



MONTACHUSETT REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION (MRPC)

REMOTE MEETING

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2023, 7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Open Meeting, Introductions and Announcements

This meeting is being held under Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023, signed by Governor Healey on March 29, 2023, allowing local and regional governments to hold public meetings remotely or in a hybrid fashion. All votes will be taken by roll call. Chairperson L. Shifrin called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Roll call vote followed:

R. Ward – present
A. Reid – present
D. Valliere- present
G. Tillotson – present
K. Norton – present
R. Hoyt – present
L. Shifrin - present

2. MRPC Minutes – November 9, 2023 – Approval of Commissioners Requested

Having no objections, G. Tillotson moved to accept the minutes as presented. The motion was seconded.

Roll call vote followed:

R. Hoyt – yes
G. Tillotson- yes
J. DeRoy- yes
R. Ward- yes
M. Bohart- abstain
A. Reid- yes
D. Valliere- yes
K. Norton - yes
K. Nartowicz- yes
K. Munroe- yes

3. Cash Schedule – November 2023 – Acceptance of Commissioners Requested

R. Hoyt presented the November 2023 Cash Schedule. The opening balance for September 1, 2023 was \$547,250.87, total receipts and transfers for the month were \$276,368.14, total cash on hand before this warrant was \$823,619.01, less the amount of this warrant \$269,991.99, left a balance after the warrant of \$553,627.02.

Having no objections, G. Tillotson moved to accept the November 2023 cash schedule as presented subject to audit. The motion was seconded.

Roll call vote followed:

A. Reid – yes
M. Bohart – yes
D. Valliere – yes
G. Tillotson – yes
J. DeRoy – yes
K. Norton – yes
K. Munroe – yes
K. Nartowicz – yes
R. Ward – yes
R. Hoyt – yes
L. Shifrin – yes

4. Guest Announcements and Questions

George Kahale, MART Representative

- **Harvard Commuter Shuttle**

The Town of Harvard has requested a new Commuter Shuttle Service between downtown Harvard and Littleton MBTA Commuter Station to provide access to its residents to the Boston area. The new shuttle service started Monday, November 6, 2023. For 2 Trains in the AM and 2 Trains in the PM with 2 locations for pick-up one at the Town Hall and the other at Harvard Senior Center, it is a Fare-Free service.

- **MART Carey Street – Parking Improvement Project**

This project has been completed, creating 50 parking spaces, and that increases our available parking for both employees as well as creating a dedicated fleet parking. Additional features of the project included security fencing, a new storm drainage system, and the burying of the utilities underground. The Project greatly improved the MART facility, provided additional much-needed parking, and better secured both the physical site and MART assets, also hardened our utility security with upgraded lines, and secured underground conduit.

- **MART Bus Shelters Grant**

MART recently installed two Bus Shelters in Athol, four Bus Shelters in Gardner, and one Bus Shelter in Leominster; through the Grant of the Shared Streets and Spaces Program under MassDOT for FFY23; as

part of this Grant MART will be installing a total of 12 Bus Shelters in Athol, Gardner, Fitchburg, and Leominster.

- **MART Fare Changes**

MART has implemented the fare changes approved by the Advisory Board earlier this year with the reduction in fixed route fares from \$1.25 to \$1.00, and students riding fare-free, as well as no-cost transfers between regional routes.

5. Administrative Matters

5.1 Digital Equity Planning – Outreach Presented by K. Chapman

This second Montachusett Region Digital Equity Information and Outreach Session will provide a follow-up to the first session held on November 9th (see link below to view a recording of that presentation). Karen Chapman, Planning and Development Director, will be presenting a snapshot of digital equity across the Commonwealth with a focus on the Montachusett Region and illustrating Digital Equity assets, barriers, and gaps in availability, affordability, and adoption.

If you were not in attendance at the first Digital Equity Planning outreach and info session that was held on November 9th, you can view a recording at the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xuH0Hf3VrM&t=494s>

Also, remember to view our NEW [Digital Equity Planning webpage](#) and list of [additional resources](#) to learn more about [MBI's Digital Equity Planning program](#), [AmeriCorps Lead for America](#) community service program, and other important programs such as the [Affordable Connectivity Program \(ACP\)](#), and [E-Rate program](#).

