, Senator Mark's bill S.2150 has 10+ sponsors and has a lot of energy behind it. He also felt that it would be useful for the RIC to have a conversation with the Telecommunication, Utilities, and Energy (TUE) Joint Committee, of which Senator Mark is a member. There is a TUE meeting in Pittsfield on Friday, December 1. Lastly, with respect to solar development, Senator Mark is prioritizing rooftop installations on newly constructed public buildings and has raised concerns about the capacity of the grid to handle solar generation.

Ken W. asked Casey P. if there is a Senate companion bill to House bill H.2135. Casey P. said there is not yet one.

Kent L. said that his main concern is the diminishment of local control. Although it is likely that some local control will have to be ceded in order to better achieve and coordinate climate goals, there needs to be a balance between such priorities and local preferences. Additionally, he mentioned that installation site type priorities are complicated because while he agrees that installations on built environments are preferable to those on open space or forest from an aesthetic and environmental perspective, such prioritization could also exclude overwhelmingly rural municipalities like Washington from benefitting economically from solar development.

Christine R. said that she was primarily interested in legislation that distinguishes between different site types and prioritizes development on those sites that have the least value for other purposes. For instance, prime farmland should be considered a last resort for solar development, while non-farmable open land should be considered a priority.

Eleanor T. brought up House bill H.3215 introduced by Representative Jeffrey Roy. This bill explicitly removes control over solar projects from municipalities and consolidates permitting and siting within an office within the Department of Environmental Protection. Rep. Roy is a member of the Commission on Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting and is co-chair of the TUE, and therefore has clout on these issues.

Casey P. said that Rep. Roy was going to be at the TUE meeting in Pittsfield on December 1 if any of the committee members wanted to voice their concerns to him. He also said that he thinks it would be useful if the RIC provided Sen. Mark with a letter compiling its concerns on the issue and relevant legislation. Kent L. said he wanted to make sure that the RIC focused on legislation that was likely to be passed. Eleanor T. agreed and said that the RIC should look towards Sen. Mark and his staff to provide insight in this respect. Furthermore, Eleanor T. asked Casey P. if Sen. Mark's office could provide some information on the multiple working groups that Governor Healy has set up on energy transition issues. Casey P. said he would consult with the legislative team and get back to the RIC.

Kent L. mentioned that in addition to local control and appropriate siting, a third issue that concerned him is how the incentive structures behind solar installations drive development and how these structures can be modified to ensure an equitable distribution of development. Similarly, Eleanor T. mentioned that during the previous legislative session, there was attention given to the issue of enabling municipalities to either tax or sign PILOTs with solar developers, but this legislation failed to become law. If towns are to be expected to host more solar, they need more flexibility with respect to how they structure the financial agreements.

Christine R. said that more clarity is needed on what exactly is a “qualifying project”, as this language is used in several bills without a precise definition. Additionally, she said it could be useful if Sen. Mark’s staffers reached out to the relevant committee staffers to better understand the state of various competing legislation.

Eleanor T. said that the Clean Energy Transition Working Group published a draft report of conclusions and recommendations on November 17. It was meant to publish a full report on November 28, but neither Eleanor T. nor CJ H. were able to find it. CJ H. will reach out to Working Group staff to get the full report. The timetable for submitting comments to the Working Group is very tight as the report will be reviewed on December 6 and the final report will be submitted December 29. The report will be used to inform legislative decisions by TUE for the rest of the session, so registering comments and concerns is important.

Andrew G. said that an underlooked aspect of the energy transition in Massachusetts is that many programs and policies are being implemented by federal, state, and local bureaucracies without sufficient care being paid to consistency. This is resulting in different outcomes municipality to municipality.

Sheila I. said that she is interested in what the legislature is doing with respect to upgrading the grid. Casey P. said that this is an issue Sen. Mark has been pushing and that the Senate President Spilka has reached out to Washington on this issue. Additionally, he mentioned that the RIC should reach out to the UMASS clean energy extension, which provides individuals, businesses, municipalities, and NGOs with technical and legal information regarding the state of the energy transition.

Christine R. said she was interested in hearing more about what opportunities exist to tie this work into federal funding. Casey P. said that a resource for this information could be Quentin Palfrey.

Tom M. said that Casey P. (or another member of Sen. Mark’s office) is welcome to attend RIC meetings moving forward. Casey P. said that he thought this was a good idea.

The Committee agreed that it should draft a collection of shared interests regarding the topics discussed in the meeting and use it as a framework to approach the Working Group report and other related legislation. Kent L. and Sheila I. mentioned that Berkshire County is economically, demographically, and geographically varied and therefore there are likely to be differences of perspective even on shared interests.

CJ H. said that next steps would be summarizing the meeting and hunting down the draft report. Christine R. reminded committee members that all correspondence must go through CJ H. Similarly, Tom M. asked Casey P. to use CJ H. as the conduit to the group.

## **V. Next Committee Meeting Date – December 13, 2023 at 3:30pm**

### **V. Adjournment**

Kyle H. made a motion to adjourn, Sheila I. seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 4:55 p.m. after a unanimous roll call vote.