



Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC)

Via Zoom

January 12, 2024, 9:00 to 11:22am

Minutes

Present: Linda Dunlavy (FRCOG), Trish Settles (CMRPC), Jay Coburn (Cape Cod Commission/CDP), Wendy Hudson (NPEDC), Dave Christopolis (At-Large), Thomas Matuszko (BRPC), Kimberly Robinson (PVPC), Rep. Natalie Blais, Shaun Suhowski (MRPC designee), Bill Veno (MVC) – **Quorum = YES**

Members Absent: Sara Smiarowski (At-Large), Helena Fruscio Altsman (Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities Designee),

Guests: Mallory Sullivan (EOED), Dana LeWinter (MHP), Andy Hogeland, James Fuccione (Mass. Healthy Aging Collaborative), Ethan Melad (CMRPC)

1. **Welcome and introductions:** Linda Dunlavy, Chair, called the meeting to order at 9:02am
2. **Approve minutes of November 9, 2023:** Tabled
3. **Introduction of Mallory Sullivan, Rural Programs Manager, Massachusetts Executive Office of Economic Development** - Mallory introduced herself and talked about the finalization of the One Stop kickoff on January 19. There has been some restructuring of the program, but no new opportunities have been added.
4. **RTP Focus Area - Housing & Housing Bond Bill Testimony** – The panel hearing for the Housing Bond Bill is Jan. 18, with testimony limited to 3 minutes each for 3 people, or 2 minutes each for 4 people. There was some discussion of data points to use in testimony (numbers of towns and percentages of populations impacted, lack of growth, metrics for housing goals, etc.). Differences in rural challenges were mentioned including Western economic distress vs. Eastern and Island high-cost difficulties. In further discussion of real estate transfer fees, Jay pointed out that communities need flexibility in spending. Linda mentioned that the real estate transfer fee cap leaves most rural communities out. Trish added that while costs may be lower in some bedroom communities, added support for planning is necessary because there is often a political struggle. Consensus was to support Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) Zoning By-Right. Linda will draft testimony for submittal. There was some discussion of in-person panel vs. written-only. Rep. Blais recommended panel testimony.
5. **RPP Focus Area - Governance: MMA Western MA/Rural Conference update and discussion of priority focus** – Andy Hogeland discussed the planning efforts for this upcoming conference and outlined some of the likely discussion/panel topics and guests. The date is set for Saturday April 6, at the Hotel Northampton. Possible topics include municipal modernization, legislative update, Payment in Lieu of Tax (PILOT) programs for nonprofits, housing, regionalization, economic development, and West-East rail. The group agrees that topics should be of interest to all rural

communities, not just Western MA. Additional topics such as rural transit and infrastructure, and Vermont as a case study for resident recruitment were mentioned. Some thought that PILOT discussion may have limited appeal, and West East rail should be removed.

6. **Discuss Legislation, Policies & Priorities** – Rep. Blais spoke about the budget landscape and that it does not look great. FY24 is below the benchmark, and the administration announced 9C cuts of \$375M. Cuts will not impact schools or local aid. Joint rule 10 day is Feb 7, which is the last day to report bills favorably out of committee, send to study, or extend. Only one RPAC priority bill is out of committee. Linda mentioned the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) bill which will have a hearing on January 24th, and which will increase total funding.

7. **Future Activities, Priorities and Other Items** – Future meeting topics discussed by Commission members included Agriculture and Ag bills and could include a presentation of the new Agriculture Plan. Rep. Blais endorsed the plan and mentioned there could be an opportunity for RPAC input.

There was some discussion surrounding new rural programs creation; rural definition should be identified when creating a new program matrix. Linda wondered how best to proceed, and whether a subcommittee might be a good idea. Will be discussed with Anne Gobi, and Mallory will follow up.

8. **Adjourn: 11:22am**

Respectfully submitted by Trish Settles, RPAC Clerk