It's still not too late for your community to take the [Statewide Digital Equity Survey](#) or to [apply](#) for digital equity planning services from MRPC through MBI's [Digital Equity Program](#).

Planning Staff at the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission are standing by to answer any questions you may have, and we look forward to the chance to speak with you by phone, or at an upcoming community meeting or event. Please share this information with any interested municipal staff or community stakeholders and let us know if there is anyone else in your community that we should add to our outreach list.

5.2 Brad Harris, Retirement – Action Requested Presented by G. Eaton

REPORT

MRPC's Transportation Projects Director (TPD), Brad Harris has resigned from his position and will be retiring in early January 2024. His last day in the office will be Friday, January 5, 2024 (one day after the Commissioners' meeting to be held on January 4th).

MRPC has a policy to post the availability of open positions internally, for a period of two weeks, providing an opportunity for existing employees to apply before advertising the position outside of the office. At the appropriate time, we may also advertise the position externally. If so, please be informed that MRPC advertises open positions with the American Planning Association (APA), New England Chapter of the APA, and the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA), and sometimes through other media outlets.

On average, the TPD typically oversees about 60% of the revenue that comes into the agency through the MASSDOT-MRPC Transportation Planning contract. The TPD also oversees four Transportation Planners.

The Executive Director recommends that Commissioners:

- Create an Interview and Recommendation Committee to review applications, conduct interview(s), and make a recommendation (to the Commissioners) for hiring (at their next meeting to be held on January 4, 2024), if an internal candidate is selected to succeed Mr. Harris; and,
- This Committee should consist of a maximum of four employees (identified below) and three or five Commissioners (so that the Committee has an odd number of members).

The MRPC employees are:

- Holly Ford, Administrative and Human Resources Director;
- Karen Chapman, Planning and Development Director;
- One of the four Transportation Planners (to be identified later this month); and
- The Executive Director.

The Executive Director requests that three or five Commissioners volunteer their time to serve on this Committee. If three commissioners volunteer, we will have a committee of seven members and if five volunteer, we'll have a committee of nine.

This position will be posted internally on Friday, December 8th, per the MRPC Personnel Policies and Employee Procedures Handbook. The open position will be posted on the bulletin board and all employees will be notified by email.

Ideally, this Committee would interview the internal candidate(s) on one of the following dates; December 27, 28, 29, 2023, January 2 or 3, 2024. Our objective would be to bring a hiring recommendation to the Commissioners at their January 4th meeting.

Based on how many applications are received and candidates are interviewed, our hiring process could be extended into February or beyond. If our selection process goes beyond January 4th, then the Executive Director will recommend that the Commissioners appoint an Interim Transportation Projects Director to ensure we have continuity of contracts management between MRPC and MASSDOT. This will occur at the January 4th meeting of the Commissioners, if necessary.

L. Shifrin asked if we can run internally and externally simultaneously. G. Eaton stated this would be against our current policy. R. Hoyt asked if an internal candidate doesn't apply when we are accepting only internal candidates, can they apply when the position is posted to the public? G. Eaton reiterated an internal candidate can apply at any time during the process.

K. Munroe asked if we would send out a copy of the Employee Policy and Procedure Handbook. The document will be emailed out after the meeting.

