**Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC)**

**Via Zoom**

**March 8, 2024, 10:00am to 12:00pm**

**Minutes**

**Present:** Linda Dunlavy (FRCOG), Trish Settles (CMRPC), Jay Coburn (Cape Cod Commission/CDP), Wendy Hudson (NPEDC), Kimberly Robinson (PVPC), Rep. Natalie Blais, Shaun Suhowski (MRPC designee), Bill Veno (MVC), Anne Gobi (EOED) – **Quorum = YES**

**Members Absent:** Sara Smiarowski (At-Large), Dave Christopolis (At-Large), Thomas Matuszko (BRPC)

**Guests:** Mallory Sullivan (EOED), Dana LeWinter (MHP), Andy Hogeland, Ethan Melad (CMRPC), CJ Hoss (BRPC), Jen Healy (QVCDC), Tom Hutcheson, Amie Shei (HFCMA), Sujatha Krishnan (CMRPC), Yahaira Graxinera (CMRPC), Jessica Atwood (FRCOG), Chelsea Patriss (CHNA9), Angela Constantino (GATRA), Clete Kus (BRPC)

1. **Welcome and introductions:** Linda Dunlavy, Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:05am
2. **Approve minutes of November 9,2023 and January 12, 2024:** Motion by Anne, second by Wendy. Bill abstained from Nov. vote; motion passes.
3. **Director of Rural Affairs update, House updates, legislative discussion –** Director Gobi spoke about several rural affairs and related matters, including the following
* Codifying definition of “rural” in the Economic Bond Bill,
* A proposed increase for the Rural Development Fund to $100M, and
* The inclusion of rural road and bridge funding in the Governor’s budget.
* The budget includes an increase to Ch. 90 and an additional $25M for rural communities.
* MassDOT will be designing the allocation formula and using the rural/small town definition which includes 181 towns.
* Additional discussion included a Food Hub grant, funding for municipal buildings, and disaster relief funding.

Rep. Blais mentioned a disaster relief fund bill developed with Sen. Comerford that would support relief that is not eligible for federal funds.

Other legislative items discussed included short-term rental tax, liquor licenses, Housing Bond Bill, and the Municipal Empowerment Bill. It was agreed that letters of support should be sent on behalf of RPAC, possibly joint with STAM. Separate FY25 budget letters to discuss Housing Bond Bill, line-byline- Economic Development Bond Bill, Municipal Empowerment, and general FY25 budget. Linda will also work with MARPA to support SAPHE 2.0. RPAC members can look at the legislative priority list and email any comments/suggestions.

1. **RTP Focus Area – Transportation: Funding, Microtransit** – Megan Rhodes spoke on regional transit and microtransit, including FRCOG’s ‘Flexible Transit’ program, which is a combination of fixed route and app-based on-demand transit. It was piloted with grant funds in 2019 and its success has allowed for an increase to RTA funding.

Angela Constantino discussed the GATRA GO program, which covers 30 communities and multiple service areas. The program used CARES Act funds to expand, with most services coming from general operating budget. Some services replaced existing underperforming fixed routes.

Linda pointed out that a summer intern could write a paper on the existing rural microtransit projects.

Jen Healy then described The Quaboag Connector’s services, which cover 10 towns and are demand-response-based. Partnerships with the Town of Ware and local healthcare institutions have been valuable. Additional programs include veterans and workforce fare discounts.

A discussion of funding and sustainability followed, with questions of how to find and hire staff, when to transition to a demand-response model, and how to use existing data for legislative advocacy.

1. **Future Activities, Priorities and Other Items –** Future meeting topic s discussed by Commission members included Agriculture and Ag bills – however Food Policy meets at the same time as RPAC.

Next meeting will be May 10, Sen. Comerford could leave meeting early, or RPAC could meet later.

Mention of Sarah Peakes retirement, as well as possibility for in-person meeting in July or Sept. in Boston or on the Cape. Jay will reach out for members’ preference.

It was mentioned that the MMA conference in Northampton was moved to April 27, Linda will send presentation materials.

1. **Adjourn: 11:59am**

**Respectfully submitted by Trish Settles, RPAC Clerk**