

The Municipal Financial Sustainability Committee
of the **Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts**
(established as Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership)*
will meet on April 11, 2024, 3:00-4:00 p.m.

MINUTES for Review

Present: Sam Haupt, Peru (chair); Liz Kidder, Leyden; Mark Phelps, New Ashford; Art Schwenger, Heath

Others: Dicken Crane, Board Chair; Coordinator Kate Conlin; Agent Lisa Hayden

Committee members absent: Ron Bosley, Florida; Alice Houghtaling, Monroe

1. **Call to order** 3:12 p.m., followed by introductions.
2. **Review & approval of February 13, 2024 minutes:** Motion by A. Schwenger; second by L. Kidder; all in favor: M. Phelps abstained.
3. **Discussion of Sen. Mark's attendance at Feb. meeting and next steps:** S. Haupt and D. Crane attended April 6 Lenox town hall event, Beacon Hill and the Berkshire Hills, hosted by Sen. Mark and his staff with speakers on various subjects of interest to the towns. Important for visibility and networking to meet Sen. Mark's staff. Lt. Gov. Driscoll attended and had positive words for the Governor's interest in the region – primarily addressing issues important to their towns, including PILOT and vocational tuition and transportation. Peru, for instance, is \$20,000 per student for tuition plus transportation to Smith Voc. School, creating a hardship because it's not reimbursed. A speaker explained it well, advocating that 100% should be covered.
 - Residents from Partnership towns, and elsewhere, spoke on issues of importance such as PILOT and the impact of additional land conservation and the need for impact acknowledgment and remediation. After she spoke about economic development and did not mention "rural" or "natural resource," D. Crane asked the Lt. Gov. to consider natural resource-based economic development, and she seemed to recognize the importance of this inclusion.
 - Kristen Elechko—Western Mass. liaison to the governor, seemed very willing to work with the WP more and we should contact her, perhaps this could be discussed at the April 16 meeting: What are requests we could make? L. Hayden noted that the budget requests sent to Climate Chief Hoffer and Stephanie Cooper at EEA, should also be sent to Elechko and Gobi. S. Haupt suggested following up with Sen. Mark and his staff on a regular basis. K. Conlin was referred to Paige Skalinsky, chief of staff, to connect on legislative issues.
4. **Discussion of Committee goals and priorities – focusing on [Ten-Year Plan](#) for guidance and specifically [Section 5](#) – the immediate purpose being to inform the Committee Chair's message/asks at the upcoming joint Committee Chair/Executive Committee hybrid meeting on April 16, 2024 and to guide future efforts of the Committee – possible topics include:**
 - a. **PILOT; Ch. 90; public safety; promotion of community service**
 - b. **Polling towns to be more directly responsible for/aware of their needs and barriers**

- c. **Involvement with Mass Municipal Association, Selectman’s Association, Rural Policy Advisory Committee, legislative delegation, Anne Gobi, and others, to discuss issues such as grant management, shared services, state aid, town capacity**
 - d. **Need for an executive director**
 - e. **Assessment of the public safety capacity of the 21 towns especially in light of existing and future tourism demands – an assessment which could also serve to inform a possible National Heritage Area Feasibility Study and open possibilities for future grants**
 - f. **Reform with grant disbursement to take into account possible burdens of town infrastructure and provide necessary funds**
 - g. **Economic development initiatives (partnering with Natural Resource Based Economic Development Committee)**
- Due to lack of quorum at last meeting, this list of discussed ideas was included on the agenda (see bold above).
 - S. Haupt highlighted public safety communications equipment requirements, for which funding is uncertain, and the idea of assessing the capacity of the 21 towns (bullet e above), mindful of impacts tourism has on communities, public safety and otherwise. L. Kidder gave an overview of questions that a public safety assessment study could answer and connect to economic development and state aid like PILOT. The Collins Center public agency was very responsive working with Leyden in the past.
 - L. Hayden suggested that the grant topic would be a question for the executive committee. Other potential annual grant ideas could be related to a visitor center before a Forest Center, or to use a grant to purchase a portable booth. Agent capacity is maxed out with support for board meetings, committees and grants. If this is something the Partnership wanted to take on, the grant would have to fund most managing of it.
 - S. Haupt said public safety is an important initiative, but the first bucket is section 5 of the plan, strengthening the pilot program and municipal aid resources - central to what the Committee’s focus is. A focus on public safety should strengthen the municipalities by getting a regional understanding, but not be about rescuing tourists. D. Crane shared an observation from Greg Cox who points out in Hawley that when the state decides they won’t maintain the forest roads, it increases difficulty on the town to handle public safety issues because the tourists are going into the woods. (Peru has more than 6000 acres of state land.)
 - A. Schwenger stated public safety is important, and PILOT is important for some towns more than others. There is a broader issue of support to local municipalities by the state: the rural towns, because of a lack of population, get lower support for Ch. 90. Maybe Ch. 90 criteria should be reviewed: could the WP initiate a study about this?
 - S. Haupt supports getting channels of communication open to the governor and legislators: perhaps a \$25 million-dollar rural appropriation for communities under 10,000 population should be divided by road mileage not population?
 - Regarding climate goals, S. Haupt staid the state will be looking for carbon sequestration and land conservation. D. Crane noted MEPA may be discussed, with concern that the

forestry exemption could be eliminated, thereby requiring an environmental review of timber harvests - an example of administration activities that could have a real negative impact on rural communities.

- L. Hayden noted a Heritage Area is highlighting the identity of the region and drawing people to the region: how much more of that does the region want? S. Haupt said there are vacant storefronts in Adams, but, for instance, the community years ago considered building a tram up Mt. Greylock.
5. **Items not anticipated within 48 hours:** There was discussion about whether a public safety study is the priority of the group. A. Schwenger thinks public safety should be top of the list. S. Haupt suggested the study could also include data collection and pain points, including a survey of the towns about what is most important for them. A FRCOG GIS specialist could be involved.
- L. Kidder stated towns are not getting enough insurance payments to cover the cost of ambulance service. M. Phelps noted the human element, the lack of volunteers in the towns to staff public safety and he hears reimbursement is an issue and insurance companies should be forced to pay the true cost of transporting patients. PILOT is inadequate in New Ashford and has been an issue for many years. Has a good working relationship with John Barrett and could reach out to him regarding the name change and other issues as well.
 - Motion by L. Kidder to: “Recommend to the Ex. Com. that the Partnership endorse participation and apply for a regional EEA grant with the Collins Center for a baseline assessment of public safety capacity in the WP region,” with the consultant receiving the bulk of the money to provide the information to the partnership. A. Schwenger seconded the motion, which was approved 4-0.
6. The next meeting was tentatively scheduled for July 17th, 3 p.m.
7. Public Comment – None.
8. L. Kidder made a motion to adjourn: seconded by A. Schwenger; All in favor at 4:33 p.m.