

## **Rural Policy Advisory Commission 2017 Annual Report**

This report of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, established under Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 23A, Section 66 (G.L. c. 23A, § 66), is submitted to the Clerks of the Senate and House of Representatives for transmission to the Joint Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies, pursuant to paragraph (g) *The commission shall annually, not later than June 2, report the results of its findings and activities of the preceding year and its recommendations to the governor and to the clerks of the senate and the House of Representatives who shall forward the same to the joint committee on economic development and emerging technologies.*

### **Members:**

*Speaker of the House or Designee*  
Representative Paul Mark

*Senate President or Designee*  
Corinne Fitzgerald

*Secretary of Housing and Economic Development or Designee*  
Chrystal Kornegay (*Chair*)

*Appointed by the Governor*  
Jay Coburn (Cape Cod Commission)  
Wendy Hudson (Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission)  
Nathaniel Karns (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission)  
Trish Settles (Central Massachusetts Regional Planning District Commission)  
Judy Terry (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission)  
Linda Dunlavy (Franklin Regional Council of Governments) (*Treasurer*)  
Bill Veno (Martha's Vineyard Commission)  
Brian Bullock (At-Large)  
Dave Christopolis (At-Large)  
Donna Hamel (At-Large)

### **Full Commission Meetings to Date:**

Minutes from all meetings and additional documents can be found on the Rural Policy Advisory Commission's [website](#).

Friday, June 10, 2016: Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Greenfield, MA  
Friday, September 30, 2016: Town of Truro Community Center, Truro, MA  
Friday, January 6, 2017: Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, Worcester, MA  
Friday, March 10, 2017: Massachusetts State House, Boston, MA  
Friday, April 28, 2017: Massachusetts State House, Boston, MA  
Friday, June 23, 2017: Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Greenfield, MA

### **Working Groups:**

Working groups were established to focus on workforce demographics, economic development, infrastructure and housing. Meetings dates and minutes can be found on the Rural Policy Advisory Commission's [website](#).

### **Key Issues Identified by Working Groups:**

The four working groups agreed upon the top three issues that the Rural Policy Advisory Commission will focus on over the coming year. The top three issues that were agreed upon are:

- Water/Sewer and Title 5
- Small Business Creation/Job Creation
- Rural Service Delivery

A summary of each of the working groups can be found in the appendix at the end of this report.

### **Rural Community Survey:**

To have a better understanding of the how the three focus areas impact quality of life and economic vitality in rural Massachusetts, the Commission created a short survey to be completed by the town administrator or the person in an equivalent position for the town. The results of this survey will help direct the work of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission over the next year. The results of the survey will be available in next year's Rural Policy Advisory Commission Legislative Report.

### **Broadband:**

Recognizing that broadband access is a continuing concern for rural areas across the state, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission invited Peter Larkin from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) to speak at the March 10, 2017 meeting. Mr. Larkin updated the commission members on the progress of MBI's work, including the establishment of a criteria for bandwidth speed and the newly created grant-only program for communities wishing to operate their own systems.

Commission members agreed that broadband access is important to rural Massachusetts, but that MBI is the entity charged with working on the issue. The Rural Policy Advisory Commission decided that its role would be to continue to monitor MBI's progress going forward.

### **Demographic Data Presentation:**

Commission members Linda Dunlavy and Nat Karns compiled a [presentation](#) for the April 28, 2017 meeting that analyzed demographic data and socioeconomic conditions in the rural communities of Massachusetts. Overall, population in the rural communities of Massachusetts grew by 5% between 2000 and 2010. However, the growth in population, by and large, was located in the rural communities in central and eastern Massachusetts that appear to be growing as bedroom communities to the greater Boston region. The outer Cape and much of western Massachusetts had much smaller population growth and even declining population in the same time period. Similarly, the residents in western part of the state and the outer Cape are older than central and eastern Massachusetts rural communities and Massachusetts as a whole. And residents in rural western Massachusetts and the outer Cape have lower median household incomes than their central and eastern Massachusetts rural and non-rural

counterparts. Lower median household incomes in much of rural Massachusetts are offset by lower average single home values. This is not the case on Cape Cod, the Islands and in southern Berkshire County where retirees and second home owners have inflated housing prices. These demographics begin to paint a picture of three types of rural\* in Massachusetts:

1. Areas of growth in central and eastern Massachusetts rural communities that are becoming bedroom communities to the greater Boston region and may be ill-equipped to manage the growth pressure.
2. Areas of population stagnation and decline and resultant economic distress in parts of north-west Massachusetts and less accessible areas of south-central Massachusetts.
3. Areas of concentrated second homeownership in the Southern Berkshires, Cape and Islands that mask the underlying socioeconomic conditions of the year-round population who risk being priced out of their communities.

