



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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CEDS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

January 31, 2024

Committee Members Present

George Abriz, BCC
Roger Bolton, BRPC
Michael Coakley, City of Pittsfield
A.J. Enchill, Berkshire Black Economic Council
Peter Farkas, BCC
Malcom Fick, BRPC Chair, (ex-officio non-voting member)
Kieth Girouard, Massachusetts Small Business Development Network
Kyle Hanlon, BRPC, CEDS Chair
Lesley Herzberg, Berkshire County Historical Society
Ben Lamb, 1Berkshie
Bryana Malloy, MassHire
Mike Nuvalle, City of North Adams
Laurie Mick, PERC (Pittsfield Economic Development Corporation)
Chris Rembold, Town of Great Barrington
Shannon Smith, Berkshire Agricultural Ventures

Committee Alternates Present

Maureen McLaughlin, BCC (Alternate)
Kevin Pink, 1Berkshire (Alternate)

Committee Members Absent

Ian Rasch, Alander Construction
Ben Sosne, Berkshire Innovation Center

BRPC Staff Present

Laura Brennan, BRPC Assistant Director
Wylie Goodman, BRPC Senior Economic Development Planner
Tom Matuzsko, BRPC Executive Director

Guests Present

Steven Ellis, Town of Montague
Brittany Polito, *iBerkshires*
Virginia Riehl, North Adams
Jenny Wright, Mass MoCA

Claudia

I. Call to Order

Kyle H. called the meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. Laura B. conducted roll call to establish attendance.

II. Approval of Minutes from September 27, 2023

Ben L. made a motion to approve the minutes. George A. seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.

Abstentions:

Roger Bolton
Kieth Girouard
A.J. Enchill

III. MA 2023 Economic Development Plan overview – Steven Ellis

Steven Ellis was approached in early 2023 to be a member of the Economic Development Planning Council charged with providing input to Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED) staff for the development of Governor Healy’s Economic Development Plan. The Council represented a broad range of interests including municipal, business, industry, and state government figures. Steven E. was approached and asked to represent rural interests given his history of advocacy for rural communities.

Steven E. said that the Secretary of EOED, Yvonne Hao, was committed to including a broad range of input. The input process replicated the model that has been used in the past for regional listening sessions and the feedback was incorporated into successive drafts of the plan. Steven E. agitated for greater rural engagement and believes that a greater effort could have been made to involve the most remote rural communities in the Commonwealth such as those in northern Franklin County, which are distant from both Pittsfield and Springfield.

Steven E. worked closely with Linda Dunlavy, executive director of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC) member. He also engaged with local chambers of commerce throughout Western Massachusetts and Berkshire County and met with stakeholders concerned about mill property stabilization, preservation, and redevelopment.

The Plan’s first draft was presented to the Council for comments in September by EOED staff. The second draft was presented in November. The Council provided additional comments and voted on having the Plan finalized and sent to the Governor for adoption and implementation.

The Council focused on three primary areas.

- Fundamentals that would enable economic growth
 - o Rural economic wellbeing was considered an economic fundamental unto itself
- Building, recruiting, and retaining workforce talent
 - o The Governor and Secretary Hao are acutely aware of the risks the Commonwealth is facing about shrinking and aging populations. Rural communities have served as an early warning sign of this dynamic, but it is an issue throughout the Commonwealth
- Strengthening specific sectors
 - o Rural communities were considered as a unique sector alongside more traditionally defined industrial/commercial sectors

Steven E. made an effort to include utilities infrastructure such as the electrical grid and waste water management systems in discussions on infrastructure, which are typically dominated by transport infrastructure concerns.

Although rural communities only represent 10-15% of the Commonwealth’s population, they represent upwards of 50% of the total municipalities and land area. There is a recognition that they occupy an important niche of the economy and need to be stabilized and reinvigorated with the addition of more youth and greater balance to their demographics. Many rural communities run a risk of entering a vicious

cycle in which shrinking populations provide little incentive for businesses to invest in these communities.

Too often, economic development grant opportunities emphasize total impact, how many dollars of private investment can be leveraged, and how many jobs are being created. This disadvantages rural communities that cannot achieve a scale competitive with urban communities. Furthermore, the relatively low valuation of rural property disadvantages rural communities because investors are not willing to take the same risks as they are on urban development. The state needs to recognize these disadvantages and adopt a less utilitarian perspective that allows rural communities greater access to grant monies.

Many rural communities are historic mill towns that have characteristics and needs that are similar to those of gateway cities. One of the goals of the RPAC has been to create a mini gateway city program that would increase resources and planning opportunities to these communities.

Rural communities need accelerated access to grant monies. Often, rural communities have projects that require significant upfront investments in engineering and design. These investments can be difficult to justify when access to state monies is uncertain and delayed.

There is concern regarding targeted support for space utilization. Many mill towns come into possession of mill buildings that they would rather not own but must take control of in order to guarantee public safety. Often, these buildings are dilapidated beyond the point of reuse and must be demolished. Furthermore, the acreage occupied by these buildings is valuable as industrial and commercial property is at a premium in rural communities where much of the land is locked up in preservation. However, there are few state monies available to assist in the needed demolition and property redevelopment.

Steven E. felt that Anne Gobi, the Director of Rural Affairs, is dedicated to relationship building and increasing interaction between the Governor's staff and rural communities. He encouraged the CEDS Committee to reach out to her and use her as a direct link to the Governor.

