



FULL COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES September 25, 2024

This was an in-person meeting held at Balderdash Cellars, 81 State Road, Richmond, MA 01254.

I. Opening

A. The meeting was called to order at 4:12 p.m.

Chair Malcolm Fick stated that per the open meeting law, BRPC was recording this meeting. Others may record the meeting after informing the meeting Chair. Documents presented must be provided to the Chair at the meeting.

B. The following Commission members were present:

John Duval – Adams Alternate
Alex Glover – Alford Delegate
Robert Collins – Dalton Delegate
Mary McGurn – Egremont Delegate
Pedro Pachano – Great Barrington Delegate
Malcolm Fick – Great Barrington Alternate
Sheila Irvin – Pittsfield Delegate
Christine Rasmussen – Stockbridge Alternate
Doug McNally – Windsor Delegate

Towns with no Delegate or Alternate present:

Becket, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, Hancock, Hinsdale, Lanesborough, Lee, Lenox, Monterey, Mount Washington, New Ashford, New Marlborough, North Adams, Otis, Peru, Richmond, Sandisfield, Savoy, Sheffield, Tyringham, Washington, West Stockbridge, Williamstown

Staff Present:

Thomas Matuszko, Marianne Sniezek, Laura Brennan, Brett Roberts

Others Present: Kathe Warden-Becket, Karan Disecky-Cheshire, Claire O'Callahan, Berkshire Eagle

C. Vote to Approve Minutes of the August 1, 2024 Commission Meeting

Douglas McNally motioned to approve the August 1, 2024, draft meeting minutes. Alex Glover seconded the motion. There was no discussion. The motion was approved unanimously.

II. Comments from Berkshire Regional Planning Commission Delegates and Alternate Delegates

There were no comments.

III. Comments from the Public

There were no comments.

IV. Presentation of Executive Committee Actions

Malcolm Fick said that the packet of materials distributed to Commission members includes Executive Committee actions that were taken on the August 1 and September 12, 2024 meetings.

V. Presentation of the Home Modification Loan Program

Senior Planner Brett Roberts said that many people want to stay in the region and continue living in their homes but cannot afford to modify their homes to meet their needs as they age or those of their children with disabilities.

The Home Modification Loan Program (the Program) provides up to \$50,000 to homeowners to modify their home to meet the needs of a household member, such as wheelchair ramps and elevators, accessible bathrooms, and the construction of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) for aging parents. Once the modification is completed, a 50-year mortgage equal to the cost of the modification is put on the house. The program income criteria are very generous – a one-person household income must be below \$207,800 to qualify. The homeowner must provide adequate documentation from a physician. The homeowner works directly with the BRPC and the homeowner's selected contractor. There is no bidding process, the homeowner can select any contractor.

There is no cap on the number of loans. Information has been sent to Councils on Aging and Brett will be visiting COAs in person. The Program may be appropriate for homeowners not qualifying for CDBG funding. Second homes are not eligible.

The process starts with contacting BRPC's program associate, Christie Lewis at clewis@berkshireplanning.org or 413-442-1521 ext. 23 for an application. Christie can help fill it out. If approved, the homeowner finds a contractor and gets a quote. BRPC verifies the homeowner's income and needs for the project. BRPC will send the project to the state for final inspection and approval if it is approved.

Lowering kitchen cabinets and countertops would qualify under the Program. The project costs are covered upfront, and the homeowner doesn't pay for anything. Eligibility for addressing future needs would depend on the documentation provided by a physician or other care professional. Septic systems are not covered but air conditioning and ventilation may be if the homeowner has a respiratory issue.

VI. Discussion and Identification of BRPC Legislative Priorities

Tom Matuszko said the Regional Issues Committee has been serving as an ad-hoc legislative issues committee. BRPC is working on a structure to address legislative priorities better. This meeting's materials include a list of legislative priorities the Rural Policy Advisory Commission assembled. The categories are rural advocacy, rural economic development, roads, bridges, culverts, schools, housing, municipal operations, agriculture, municipal building needs, public health, and climate.

The legislation included under the priorities are bills filed in the previous session. The legislature has been in informal session since July. There is some discussion of going back into formal session to address stranded bills.

The major bills that BRPC and the Rural Policy Advisory Committee are concerned about that are still in conference committee are the economic development bond bill, the climate bill, and the so-called municipal modernization bill, which is important because it contains language extending the open-meeting law provisions that allow for virtual meetings.

BRPC and the Regional Issues Committee worked with local legislators, including Senator Mark, to communicate legislative priorities. The Rural Policy Advisory Committee has also allowed BRPC to connect with legislators from other rural areas of the state, such as the Pioneer Valley and Cape Cod.

Some of the issues discussed were:

- Chapter 90 funding increases to cover the expenses of road, bridge, and culvert maintenance and construction. Level funding is not enough.
- Rural communities must work together and cannot be seen as competing over these funds.
- Inflation is outpacing the town's ability to fund construction projects.
- Delays in bidding, securing easements, getting state approval, etc., mean project costs increase when they are finally completed.
- Fewer projects are funded as they become more expensive, and funding remains at the same level.
- Simplifying Chapter 90 application process.

It was suggested that BRPC identify budgetary priorities and communicate them to legislators when a new legislative session begins in January.

Tom Matuszko said that if the Commission finds the broad categories of legislative priorities acceptable, BRPC will continue to focus on them.

VII. Discussion of Important Items Facing Your Municipality

This discussion was skipped due to time constraints.

VIII. Adjournment

Pedro Pachano made a motion to adjourn. Doug McNally seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:55 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, November 21, 2024, at 6:00 p.m.