The demographic analysis helps to understand “rural” in Massachusetts and highlights that, because of very distinct differences between communities and regions, a single approach to policy and economic development does not make sense. Instead, the Commission identified three possible focus areas for policy and economic development.

#### **Anchor Communities**

- Identify lead Rural Towns that serve as an employment or population centers to smaller Rural Towns, in traditionally underserved or gap areas, and target support to extend services and resources to these communities.

#### **Targeted Town Centers**

- Identify Rural Towns with defined town centers that could support enhanced or expanded commercial development and assess infrastructure and support needed to enhance economic activity in the town center.

#### **Low Density Rural**

- Identify Rural Towns without defined town centers and implement projects to support home-based opportunities (such as through broadband access).

Over the next year, the Commission will further define these three focus areas, identify communities that match each area, and test whether targeting policy and economic development efforts using this categorization is feasible and beneficial.

- The Housing Working Group of the Commission notes that these three types of rural communities may not match the strength/vitality of housing markets in rural areas around the state.

#### **Conclusion:**

Over the next year, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission will continue to work towards researching critical issues that face residents and communities in rural Massachusetts and will produce policy recommendations surrounding the issues of water/sewer infrastructure, small business and job creation, and rural service delivery. In the long term, the work of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission will help promote collaboration among rural communities and help develop and support new leadership in those communities.

# Rural Policy Advisory Commission

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### Members:

Gailanne Cariddi, Linda Dunlavy, Wendy Morton Hudson

### Summary:

The focus of the group's three meetings in FY17 was to better understand "rural" in Massachusetts and especially to understand economic development opportunities and constraints in rural communities. The group asked planners from Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) to analyze, map and compare demographic conditions in MA and rural MA. The final presentation was presented to the full Commission in May.

The working group considered how to characterize the rural economy of Massachusetts and identified three types of economic development centers in rural areas that could be used to approach and develop rural economic development practice and policy.

1. Anchor Communities – Towns in a rural geography that already serve as employment and population centers to smaller rural communities because of the pre-existence of community colleges, career centers, public transportation, other social support services and have a "large" concentration of employment opportunities.
2. Targeted Town Centers – Rural towns, town centers or village center that already have and could be enhanced to support more concentrated commercial development and employment opportunities.
3. Low Density Rural – Communities without pre-defined town centers and with no or very limited existing commercial activity that would benefit from infrastructure enhancement to support home-based opportunities, especially broadband.

### Top Priorities:

1. Create vibrant town and village centers to better diversify the tax base in MA and rural communities.
  - a. Small business support
    - i. Fair application of or elimination of blue laws (fair competition with Amazon et al)
    - ii. Energy costs
  - b. Sewer and Water
  - c. Zoning to promote business creation
2. Focus on sector-based economic development particularly important to rural areas.
  - a. Tourism
  - b. Manufacturing
  - c. Forest products
  - d. Agriculture
    - i. Address shortage of ag-based curriculum in vocational technical high schools
    - ii. Small farm succession planning
    - iii. Implementation of recommendations in the MA State Food Plan
3. Address economic inequality between rural and urban areas.
4. Better engage rural communities and stakeholders in the work and priorities of the Commission through regular public forums to ensure that all issues and priorities are identified and addressed.

### **Workforce & Demographics Working Group**

### Members:

Nathaniel Karns, Trish Settles, Linda Dunlavy, Jay Coburn, Aldona Hamel

### Summary:

The focus of the working group's six meetings during FY 2017 was to:

1. Better understand the socio-demographic information about rural communities and how those may be the same or different both among rural communities and as against the more urban parts of the state. Two presentations were made to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission showing this information (September and April) on maps. In general there are three "types" of rural communities in Massachusetts – those impacted by exurban growth in the greater Boston region and parts of Hampden and Hampshire Counties; those impacted by heavy tourism and second home markets in Barnstable and southern Berkshire Counties; and those that are showing persistent population loss and economic stagnation or decline in the "northern tier" from New York to northern Worcester County, in western Worcester County and eastern Hampden and Hampshire Counties. These trends show a need to create different approaches to issues in those subsets of rural towns. There are obvious weak and strong market areas and much state policy does not reflect that difference.
2. Consider the impacts of the demographic changes on the social and political capital available in rural towns, most of which rely heavily on volunteers to provide public services which in larger communities are provided by paid staff. A particular focus was on the decline in numbers of volunteer fire fighters which many rural towns use either exclusively or primarily for emergency response (the same holds true for EMTs). There is difficulty in regionalizing municipal services, even though that may appear to be simple. The legislatively mandated composition of regional planning agency boards may create an obstacle.
3. Initial discussion was held about needing to understand workforce issues in rural towns but no progress was made. The availability of regional technical high schools and their course offerings versus local employers' workforce needs is an area for investigation.
4. The inaccessibility of resources for further training, education and business development assistance in many rural areas was a topic. Mapping was done of where such resources were actually located and from the mapping, it is apparent that residents of a number of small towns have very limited access to such resources which may facilitate further population and economic decline. An actionable future item is to identify Service Center Communities for sub regions where providing a broader spectrum of training, education and business development services is needed (examples are Great Barrington, Ware, Orange, and Chesterfield).
5. Water and sewer infrastructure and its importance to rural towns needs to be understood. Rural water and sewer expansion may be a future action item.

