



BRPC

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL ISSUES COMMITTEE – Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, April 9, 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
Sheila Irvin, Delegate from Pittsfield

Committee Members Not Present

Kyle Hanlon, Delegate from North Adams

BPRC 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 3:30 p.m. Roll call was taken, and the meeting was recorded.

2. Approval of Minutes – February 5, 2025 and March 26, 2025

CJ H. updated the Committee that minutes were not distributed prior to the meeting and will be held to a following meeting for review and acceptance.

3. Review and selection of priorities for the upcoming legislative cycle

CJ H. provided an overview of priorities identified by members of the Committee. Eleanor T. said she is surprised that the State-Owned Pilot Reform only received one expression of interest from RIC members because this is an important issue for Mt. Washington. She asked if it is not considered important in other Berkshire County municipalities. Christine R. said she thinks it should be included on the final list of priorities. Kent L. said that this is a top priority for Washington. Additionally, the auditor's office released a report on the issue and the auditor was in Windsor on Monday to discuss the proposal. However, it is a long-running issue and it is unlikely that a bill will emerge in this legislative session. Eleanor T. said that the Chairs of the Ways and Means Committees had previously expressed interest in the topic, and the Governor acknowledged that the current formula disadvantages Berkshire County municipalities when she visited Pittsfield. Andrew G. said that Williamstown is interested in the topic, but it is less of a priority as it does not have a large impact on the town's budget. Malcom F. said that it is a priority for Great Barrington. Tom M. said that he is working with other RPAs to see if there is another approach to advance this issue.

Malcom F. said he is struck by the lack of consensus of legislative priorities among RIC members and wonders if the same lack of consensus would be found in the broader

community. Instead of advocating for potentially niche priorities, RIC should focus on the handful of priorities that are shared.

Eleanor T. said that the Accelerated Bridge Program should be a priority as towns like Great Barrington desperately need assistance to repair and replace failing bridges. The Governor said she is devoting more funding to this problem, but Federal funding is uncertain, and this is the type of priority that can get lost among the priorities that dominate in Eastern Massachusetts. Kent L. said that the Accelerated Bridge Program is important because it is not just about funding, but also about streamlining the design and approval processes for bridges. Sheila I. said that a major frustration with bridge projects is that each bridge is treated as totally unique. Solving this problem would help build and maintain infrastructure throughout the County. Andrew G. said that environmental permitting for existing bridges is another area in which streamlining could be very beneficial.

Christine R. said that the new Chapter 90 funding formula that considers road miles should be a priority. This is something that needs immediate focus as the Massachusetts House is already discussing its budget and will be moving very quickly to meet its deadline. Tom M. said that in discussions with local legislators and town officials, roads, bridges, and culverts have been a big priority. He will be submitting testimony advocating that the new \$100m in funding be allocated according to road miles, expanding the program into a multi-year effort, and ensuring that funding for micro-transit is included. Kent L. said that this represents a potential inflection point as the funding is coming from a new source, the surtax. This is an opportunity to shape how new funding sources are allocated and could create an opening to eventually change the foundational Chapter 90 formula.

Eleanor T. said that funding for regional schools might be a priority for RIC and BRPC. With declining enrollment, aging schools, and local populations not eager or able to pay for repairs and upgrades, state funding is necessary. Tom M. said there are several legislative proposals to increase rural school aid and fully fund school transportation, but he does not know of any that address building condition. The state provides funding for school buildings through the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). Kent L. said that it can be difficult to secure MSBA funding because it requires a significant local match. Local communities often do not want to meet this match because operational funding is already so burdensome. If the state could take a larger role in funding operational expenses, then local communities would have more leeway to fund building costs. Christine R. said that these concerns tie in well with current budget proposals to fully fund transportation for out-of-district vocational students and reimburse districts up to 95% of the cost of local transportation.

Eleanor T. asked if Berkshire County school districts are still struggling with providing adequate academic facilities for vocational education. Tom M. said that it remains an issue, especially in Southern Berkshire County.

Tom M. said that the Berk12 education task force is an advocate for educational topics in the county and has its own legislative agenda. RIC could arrange for someone from Berk12 to speak at a meeting or distribute materials regarding their priorities. Eleanor T. and Christine R. agreed.

Tom M. said that he will be providing testimony in support of the select legislative priorities if they come up for discussion. This often happens at short notice, so RIC may not get time to review his testimony before it is submitted. Malcom F. requested that Tom M. send RIC copies of any testimony he provides. Tom M. said he would.

Tom M. said that there is an amendment to the transportation funding bill currently being heard that provides \$25m for micro-transit. He asked that the Berkshire County delegation support the amendment.

Kent L. asked Tom M. if there was anything at the Beacon Hill in The Berkshires session that is worth bringing to RIC's attention. Tom M. said that Senator Nick Collins, Chair of the Joint Committee of State Administration and Regulatory Oversight, talked about Article 97. The Senator asked attendees if there were comments related to fast-tracking those regulations, and he did not seem supportive of this. In addition to Sen. Collins, Senator Payano, Senator Rausch, and the Inspector General also attended. Other topics discussed included the Pilot program, the open meeting law and public records requests. Kent L. asked if there was any discussion regarding procurement. Tom M. said that he raised the topic of increasing the threshold to be equal with that for schools, \$100,000, and this was well-received. Kent L. said that low thresholds are onerous for small towns that do not have full-time procurement staff. Tom M. said there was talk about relief for projects that do not receive any bids. Additionally, there was talk about relieving the prevailing wage requirements for small projects under a certain threshold.

Tom M. said that one legislative priority he wants to keep in focus is the Municipal Empowerment Act because it addresses issues associated with Chapter 30B. The bill is not likely to be brought up soon, but there are elements that BRPC should continue supporting.

Eleanor T. encouraged BRPC to submit comments on the energy siting issues that come up through the regulations in draft form and Article 97.

4. Discussion related to siting and permitting for clean energy infrastructure update

CJ H. said that there will be four sessions on the working papers and proposed regulations. At each, there will be some sort of presentation. It is unclear whether they will be a hearing setting where attendees provide comments and ask questions, or if they will be more open. CJ H. will attend the meeting tomorrow. The comments that BRPC previously provided remain relevant, but they can be amended if the regulations change.

Christine R. said that she thinks the session tomorrow is about soliciting recommendations from agencies. The next working group is more about site visits by siting board staff.

Eleanor T. asked CJ H. to let RIC know what he learns at tomorrow's session so members can begin to form a plan for advocacy. CJ H. said he would and that this reflects what BRPC is doing internally.

Eleanor T. asked CJ H. to send members the link to the straw proposals after the meeting.

5. Next Committee Meeting Date

The next meeting will be on Wednesday, May 21, 2025, at 3:30 p.m.

6. Adjournment

Christine R. made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Eleanor T. seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 4:37 p.m.