

MINUTES
**Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts
Municipal Financial Sustainability Committee Meeting—February 13, 2024**

Committee Members in attendance: Sam Haupt, Committee Chair – Peru; Art Schwenger – Heath; Liz Kidder – Leyden; Mark Phelps – New Ashford

Board Members in attendance: Dicken Crane, Board Chair – Windsor; Marybeth Chichester – FRCOG; Keith Ross – Society of American Foresters

Staff/Partners/Guests in attendance: Lisa Hayden, NEFF/Admin Agent; Kate Conlin, NEFF/Coordinator; Vanessa Farny, Division of Conservation Services, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs; State Senator Paul Mark

1. Call to order, welcome, and introductions 3:03 p.m.

2. Discussion with State Senator Paul Mark about legislative efforts to achieve PILOT (Payment-In-Lieu-of-Taxes) reform & WP name change & related issues

PILOT Reform

- S. Haupt – how can your submitted PILOT reform legislation collaborate with other voices such as the State Auditor’s?
- Sen. Mark - How do we make the current pool of funding bigger for PILOT in the budget, while also increasing equity in the funding equation? The best move would be to do something in the Budget or the Economic Development Bill or Municipal Services Bill the Governor filed, trying to insert something there. In second year of legislation, it is acceptable to file bills into the Budget. Generally, these days more funding items move as packages. The biggest obstacle this year is that the Governor cut \$750 million out of the Budget because of the slowdown—and the slowdown is increasing. Sen. Mark feels a little more cautious, though we have a good number of legislators working on this through the Rural Policy Advisory Commission.
- S. Haupt – expressed concern that if there are changes to the PILOT formula that any extra funds would be restricted in their usage, for example specifically earmarked for conservation projects, while some of our small towns feel we already made significant conservation contributions and look to PILOT or Ch. 90 to assist for general operational funds.
- K. Ross – the concept that conservation lands don’t pay their way isn’t true at all, land under CR puts more money in than it requires. These lands help hold the value for house lots as well as bring in money without tax services.
- S. Haupt – what can the Partnership do to keep this initiative moving?
- Sen Mark – Keep relationships going with legislators like him and Rep. Blais. In addition, Director of Rural Affairs Anne Gobi is supposed to be that contact for the small towns to the Governor directly. April 6, Sen. Mark will be hosting the second annual gathering of Senators in Lenox and the WP could send one representative (follow up with him for RSVP). Suggests attending the Rural Policy Advisory Commission or the Select Board association and encouraging cousin organizations around the state to be in touch with their legislators.

Name Change Legislation

Sen. Mark – The Bill is filed and in the current legislative session Sen. Mark will put Agent in touch with staffers and recommends staying in touch with him and Rep. Blais.

Municipal Services

- L. Kidder – is there movement in the legislature for regionalization of municipal services? Town contracts for services are all different and fragile. There are concerns with inconsistency in how

different towns are regionalizing, loss of connections to emergency services leaving just mutual aid and varying pricing. Perhaps someone needs to look at this more regionally.

- Sen. Mark- Yes, it is discussed and that's why grant money is available. Any municipality looking into these services, which are really good ideas, is encouraged. The role of the legislature is how to help make connections and how do we get you what you need. Idea to file a law next year to require services like police and fire, and the state somehow helps that happen.
- S. Haupt – there is also a waning of the spirit of volunteerism and the problem of recruitment.

Other Legislative Matters

- Concerning a question about the potential to be included in the Environmental Bond Bill or other legislative avenues of funding: Sen. Mark – once the name change is official he would try to tackle the budget angle. In terms of a bond authorization, you have to work with the Governor to actually spend the money.
- D. Crane – there is a bill in front of the utilities telecommunications that includes increasing the payment if equipment has a particulate separator – to encourage the clean burning of wood – right now you can burn in inefficient and smoky ways, but this bill would incentivize burning cleanly, came out of committee – moving in right direction? Sen. Mark – the bill is still active. Sen. Barrett was going to send a letter to DOER and he can double check with him.
- S. Haupt, on behalf of Joe Nowak – What steps can the Commonwealth make in the financing or delivery of methane digestors to control climate emissions and alternatively provide a source of power for dairy farmers? Sen. Mark – through an increased dairy tax credit, he wants to help them diversify. If a farm is interested in this and in his district, he is happy to work with them one-on-one. D. Crane remarks that Pine Island Farm in Sheffield has an anaerobic digester and is a good example of a successful one.
- D. Crane asks about the Bottle Bill. Sen. Mark – moved to the Senate. Through a ballot question, the people spoke, now there's new information. The way we recycle at the municipal level is different than ten years ago. Communities are letting legislators know they support it, article in Berkshire Eagle, Sen. Mark said he supported updating the Bottle Bill.
- A. Schwenger thanks Sen. Mark and reminds that the WP is a new and different organization that people aren't used to dealing with at the state level because the control is local and municipal. The Partnership is well- coordinated with nonprofits and other organizations, and it's easy to forget that, but it's special.

3. Follow-up on Office of the State Auditor presentation on PILOT reform – review of content from Oct 12, 2023 meeting minutes and next steps

- S. Haupt noticed in the minutes that the State Auditor was to issue a new PILOT report at the end of 2023. Kate will follow up and see if it has been issued.

4. Discussion of other pathways for PILOT reform – Resilient Lands Initiative, 2025/2030 Massachusetts Clean Energy and Climate Plan, Forests as Climate Solutions

- L. Hayden reported she and Dicken and Finance Chair Joe Nowak had a productive call with Climate Chief Hoffer and Undersecretary Cooper. Regarding PILOT and name change, we will want to keep in touch with policy connections at the state level. We have been invited to follow up and need to be doing that. Thanking V. Farney for attending, the Agent staff will stay in touch with our EOEEA grant program contact, as well, to make sure the Partnership is being heard with these initiatives.
- D. Crane – In this meeting, Chief Hoffer asked what specific things EEA can do to help and he replied – “for you to listen to us.” When it comes specifically to managing the forested landscape, we know a lot about our area, and the climate committee didn't have anyone from

our area, or any timber harvester on the panel. D. Crane stated there is a need to engage with the communities in our region and to include us in the discussion, rather than just hand us your recommendations or guidelines.

- V. Farny remarked that there is broad acknowledgment at the staff level of the importance of the PILOT program and ecosystem services – and focus on how EEA can best augment or support these initiatives.

5. Review & approval of September 13, 2021 minutes

- A. Schwenger moves to accept the minutes, L. Kidder seconds, all in favor.

6. Discussion of Committee goals and priorities – focusing on Ten-Year Plan for guidance

- S. Haupt could invite John Barrett to a future meeting. L. Kidder suggests also inviting Sen. Commerford and Rep. Blais.
- L. Hayden – Board Chair and Agent are encouraging each committee to create a short list of priorities and projects for the coming year – the Agent contract has a small amount of unrestricted funds if priorities are identified. The next meeting could have this as an agenda item, and Committee members are encouraged to review Section 5 of the Partnership’s Ten-Year Plan posted on the web site in advance of the next meeting to spur ideas.

7. Items not anticipated within 48 hours - none

8. Schedule next meeting - March 26, 3:00-4:00 p.m.

9. Public Comment - none

10. Adjourn - 4:09 p.m. A. Schwenger motion, L. Kidder second, all in favor.