**Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC)**

**Via Zoom**

**February 14, 2025, 1:00 p.m.**

**Minutes**

**Present:** Linda Dunlavy (FRCOG), Trish Settles (CMRPC), Thomas Matuszko (BRPC), Wendy Hudson (NPEDC), Dan Doyle (MVC), Dave Christopolis (At-Large), Anne Gobi (EOED), Jay Coburn (Cape Cod Commission/CDP), Kimberly Robinson (PVPC), Karen Pettinelli (SRPEDD) – **Quorum = YES**

**Members Absent:** Shaun Suhoski (MRPC designee), Sara Smiarowski (At-Large), Sen. Paul Mark, Rep. Natalie Blais

**Guests:** Mallory Sullivan (EOED),Amelia Morton (Rural Affairs intern), Ethan Melad (CMRPC), Anthony Senesi (CMRPC), James Fuccione (MHAC), Mark Maloni (FRCOG),

1. **Welcome and introductions:** Linda Dunlavy, Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:15 p.m. Linda stated that Commission member Bill Vino from MVC has retired. Dan Doyle will be the new Commission member representing MVC.
2. **Approve minutes of December 13, 2024:** Motion by Jay, second by Wendy, motion passes unanimously with one abstention by Dan Doyle.
3. **Office of Rural Affairs update:**

Anne stated that the Office of Rural Affairs and MMA will hold the western Massachusetts rural conference on May 3, 2025. Anne described some potential speakers.

Anne had a meeting with EOHLC Secretary Augustus and the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) regarding a $10 million allocation to small housing developments. The MHP will be bringing forth a proposal that Anne will share with other State officials. Anne said that once the proposal is drafted, she will share it with RPAC for their comments.

Anne said that Secretary Hao and others are looking internally at implementing everything that was approved in the Economic Development Bill. Anne said that she is working internally to elevate rural priorities within the implementation of the Economic Development Bill.

Anne said that the legislature committee assignments have not yet been finalized. Anne said that she anticipates the assignments to occur by the beginning of March.

Mallory announced that the Office of Rural Affairs interns will start next week and assist staff with the Rural Equity Grants Inventory. The inventory will examine all competitive grants that the State allocates and determine the distribution of grant awards to rural communities over the past 10 years. Mallory stated that when the inventory is complete, they will see if there are any rural disparities with grant distribution. Mallory said that the Office of Rural Affairs will collaborate with State agencies that are not incorporating any kind of rural consideration in their review of competitive grants.

Mallory stated that the Community One Stop for Growth expression of interest period opened on January 24, 2025. Mallory stated that the State is highly encouraging communities to submit expressions of interest for additional guidance.

Amelia stated that in 2024, she worked with RPAC members to create an inventory of what has been done since the 2019 Rural Policy Plan. Amelia stated that in 2025, she will be taking the inventory information and transitioning it into an updated rural policy plan. Amelia stated that she recently drafted inspiration reports for the next plan. Amelia said that she created resources and a template for the next rural policy plan. Anne noted that she would recommend that the next update be more condensed with measurable goals. Linda said that it is the intention of Rep. Blais to propose an earmark for funding the rewrite and update of the rural policy plan.

Anne stated that she is meeting with the DCR on March 7th regarding the potential formation of a regional wood bank. Anne said that at the meeting, there will be stakeholders present from the logging community. Dave said that he would share with Anne some information regarding a prior proposal of a wood bank.

1. **Discuss Legislation, Policies & Priorities:** Matching Bills to Priorities

Linda said that she sent a spreadsheet of bills that have been filed that may be correlated to RPAC priorities. Mark stated that the spreadsheet has 96 bills with connection to RPAC priorities and that the list may need to be condensed down to a manageable number. Linda stated that FRCOG invested in MassTrac to search for proposed bills.

Linda said that now, all the bills on the spreadsheet need to be reviewed by every RPAC member to determine if they match rural interests. Linda stated that this needs to occur soon in preparation for the hearings for each bill. Linda stated that once the RPAC-supported bills are finalized, then RPAC can collectively decide what bills will be delegated for members to provide testimony. Linda stated if there is a particular area of expertise or passion that RPAC members make a note of that when reviewing the bills. Linda stated that if an RPAC member would like to provide written testimony, please let Linda and Mark know. Mark stated that the spreadsheet indicates sponsors, co-sponsors, last action taken, committee status etc. Mark stated that the Word document aligns each bill with a particular RPAC priority area with a brief description from MassTrac.

Linda said that she has a list of new rural legislators that will be individually contacted and sent a letter articulating the efforts of RPAC. Linda said that all RPAC members that have a new rural legislator will add their personal note to the letter. Linda said she plans to send the letters to RPAC members next week so that RPAC members can add personalized language to the letter. Anne said that there are 19 new rural representatives and 4 senators.

Chapter 90 Advocacy Discussion

Linda said that the Governor has proposed to create a five-year Chapter 90 bond that would increase the amount of Chapter 90 to municipalities from $200 Million to $300 Million. Linda said that the formula would be modified. Linda stated that the current formula is 60% road miles, 20% population, and 20% jobs within a community. Linda said that MassDOT proposed a new formula that would eliminate jobs from the formula, and that 20% would be put into road miles. Linda said that she believes the new formula would help rural communities somewhat.

Linda said that FRCOG created a spreadsheet that would show the allocations for each municipality, and RPAC members can tweak the formula to see how the formula could be modified. Linda said that she recommends that RPAC members use the spreadsheet and use the data to create personalized letters to legislators describing the benefits of the formula change. Linda said that advocating may be a different framing for rural, suburban, and urban areas. Anne recommended that a template letter be created in advance so that it gets sent to the Ways and Means Committee. Linda said that FRCOG will draft a Chapter 90 letter that will include some analysis and some space to personalize the letter. Anne noted that the House Transportation Committee Chair has retired.

PILOT Study Discussion

Linda said that the Auditor’s PILOT Study is a launching point to describe the continued disadvantages municipalities face regarding lost economic development if a town has a significant percentage of land that is preserved state owned land. Linda said that it is still not included in the formula, and it is only based on the growth of property value. Linda recommended that a group of RPAC members meet to strategize on the formula before meeting with the Auditor about how more equity can be made. Anne suggested that RPAC send recommendations and information ahead of the meeting so that they can review it beforehand. Trish volunteered to be on the group to strategize to improve the PILOT formula.

1. **Future Activities, Priorities, and Action Items**

RPAC discussed meeting in-person in Boston with the Rural Caucuses in early May on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Trish suggested a future RPAC topic regarding pros and cons of county governments. James suggested a future RPAC topic regarding a new healthy aging data report that will be released in May.

**Adjourn: 2:30 pm ---Respectfully submitted by Trish Settles, RPAC Clerk**