



**REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE –Meeting Minutes**

Wednesday, March 26, 2025, 3:30 p.m.

*via Zoom*

Committee Members Present

Andrew Groff, Williamstown (non-Commission member)

Kent Lew, Washington (non-Commission member)

Christine Rasmussen, Alternate from Stockbridge, RIC Chair

Eleanor Tillinghast, Mount Washington (non-Commission member)

Malcom Fick, BRPC Chair, ex-officio; Alternate from Great Barrington

Committee Members Not Present

Kyle Hanlon, Delegate from North Adams

Sheila Irvin, Delegate from Pittsfield

BRPC Staff Present

CJ Hoss, Community Planning and Development Program Manager

Thomas Matuszko, Executive Director

**1. Call to Order and Open Meeting Law Statement**

Christine R. called the meeting to order at 3:33 p.m. Roll call was taken, and the meeting was recorded.

**2. Update on Open Meeting Law**

Tom M. said that he was pleased by the extension of the Open Meeting Law. Kent L. said he hopes that legislation is passed to make the extension permanent.

**3. Review and discussion of potential areas of focus for the upcoming legislative cycle, including RPAC and MARPA priorities**

CJ H. said that BRPC and RIC should spend more time tracking important legislation. Although BRPC and RIC submitted comments on legislation and petitioned lawmakers over the past year, it was difficult to see the impact of these activities. BRPC should seek greater alignment between its legislative priorities and those of the local legislative delegation – instead of BRPC advocating exclusively for its top priorities, it should focus on areas in which its priorities overlap with those of the local delegation. Tom M. said that BRPC should review the bills sponsored by local delegates to gain a better understanding of their priorities.

Eleanor T. said that BRPC should focus on working with the other RPAs, specifically those in Western Massachusetts. Several RPAs working together tend to command more attention on Beacon Hill than one RPA working in isolation. Tom M. said that BRPC works with the other RPAs through the Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies (MARPA). Additionally, the RPAs collectively procure the services of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) through MARPA, which helps identify legislative issues and lobby lawmakers. Tom M. said that he is also working with like-minded communities and RPAs through the Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC), which is led by the Franklin Regional Council of

Governments (FRCOG). For each policy priority, RPAC identifies relevant legislation, and Commission members identify those pieces of legislation that are most relevant to their specific regional needs and priorities.

Kent L. said that one way to work with the local delegation is to ask them what sort of testimony BRPC and local communities can provide that will support their positions and could sway their colleagues. Tom M. said that Representative Leigh Davis has reached out about wanting to improve coordination between her office and BRPC. BRPC could invite her to the next RIC meeting and ask her how BRPC can support her legislative priorities through testimony.

Malcom F. said that the list of legislation identified by MARPA and RPAC is substantial, and trying to address them all would spread BRPC's attention too thin. Instead, BRPC should identify a subset of bills on which to focus. Kent L. agreed and said that the BRPC staff should make a first pass of the legislation to identify those bills that are sponsored by the local delegation and are relevant to BRPC. RIC members could then vote on which subset of those bills to focus.

Eleanor T. said that she thinks some of the MARPA- and MMA-identified priorities would be good to focus on. For instance, the Means-Tested Senior Citizen Property Tax Exemption, the Act Providing for the Establishment of Sustainable Resource Funds, the Act Advancing Equity for Rural Communities Receiving State Grants, the Municipality's Right of First Refusal for Agricultural and Recreational Land, and An Act Relative to the Municipal Authority in Public Rights of Way. She also said that supporting Rep. Davis' H.1634, an Act Relative to Sexual Assault by Adults in Position of Authority or Trust, is important as this is a priority of Rep. Davis and is an issue that is relevant to Berkshire County.

Christine R. said that BRPC's subject matter expertise is greater in some areas than others. Therefore, BRPC should focus on legislation in those subject areas. Tom M. said it would be wise to focus on those bills that are likely to be passed. This is an area in which the MAPC legislative team could help BRPC.

Andrew G. said BRPC's legislative priorities should be those which address municipal functionality and land use issues relevant to Berkshire County. For instance, the Municipal & Public Safety Building Authority is a priority for the County, as many of the smaller, less-affluent municipalities struggle to maintain and construct new non-school municipal buildings.

Tom M. said that he will provide RIC members will an updated list of the MARPA legislative priorities. They can then begin selecting those bills they believe are most worthy of attention.

Kent L. agreed with Andrew G. that the Municipal and Public Safety Building Authority is a priority. He suggested that BRPC could support this priority by collecting data on regional public structures and their associated repair and replacement costs. Tom M. said that the previous auditor had assembled an inventory of this sort several years ago.

Christine R. said that housing legislation should be a priority considering potential reductions in Federal funding. Tom M. asked for feedback on the local transfer tax for housing; this bill is popular with housing advocates and was nearly passed in the previous legislative session. Additionally, the bill would be opt-in, so communities could choose if they wanted to participate. Malcom F. said he supports the bill, but there is not unanimous support in Great Barrington, particularly among those who depend on the sale of high-end real estate. Andrew G. said that he is interested in the transfer tax and would like to see

more information on its impact, which would depend on how it is structured. Christine R. said that RIC could assemble information on complicated and potentially controversial bills like the transfer tax that is distributed to communities for their edification.

Christine R. said that RIC members should review legislation and return a list of priorities to CJ H. Kent L. agreed and said that the priorities should be returned to CJ H. before the next RIC meeting. CJ H. can then consolidate the list of priorities where they overlap or there are duplicates. Christine R. said that each RIC member should send 10 priorities to CJ H. by next Wednesday, April 2, 2025.

#### **4. Identification of any other future discussion topics**

Eleanor T. asked for an update on the Seasonal Communities designation. Tom M. said that there are eight municipalities in Berkshire County that were designated as eligible to become a Seasonal Community. To accept the designation, each must vote on it at town meeting. The advisory commission will be meeting later in the year to devise criteria that would allow other municipalities to be eligible.

Tom M. provided an update on the Article 97 regulations. He said that the deadline to submit comments is today. BRPC looked over the regulations and discussed them with Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC). Neither BRPC nor BNRC have issues with the regulations as proposed.

#### **5. Next Committee Meeting Date**

The next meeting will be on Wednesday, April 9, 2025, at 3:30 p.m.

#### **6. Adjournment**

Eleanor T. made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Kent L. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 4:39 p.m.