

MINUTES

Municipal Financial Sustainability Committee of the Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts May 12, 2025, 4-5:00 p.m.

In Attendance: Sam Haupt—*Peru (Chair)*; Art Schwenger—*Heath*; Mark Phelps—*New Ashford*; Liz Kidder—*Leyden*;

Absent: Ron Bosley—*Florida has stepped down from Board*

Board/Staff: Greg Cox – Hawley; Russ Richardson – Massachusetts Forest Alliance & Alain Peteroy – Franklin Land Trust joined during meeting; Lisa Hayden—*Administrative Agent, NEFF*;

Guests/public: State Rep. Natalie Blais

- 1) **Call to order** – 4:01 p.m.
- 2) **Review & approval of March 4, 2025 minutes** – A. Schwenger moved & L. Kidder second, all in favor; S. Haupt suggested removing extraneous ‘He suggested...’ Motion to approve minutes as amended passed unanimously.
- 3) **Discussion with Rep. Blais on her PILOT reform bill:**
<https://malegislature.gov/Bills/194/H3032>
Following introductions, Rep. Blais provided an overview of her bill H3032, which calls for substantially increasing funding through Payment in Lieu of Taxes for towns hosting state-owned land. She was proud to work with former state Auditor Suzanne Bump and Sen. Comerford & Hines to successfully close a previous \$15 million gap for the PILOT fund. However, a problem remains in that Western MA towns still “get less of the more.” The average Franklin County municipality gets \$32 per acre of state-owned land, as compared to \$5400/acre in Suffolk County and \$7800/acre in Dukes County. She reintroduced a bill filed in the last several sessions and this time added an ecosystem services payment section, which would consider the amount of forest cover and wildlife habitat. She and Sen. Comerford also wrote a letter to the Governor requesting the reform measure be included in the environmental bond bill. Noting that 37% of New Ashford is DCR land, M. Phelps asked how Rep. Blais’s bill differs from Auditor Diana DiZoglio’s report recommendations, and if changes will be decided by bureaucrats or written into the law. Rep. Blais responded that adding accounting for ecosystems services will increase funding to smaller towns

and that the implementation needs to be done in partnership with the current administration. If only the formula is changed, within one year there will continue to be property value fluctuations, but if the Ex. Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs can make recommendations about the formula, such as recognizing the value of carbon storage from natural and working lands in towns, adjustments can be made to ensure more equitable reimbursement.

S. Haupt asked about the idea of putting a series of floors in the formula, and Rep. Blais said that is another way to achieve the same goal of additional reimbursement. He also asked how the Partnership can promote advocacy on this issue? Rep. Blais said when a public hearing is held on the bill, towns can submit testimony in support of legislation, and she welcomed engagement from the Woodlands Partnership in accomplishing meaningful PILOT reform. Rep. Blais departed the meeting.

4) PILOT reform – Recap of April 7th event; Executive Committee request for this Committee to synthesize PILOT reform proposals and recommend elements most important to support; continued public outreach

L. Hayden gave a brief recap of the successful April 7 event at Windsor Town Hall on the need for PILOT formula reform featuring guest speaker Auditor Diana DiZoglio, attended by about 70 people and with several Partnership Board members and Agent staff hosting & speaking as part of the program.

iBerkshires: <https://www.iberkshires.com/story/78570/State-Auditor-Pushes-PILOT-Program-Reform-in-Windsor.html>

WAMV: <https://www.wamc.org/news/2025-04-08/mass-auditor-dizoglio-seeks-reforms-to-pilot-program-parity-for-western-massachusetts-communities>

Berkshire Eagle: https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/local/pilot-report-western-mass/article_4a676e8c-98d4-4b23-9a85-144289c9531d.html

A. Schwenger said this Committee should make a recommendation to the full Partnership Board about a position on PILOT reform and participation in the process, so the Partnership can get back to Rep. Blais and Sen. Mark and others about proposed changes. S. Haupt said he agrees that a unified message makes sense. M. Phelps said he has reviewed Auditor Dizoglio's report but has not reviewed Rep. Blais's bill and he agreed to read it as well and provide feedback to the Committee on pros and cons of the legislation & the Auditor's report. S. Haupt also

offered to reach Sen. Mark to get more details on what he is proposing. Comments can be sent to the Agent to compile.

G. Cox suggested the effort needs a broader base of support beyond NW MA and to include towns in Hampden and Worcester counties that are at a similar disadvantage under the current formula. There was a suggestion to reach out to Farm Bureau members as potential allies in seeking reform.

5) Collins Center Emergency Services survey update

L. Hayden gave an update on the public safety survey being conducted by the Collins Center, noting that the online survey link has been kept open in an effort to get more respondents, and hopefully get some participation from each WP town.

6) Items not anticipated within 48 hours - None

7) Schedule next meeting – Tentative June 3 as a placeholder confirming timing with Collins Center team

8) Public Comment - None

9) Adjourn – A. Schwenger motioned & L. Kidder seconded. All in favor at 4:59 p.m.