Roger B. thanked Steven E. for providing specifics on the Economic Development Plan. Roger B. felt that the plan is heavy on ends and vague on means. He would like more specificity on the funding sources that are referenced in the plan, the status of the PILOT agreements program, and the legislation that will be needed to implement the plan's goals.

Steven E. said that it was evident to him and the Council that the planning process and the plan itself was ends-oriented. It was not meant to develop specific programs so much as to provide guidelines for future program development. The Governor is going to make a series of proposals over this year and the next year that the legislature will then be responsible for funding. He had not heard of any progress regarding the PILOT agreements program or regarding extending the Gateway Cities initiative. However, he believed that the Governor's budget would include substantial funding for some of the initiatives included in the One Stop for Growth portal environment. Overall, having the plan set certain objectives gives municipal authorities codified goals to reference while writing grants.

Kevin P. asked if Steven E. had heard any specific conversations around match grant funding.

Steven E. said that match grant funding was referenced specifically in Council conversations and there is currently legislation pending regarding this funding. He recommended that Kevin P. reach out to the federal funds office for more information.

Wylie G. asked Steven E. if there was conversation regarding broadband and a recognition that rural communities are often hamstrung by having a monopoly ISP. Additionally, the federal affordable

connectivity program is being wound down, which will deprive low-income households of internet access.

Steven E. said that broadband access was discussed in relation to its importance for developing and maintaining rural workforces.

Ben L asked if there will be webinars or workshops that provide a summary of the plan. He also asked if there was a recognition of the variance of needs within rural communities relative to those of urban communities.

Steven E. said he did not know if there were workshops and webinars planned. He said that there was much conversation about the difference between urban and rural needs as well as the difference between the needs of different rural communities.

The CEDS committee thanked Steven E. for his work on the Economic Development Plan and thanked him for speaking with the committee.

Steven E. left the meeting at 1:42 pm.

IV. Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 5-Year Update – Ben Lamb

Ben L. said that the Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 has officially turned five years old. 1Berkshire is now in the process of benchmarking progress towards the goals laid out in the document. The full Blueprint advisory council was recently convened for the first time since launch, and 1Berkshire is processing the input gathered from that meeting. 1Berkshire will be issuing a Berkshire Blueprint 2.5 benchmarking addendum in May 2024 that will incorporate what stands true from 2019, what has changed, and what do the Blueprint goals look like moving forward.

Laura B. thanked 1Berkshire for its work on the Blueprint and its collaboration in writing the CEDS documents.

V. 2023-2027 Berkshire County CEDS Year 1 PPR to EDA – Laura Brennan

i. Summary Background Data - Status Overview

Laura B. said that the first annual update and performance progress report is not due to EDA until June 30, 2024. This gives BRPC staff and the CEDS Committee more time to gather marks of progress since the 5-year CEDS was published. It also allows BRPC staff to use the most recently published 5-year American Community Survey data.

ii. Goals and Objectives – Representative Activities

In terms of goals and objectives, the CEDS Committee is always looking for representative activities and demonstrative progress towards the goals stated in the 5-Year CEDS document. Many of the representative activities recorded in the past still apply and will be included such as MassHire youth outreach and BCC employer programs. BRPC staff will be reaching out to CEDS Committee members over the next months for updates on these and new activities.

iii. Priority Projects – Update and New Submissions

The annual update also includes updates on a list of priority projects. Each year the CEDS Committee offers project proponents the opportunity to submit new projects for consideration. BRPC staff recently received submissions for three new projects, two of which were discussed at the meeting.

Northern Berkshire Community Resource Center – Northern Berkshire Community Coalition

Kyle H. said that the Coalition is a valuable resource for North County that is involved in a lot of different aspects of community development and provides many important resources to North County residents.

Chris R. asked if there is any information regarding the employment impact of the project.

Ben L. said that the Coalition itself would be housed at the facility. Currently, the Coalition has 13 staff members, but this fluctuates based on the funding that is available. The purpose of the facility is to provide a North County physical footprint for organizations that are active in the area, but do not have a physical presence. In total, there would likely be 20-25 people working in the facility per day.

Roger B. said it would be helpful to give specifics on the organizations that would use the facility. He said it would also be useful to provide justification for the need for a 200-person meeting space.

Ben L. said he could not reveal the exact organizations that might use the facility as those conversations are confidential, but some examples include the Berkshire County Sheriff's Office and MassHire Berkshires. Additionally, the Coalition holds a community forum every month that has 100+ attendees, and many North County organizations hold annual meetings and other convenings that would benefit from a smaller and more affordable meeting space, as well as one that is ADA accessible.

Blackshires Initiative

Kieth G. said it would be helpful to have more information regarding measurable outcomes and a more specific total cost range.

Chris R. said it would be helpful to have more information on which exact CEDS goals this project achieves.

Laura B. said the Committee would vote on these projects and other projects that they receive at the next meeting.

VI. Small Business Resiliency Assessment Tool update – Laura Brennan

Laura B. said that the Small Business Resiliency Assessment Tool is gaining momentum again as the EDA has invited BRPC to submit an application to move the tool from concept to an online platform. BRPC will be reaching out to technical assistance providers and small businesses in the coming months to increase community involvement.

VIII. Adjournment

Chris R. made a motion to adjourn. Ben L. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 2:06 pm.

Next Meeting – Laura B. will send a poll to Committee members to determine March meeting date.