### Top Priorities:

1. Lack of public transportation which limits economic upward mobility ("Distance is Real") – models for providing public transportation in a cost-effective manner in rural areas?
2. Decline of social infrastructure/increase in complexity of issues creating a double impact on communities reliant on volunteers – further enhancement of sharing of services mechanisms.
3. No Growth or Slow Growth communities encountering significant fiscal constraint (particularly former mill towns - "Gateway Cities but for size") – develop Service Center Communities and Vibrant Town/Village Centers program.
4. Engage existing stakeholders in the work of the RPAC and seek broader input on priorities.

### **Infrastructure Working Group**

### Members:

Dave Christopolis, Brian Bullock, Bull Veno, Trish Settles, Judy Terry.

### Summary:

The focus of the working group's 5 meetings during the past year was to explore the infrastructure needs of rural towns on Massachusetts as defined by the Rural Policy Advisory Commission.

The Infrastructure Working Group chose to focus on the infrastructure needs of rural towns related to **broadband, transportation, water and sewer and agriculture.**

The group sought input from the public and each member did research in the topic areas above. The Infrastructure Working Group arrived at the statements to support this work:

- Ensure broadband is made available to all residents in MA
- Explore ways to improve transportation services for rural regions
- Put a focus on clean water and energy issues facing rural towns
- Invest in agriculture (preservation and production) and value added products
- Invest in town center development
- Tie infrastructure to tourism and economic development

The working group also recommends more research regarding infrastructure including a list of current state policy and plans related to agriculture as well best practices/legislation/language from other states. The working group discussed determining a way to identify implementation dollars for rural projects that are "ready to proceed" in rural towns.

Other recommendations include:

- Advocate for rural commission budget to support research and implementation strategies
- Build a database of MA towns who meet the definition of rural and begin collecting information that allows for easy comparisons related to socio-economic demographics and determine a finite list of other fields of data that will help us understand the similarities and differences and look for logical ways to promote regional rural policy and programming

### Top Priorities:

1. Continue to monitor broadband progress in underserved/unserved towns
  - Follow up with MBI and towns on broadband progress
2. Better understand water and sewer needs of rural towns
  - Look at towns with no water/sewer infrastructure, those with partial systems and explore the feasibility of alternative systems
3. Raise awareness of gaps in transportation services in rural towns particularly for older residents
  - Look at statewide RTA system to see if changes can be made to accommodate rural towns
  - Explore alternative transportation solutions
4. Find ways to support local framers and the agricultural economy in rural towns
  - Determine infrastructure needs of farmers
5. Show the intersection of infrastructure and economic development including tourism

### **Housing Working Group**

Members:

Corinne Fitzgerald, Jay Coburn, Donna Hamel, Konnie Lukes

Summary:

The Housing Working Group's focus this year was to establish the area's most important to housing in rural communities. In doing so it was important to recognize three levels of rural housing markets for the purpose of determining the needs of each segment. The Housing Working Group chose to adopt the following classifications:

1. Strong market
2. Average market
3. Weak market

**The 10 most important issues effecting housing in rural communities (all 3 markets)**

- Lack of Broadband access
- Uniform code title 5 and Municipal water & sewer to town centers
- Lack of infrastructure
- Need for accessory dwelling units
- Reducing complex process in the building and housing development
- Regulatory issues creating barriers to housing
- Lack of experience in rural governance
- Creation of affordable housing
- Creation of more workforce housing
- Resources for communities to help homeowners

**Consideration for addressing these issues:**

- Identify other groups and governmental agencies that are currently working on issues relating to rural housing for collaboration consideration.
- Continue to monitor the progress of MBI to insure that viable high speed internet options are available as soon as possible to all homes and businesses in every rural community.
- Monitor legislation that is filed with the state legislature that effect housing in rural communities.