M. Bohart, R. Swartz and K. Munroe volunteered to be on the Interview and Recommendation Committee.

REPORT

BE IT RESOLVED that the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission hereby approves the Executive Director's recommendation to create the Interview and Recommendation Committee, as described above, with an appropriate number of Commissioners to serve on the Committee based on the Commissioners who will volunteer to serve and identified at the meeting of December 7, 2023. (See the list of volunteers above)

L. Shifrin moved to accept the motion as accepted as presented, the motion was seconded.

Roll call vote followed:

A. Reid – yes
M. Bohart – yes
D. Valliere – yes
G. Tillotson – yes
K. Norton – yes
K. Munroe – yes
K. Nartowicz – yes
R. Ward – yes
R. Swartz- yes
R. Hoyt – yes
L. Shifrin – yes

5.3 Communications Intern – Increase of Hours – Action Requested Presented by G. Eaton

REPORT

Dorothy ("Dottie") Bresnahan was hired as a Communications Intern and to work for the MRPC up to ten hours per week. Ms. Bresnahan can manage more work assignments than originally anticipated and management has an increased understanding of Ms. Bresnahan's abilities. Due to these factors, the Executive Director recommends that her hours be increased from 10 to 18,

weekly. The hours and funding allocated to another Intern will be reduced. Thus, the total funding for the three existing Interns in the FY24 Budget is anticipated to remain unchanged unless other Interns are needed in the future.

RESOLUTION

BE IT RESOLVED that the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission hereby approves the Executive Director's recommendation to increase Ms. Bresnahan's hours from 10 to 18 hours per week, as described above.

L. Shifrin moved to accept the motion as accepted as presented, the motion was seconded.

Roll call vote followed:

A. Reid – yes
D. Valliere – yes
G. Tillotson – yes
K. Norton – yes
K. Munroe – yes
K. Nartowicz – yes
R. Ward – yes
R. Swartz- yes
R. Hoyt – yes
L. Shifrin – yes

5.4 MA Federal Funds Office – Information Only Presented by G. Eaton

The Commonwealth has created a Federal Funds Office to ensure that Massachusetts' communities receive the maximum amount of funding available for local improvements. From the new office's website, it states:

- *"The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Office for Administration and Finance (A&F) is responsible for maximizing federal revenue and minimizing compliance risks associated with federal grants in the Commonwealth.*
- *As the federal government issues guidance and as the priorities change, A&F adapts its strategy for allocating funds in order to maximize the amount of federal funds available to the Commonwealth. Some of the work associated with maximizing federal revenue happens retrospectively: an expense is incurred and allocated to an available state or federal funding source, but it may be reallocated later if a more appropriate funding source is identified. Spending may be reallocated between different federal funding sources, or between federal sources and state sources. Factors that A&F considers in matching spending with funding sources include eligibility rules, spending deadlines, the availability of new funding sources, and compliance risks."*

Additional information can be found here <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/covid-19-federal-funds-office>.

5.5 Food Drive and Coat Drive – Information Only Presented by H. Ford

MRPC held its second food drive September 25th through November 21st. Stephanie Marchetti, the Executive Director of the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC), came to our office to not only pick up the items donated but also give us an overview of what the Veteran's Outreach Center does and how our donated items will be used.

MVOC provides support to military veterans and their families in need of services to develop a resilient, self-sufficient lifestyle essential to succeed in today's environment. They offer low-income housing alternatives and residential readjustment programs, mental health counseling, case management, employment training, personal development, veterans' benefits resource assistance, medical transportation, and food assistance.

The MVOC is home to twelve transitional veterans, single room occupancy units and seven low-income permanent housing units, a food pantry, a drop-in center, and the executive leadership and administrative offices with a dedicated staff on hand for veteran-related inquiries during business hours. The MVOC operates three additional housing off-site facilities for qualified veterans: Unity House (15 room permanent-supportive readjustment program veterans housing), Nichols Street Apartments (12-unit low-income permanent housing), and Cathy's House, an 8-bed permanent-supportive / transitional housing program designed for women veterans.

One thing we learned is that although the MVOC received grants which fund many of their food needs, items such as detergent, soap, shampoo, conditioner, anything that is not food is not an eligible expense when using grant money. This makes the need for these items greater. We're talking about holding another drive where we collect toiletry and laundry items.



We also had a coat drive for people in need. Approximately ten gently used coats were donated by staff to assist homeless and others in need in Worcester County.

L. Shifrin asked if we could notify the Commissioners of the next food drive held. Many communities may want to participate.

