**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), Mallory Sullivan (EOED), Dave Christopolis (At-Large), Danica Belknap (SRPEDD), Anne Gobi (EOED) – **Quorum = YES**

**Members Absent:** Sara Smiarowski (At-Large), Helena Fruscio Altsman (Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Designee), Thomas Matuszko (BRPC)

**Guests:** Sen. Jo Comerford, Sen. Paul Mark, Ethan Melad (CMRPC), CJ Hoss (BRPC), Jessica Atwood (FRCOG), Clete Kus (BRPC), Allison Gage (BRPC), Christine Madore (MHP), Olivia Ray (22 News), Derek Krevat (MassDOT), Mark Maloni (FRCOG), Beth Gianini (FRCOG)

1. **Welcome and introductions:** Linda Dunlavy, Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:00 pm
2. **Approve minutes of March 8, 2024:** Motion by Jay, second by Kim. Bill, Danica and Dave abstained, motion passed.
3. **Discuss Legislation, Policies & Priorities –** Rep. Blais reviewed the House FY25 budget, which was approved in late April at approximately $58 billion. Rep. Blais mentioned a number of items included in the bill, such as the establishment of a disaster relief and resiliency fund ($14M), an increase to per-pupil education funding, $184M for RTAs, and an additional $25M for local roads.

Sen. Comerford spoke about the Senate budget, which includes: a 3% increase to UGGA, $125M for local roads and bridges, $48M for libraries and COAs, and $25.5M for the Mass. Cultural Council.

Rep. Blais noted that the Housing Bond Bill will be discussed in the next couple weeks, with the Economic Development Bill following that. Sen. Comerford recommended letters from Rural Caucus members in support of the Housing Bond Bill, as well as a letter from the RPAC submitted to conference committee.
4. **RTP Focus Area – Land Use and Working Lands, Climate Change & Resiliency: Rep.** Blais discussed activity by the Commission on Energy Siting & Permitting; a summary of discussions and recommendations was released in February. She recommended being in touch with the TCC.
5. **RTP Focus Area – Transportation:** Derek Krevat presented on MassDOT’s *Beyond Mobility* plan. The plan is open for public comment until May 31, and a final revision is expected by July 31. He noted that the plan proposes performance measures, and there are differences between urban and rural metrics. Linda requested that dirt and gravel road data be included, and Wendy noted the relevance of ferry speeds and infrastructure such as the Cape bridges. Beth Giannini also noted the importance of coordination with RPAs on these topics.
6. **Director of Rural Affairs update:** Mallory pointed out that Community OneStop applications are due June 5. They have received a record number of expression of interests (EOIs), including 16 communities that had not submitted before; 11 of those were rural, and a total of 115 rural EOIs have been received.

Anne mentioned she has been in her position for 1 year and visited 72 communities, and then reviewed some of her recent activity including weekly meetings with Town Administrators and Managers, and starting a monthly meeting with chambers of commerce. Currently, the Economic Development Bond Bill adds substantial funding for the rural development fund, and she/legislature should work with RPAC and communities to get an inventory of municipal buildings and infrastructure needs. Earmarks will be discussed following the current legislative session.

Rep. Blais mentioned that the municipal building authority bill is in Senate Ways and Means Committee.
7. **Future Activities, Priorities and Other Items –** There was some discussion about the RPAC quarterly update as well as the possibility of producing an RPAC newsletter. Linda will collect thoughts about the newsletter and consolidate for approval.
8. **Adjourn: 2:47 pm**

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