



REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

via Zoom

Committee Members Present

Malcom Fick, BRPC Chair, ex-officio; Alternate from Great Barrington
Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)
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

Other Persons Present

Casey Pease, Constituent Service Director, Office of Senator Paul Mark

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 3:34 pm by Christine R. Roll call was taken and the meeting was recorded.

II. Approval of November 29, 2023 Meeting Minutes

CJ H. mentioned that some corrections regarding bill names/numbers were needed. Christine R. made a motion to incorporate the discussed changes and accept the minutes. Shelia I. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Continued Discussion of Energy Policy in Massachusetts

In anticipation of the meeting, CJ H. reviewed the Clean Energy Transition Working Group (CETWG) draft report and produced a summary memo highlighting potentially problematic elements for RIC to discuss.

Transmission Planning

The draft report emphasizes that existing utility and transmission line corridors should be used to the extent feasible when installing new transmission infrastructure. CJ H. said he thought this was in line with RIC's position on the matter.

Kent L. mentioned that the use of state-owned transmission corridors and state rights-of-way (for instance along state highways) can have the consequence of limiting local control. This recently caused an issue in Washington, where a new transmission pole was installed in the entrance to the town park.

Eleanor T. said that while she agrees that new transmission infrastructure should be installed on state-owned land to the greatest extent possible, there should be a focus on

using existing transmission corridors and avoiding cutting new corridors through state forest. Additionally, a singular focus on the installation of new transmission infrastructure ignores the concomitant massive build-out of new distribution infrastructure, which has the potential to be more disruptive to local communities. Current laws (Chapter 40A Sections 3/3A) give municipalities few opportunities to weigh in on infrastructure and largely exempt public service corporations from local zoning and permitting control. Considering the imminent infrastructure build-out, there needs to be greater opportunity for public comment and local influence. Furthermore, there needs to be a greater effort made towards informing and alerting local communities about proposed projects. When a project involves new utility lines or expansion of existing utility lines, there should be a public hearing with the local selectboard or planning board to seek public input. Lastly, the fact that energy infrastructure developments are likely to fall disproportionately hard on rural areas means that rural communities should receive special protections akin to those afforded to environmental justice communities. One way this could be assured is by giving organizations like the Mass Municipal Association, the Selectboard Association, the Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies, and the Rural Policy Advisory Commission larger roles in state energy permitting bodies.

Workforce Development

The draft report acknowledges that a build-out of energy infrastructure will require an increase in the availability of power system engineers. In order to encourage this, the draft report recommends promoting and supporting programs at Commonwealth 4-year universities such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI).

CJ H. commented that the RIC is in favor of these efforts, but that state support for such programs should be distributed across the Commonwealth and should engage educational institutions other than just private 4-year universities such as the state universities, community colleges, and trade schools.

Andrew G. agreed with CJ H.'s comments and added that there is a general need for tradespeople beyond just engineers.

Kent L. said that if the state provides funding opportunities for such programs, there should be tiered access for participating institutions such that Berkshire Community College (BCC) doesn't find itself competing for the same funds as is MIT. Additionally, funding disbursements should account for the pipelines and connections between different institutions. For instance, training done at a trade school or community college may prepare students to later receive more sophisticated training and certification at a 4-year university.

Siting and Permitting

The draft report recognizes that regulations are outdated and that overlapping permitting processes are unclear. It also mentions the role of the Governor's Commission on Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting in reforming the permitting process.

CJ H. commented that the draft report gave insufficient attention to the role of local oversight in the siting and permitting process.

Christine R. said that there need to be different strategies for reaching out to different communities and constituencies due to different levels of awareness regarding the energy transition and its implications.

Malcom F. said that any rollback of local control should be accompanied by an increased effort to engage and inform the local community of any decisions.

Eleanor T. said that the report to be released in March by the Governor's Commission on Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting will have a large impact on local control and oversight. It seems that the Governor's ambition is to limit local input and consolidate control in a state agency. This is also the intention articulated in Rep. Jeffrey Roy's bill H.3215.

Comment Letter

CJ H. said that he wanted to submit the comment letter by Friday, December 15. The letter could be submitted the following week, but the sooner it is submitted, the higher the likelihood that it is considered by CETWG. A copy will also be sent to Sen. Paul Mark.

Eleanor T. made a motion to authorize CJ H. to draft a letter based on BRPC staff and RIC member comments and submit the letter on behalf of RIC to CETWG on Friday, December 15. Christine R. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Future Discussion Topics

Eleanor T. said that if RIC wants to continue discussing energy topics, Rep. Roy's bill H.3215 should be discussed as it is likely to have a large impact on the Berkshires. Christine R. said that this bill could be discussed in context of a wider-ranging discussion on pending energy legislation.

CJ H. mentioned that RIC might want to comment on the housing bill bond and the associated zoning changes.

Tom M. mentioned that RIC might want to review the administration's economic development plan and farmland plan.

V. Next Committee Meeting Date

Casey P. said that Sen. Mark will attend the next RIC meeting to address members' legislative questions.

The members agreed that the next meeting is scheduled for Friday, January 19 at 3:30pm to accommodate Sen. Mark.

VI. Adjournment

Kent L. made a motion to adjourn. Shelia I. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 4:29pm.