5.6 Other Administrative Matters – Action Requested Presented by G. Eaton

Subscriptions Line-Item Increase Request from \$26,000 to \$29,600 to Improve Laptops Data Backup System

REPORT

Jason Stanton, GIS & IT Director strongly recommends that MRPC's services agreement with MRPC's IT consulting agency (White Mountain) be modified to improve the "backups" of all laptops used by the employees of the MRPC AND THE Executive Director concurs with Mr. Stanton's recommendation.

Portions of Jason's written report to me on this matter follow:

- Currently, the laptops have trouble backing up to our network when they are offsite, which is less than optimal and difficult to manage.
- The increase in the fee to White Mountain would enable MRPC to backup all laptops directly to the Acronis Cyber Cloud.
- By making this change and paying for the increase, this change will make the backups significantly more reliable, flexible, and easy to manage.

The "Subscriptions" line item was budgeted at \$26,000 at the beginning of this fiscal year (2024). The cost to improve the backup system is \$3,600 per year. Thus, the Executive Director recommends that the current budget of \$26,000 be increased to \$29,600 in FY24 to improve the data backups of the employees' collective work completed on behalf of the MRPC's clients.

RELATED INFORMATION

- *White Mountain IT services are classified as a "Subscription" in MRPC's budget (as in a subscription to a software applications package or "app").*
- *Many other apps used by the MRPC are accounted for under this line item such as costs related to Microsoft, Esri GIS, SurveyMonkey, and newspaper subscriptions such as the Sentinel and Enterprise, The Gardner News, and the Athol Daily News.*
- *When this line item was originally created (before computers) this line item was only used for newspaper subscriptions.*
- *Administrative and Fiscal staff have discussed the separation of newspaper and other subscriptions to periodicals from "apps." This will commence in FY25.*

RESOLUTION

BE IT RESOLVED that the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission hereby approves the Executive Director's recommendation to increase the "Subscriptions" line item in the FY24 Budget by \$3,600 from \$26,000 to \$29,600.

K. Munroe asked if we currently have written information security plan, and do we have a disaster recovery plan that is driving the change in backups? G. Eaton and K. Kress were unable to answer the question. We will look into this and come back with an answer. These plans will be sent out to all commissioners if we do have them.

K. Munroe also asked why don't we use Azur instead of Microsoft 365? We will look into this and will be better prepared to discuss it at the next meeting. K. Munroe stated that using Azure and Share Point function better for running backups.

L. Shifrin moved to accept the motion as accepted as presented, the motion was seconded.

Roll call vote followed:

A. Reid – yes
D. Valliere – yes
G. Tillotson – yes
K. Norton – yes
K. Munroe – yes
K. Nartowicz – yes
R. Ward – yes
R. Swartz- yes
R. Hoyt – yes
L. Shifrin – yes

6. Department Updates

6.1 Geographic Information Systems (GIS) – K. Kress

GIS is working with the city of Leominster and the Planning and Development Department to create maps for depicting the event that occurred on 9/11/2023. We are working to help identify potential grant funding.

6.2 Planning & Development – K. Chapman

District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) is ending this month. A request for service delivery will go out. We are discussing our options on how we work through DLTA projects going forward so we are not spreading ourselves too thin and we take the time needed for projects. We average 14 projects per year currently, we would like to suggest that half of the funds received would be used for one big project for one community.

Communities that don't already have a grant for technical assistance under a Planning Assistance Grant or Mass Housing Partnership grant should apply for MBTA assistance under DLTA.

There are other grants available for projects and we have a grant writer that can apply for grants on behalf of a community.

Next year we are also getting the DLTA Augmentation money which will give us money to help communities apply for federal grants.

6.3 Transit & Transportation – B. Harris

MRPC is at the start of a new program year, beginning October 1st. Staff is working on several new projects. Beginning in January the TIP development cycle will start again. This will be the developing the 2025 – 2029 TIP. It will begin by reviewing all of the projects that are currently available, scoring the projects and setting priorities with a goal of having a TIP ready for endorsement in May 2024.

