

MINUTES

A joint meeting of the Executive Committee & Municipal Financial Sustainability Committee
of the Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts
March 18, 2025

Present: Executive Committee: Dicken Crane – Windsor (Board Chair); Art Schwenger – Heath (Board Vice Chair); Chris Cozzaglio – Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (Treasurer); Rhonda Anderson – Ohketeau Cultural Center; Municipal Financial Sustainability Committee: Sam Haupt—Peru (chair); Liz Kidder—Leyden; Art Schwenger—Heath

Board: Keith Ross; Greg Cox

Absent: Alain Peteroy – Franklin Land Trust (Clerk); Robert O’Connor – MA EOEEA; Constance Carpenter (USFS ex-officio); Russ Richardson – Massachusetts Forest Alliance; Mark Phelps—New Ashford; Ron Bosley—Florida

Staff: Lisa Hayden—NEFF/Admin. Agent; Kate Conlin—NEFF/Coord.

Guests: Sen. Paul Mark; Jared Freedman (Sen. Comerford)

Public: Caleb Mitchell

Call to order and welcome – 4:02 p.m. - Healey Administration has extended virtual meeting provisions.

Introduction of guests

Agent overview of current PILOT reform proposals & Partnership-hosted April 7 public event - State Auditor’s Office discussion of the recently released PILOT reform report led to an opportunity to host a public forum/info session on April 7th, 1 p.m., Windsor Town Hall (next to the church). Sen. Mark will be there. Partnership members will also speak. Support needed state-wide for PILOT reform. The Auditor’s Office will help provide Partnership-specific data for ongoing outreach. Several Committee members noted that comparisons between municipal rates in W. MA and the rest of the state are compelling and “visceral.”

Discussion of various avenues for reform: Auditor recommendations; Auditor’s legislation; Rep. Blais & Sen. Comerford legislation

- Last year, Sen. Mark submitted legislation to reform the PILOT formula and create a hold harmless provision.
- Sen. Mark mentions the upcoming Environmental Bond Bill could include clarifying language for the Woodlands Partnership. Extremely simple bills can get passed – package bills are the best vehicle to get more complex things through. Rep. Blais or Rep. Barrett may want to take the lead in the House in filing amendments. Awaiting Governor to file the bill before moving ahead.
- Need to engage the Governor’s Office, Rep. Barrett, and Rep. Blais, Secretary Tepper, EEA – as well as reach out to member towns.
- Current session bills of interest to the WP: transportation package (if any community has a project Sen. Mark should be aware of, send it to him for inclusion), including changing of Ch. 90 formula for road miles; K-12 education formula
- Jared Freedman: Sen. Blais and Sen. Comerford legislation implements recommendations from the previous State Auditor Suzanne Bump.

- The first 4 sections move the current formula away from differences in land valuation increases (state-wide increases happen at various rates) (Warwick example from the Auditor report – where state-owned land can increase, but PILOT reimbursement can decrease)
- That’s been the bill as it’s been filed the past few years. Section 5 is a new section. This contemplates how to value ecosystem services provided by some state-owned land (not courthouses, etc.) The State has biodiversity goals and Climate Roadmap-mandated tracking of sequestration from natural and working lands but nowhere is that value currently reflected.
- The first 4 sections don’t cost the State money.
- Guiding considerations in section 5 came from UMass Extension.
- Greg Cox: mentions Dept. of Fish & Wildlife land is not subject to PILOT.
- Kate Conlin: tying monetary value to ecosystem services is challenging, since ecosystem services don’t fit neatly into structures of monetary value. It is important to involve many perspectives.
- Bill can change as it goes through the legislative process and the WP is encouraged to submit testimony at a public hearing, either as individuals or as a body, and could state appreciation that EEA and DOR will look at the PILOT formula and make recommendations valuing ecosystem services, but we’d like to be involved in those conversations (a working group had originally not been suggested in the legislation but this can drag out the timeframe).
- Greg Cox: large blocks of state-owned land are worth less, though they were bought in smaller parcels. J. Freedman: the proposed legislation suggests landscape connectivity as a component for consideration.
- K. Conlin: asks if Sen. Comerford could be helpful in fixing WP enabling language pertaining to financial structuring. J. Freedman is glad to know of issue and Agent staff will follow up.
- A. Schwenger: what can the WP do to help your process? J. Freedman: make clear that the WP supports the legislation when it passes through committees and suggest any changes. Local legislators have been asking EEA and the Governor’s Office to include PILOT reform in the Environmental Bond Bill, as the state is counting on further conservation to meet climate goals. Executive agencies have a cap on how much they can bond, but PILOT reform offers a way to meet land conservation goals without bumping up against the bond cap. C. Cozzaglio: numbers in testimony and communication with our representatives are crucial.

Public Comment – with time for invited guests to share their perspectives

- Caleb Mitchell (from the chat): “...I did want to mention that the proposed changes to the state constitution under article 97 allows the state to take either state-owned land, or even private land that is protected in perpetuity, for climate mitigation and may not require replacement. This should be a topic of discussion by woodlands partnership.”
- <https://www.mass.gov/event/march-26-2025-notice-of-public-hearing-on-the-open-space-act-regulations-03-26-2025>

Agent update: Fundraising Plan progress; June 24 Annual Meeting at Greylock Glen; National Heritage Area Feasibility Study; Emergency Services Study; Draft Land Acknowledgment

- Consultant Stephanie Schilling is focusing on finding support for operations and staff that can work closely with the Board. She will be here for the June annual meeting. C. Cozzaglio has recommendations for potential meetings and visits R. Anderson recommends Native Land Conservancy (K. Conlin mentions NLC work party on March 17th in Leverett, R. Anderson plans to

go as well. She noted differences in her own forest's health over the last 15 years; stated development is more of a threat to carbon sequestration than management).

- C. Cozzaglio: the emergency services listening session in Windsor led to further initiatives and thinking in town related to volunteering and community feedback. Agent staff will follow up and connect this to Collins Center staff.
- L. Kidder, new equipment helped attract fire dept. staff in Leyden.

Any item(s) not anticipated within 48 hours - none

Public comment – none (see above)

Adjourn – L. Kidder moves, C. Cozzaglio seconds, all in favor. 5:35 p.m.