Last month, the Safe Streets 4 All grant was awarded. We had the RFP out. We had seven responses and after reviewing those, we had it down to two. We interviewed the two consulting firms and we have chosen W. S. P. USA Inc. as our consultant. We hope to have a contract fully executed by the end of this month.

7. New Business

This time is reserved for topics that the chair did not reasonably anticipate would be discussed.

8. Adjournment - The date of the next MRPC meeting – January 4, 2023, 7:00 p.m.

Having no objections, the meeting was adjourned at 8:19 p.m.

This meeting will be recorded by the GoToMeeting app and will be made available for viewing at

<https://www.youtube.com/user/MontachusettRegion/videos>.

This notice is subject to change with reasonable notice provided to all.

Meeting Attendance					
Name	M/A	Representing	Appointment Date	Present	Absent
Arpano, Abby	A	Ashburnham	12.2023		X
Hoyt, Roger	M	Ashburnham	7.2011	X	
Leab, Doug	A	Ashby	7.2023		X
Pease, Alan	M	Ashby	7.2001		
Bialecki, Rebecca	A	Athol	7.2020.		XX
Norton, Kathy	M	Athol	11.2023	X	
Copeland, Shaun	A	Ayer	7.2020.		X

Tillotson, Geoffrey	M	Ayer	7.2022	X	
Vacant	A	Clinton			X
Duffy, Phil	M	Clinton	12.2011		X
Angus, Neil	N/V	DREZ	7.2023		X
Bohart, Mary Jo	A	Fitchburg	7.2021	X	
Butland, Alyne	M	Fitchburg	7.2020.		X
DeRoy, Jessica	A	Gardner	7.2021	X	
Swartz, Robert	M	Gardner	7.2019	X	
Cunningham, Peter	M	Groton	7.2022		X
Burke, Russell	A	Groton	7.2016		X
Minar, Kara	A	Harvard	7.2021		X
Donahue, Stacia	M	Harvard	7.2018		X
Kresge, Mark	A	Hubbardston	7.2023		X
Munroe, Kristofer	M	Hubbardston	2.2023	X	
Dolan, Kelly	A	Lancaster	7.2023		X
Streeter, Frank	M	Lancaster	7.2023		X
Vacant	A	Leominster			X
Valliere, Dean	M	Leominster	7.2019	X	
Vacant	A	Lunenburg	7.2020.		X
Reid, Amanda	M	Lunenburg	7.2022	X	
Ermini, Annette	A	Petersham	7.2022		X
Vacant	M	Petersham			X
Telepciak, John	M	Phillipston	10.2001		X
Jackson, Melanie	A	Phillipston	7.2022		X

Barclay, James	A	Royalston	7.2017		X
Nartowicz, Kyle	M	Royalston	7.2015	X	
Oelfke, Bill	A	Shirley	7.2020.		X
Yocum, Barbara	M	Shirley	8.2017		X
Newman, Kristen	A	Sterling	7.2023		X
Page, Patty	M	Sterling	7.2019		X
Toth, Timothy	A	Templeton	7.2023		X
Rich, Dennis	M	Templeton	7.2017		X
Sexton-Diranian, Charles	A	Townsend	7.2022		X
Shifrin, Laura	M	Townsend	7.2019	X	
Vacant	A	Westminster			X
Buckman, Gregg	M	Westminster	7.2021		X
Ward, Rick	A	Winchendon	7.2019	X	
Corbosiero, Guy	M	Winchendon	7.2011		X

Guests: G. Kahale, MART Representative

Staff: G. Eaton, H. Ford, L. Quinlivan, K. Chapman, B. Harris, K. Kress

DOCUMENTS/EXHIBITS DISTRIBUTED AT THE MEETING:

November 9, 2024 MRPC Meeting Minutes

December 7, 2024 MRPC Meeting Agenda

Current Grant Opportunities Document

Digital Equity Planning Status Montachusett Region – Power Point Slides

Montachusett Digital Equity Overview and Status – Power Point Slides

2023 Conference Report by K. Chapman