



Southern
Worcester
County
Economic
Development
Organization
c/o Central Massachusetts
Regional Planning Commission

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**Southern Worcester County Economic Development Organization
Board of Directors
Remote Meeting via Zoom
June 17, 2022
Meeting Minutes**

Present:

SWC EDO Board Members: (Exec Cmte)*

Janet Pierce, CMRPC*

Tony Sousa, Oxford*

Peter Dunn, Worcester*

Julie Holstrom, WBDC*

Mackenzie May, Central Mass Grown

Alexandra McNitt, Chamber of Central
Mass South

Jon Weaver, Mass Biomed

Sheila Cuddy, QVCDC

Peter Hoffman, Berlin EDC

Kimberley Ingalls, MassMEP

Kathy Rentsch, QCC

Guests:

Elizabeth Cruz, LABO

David Sullivan, Worcester Regional
Chamber of Commerce

CMRPC Staff:

Trish Settles, CMRPC

Kerrie Salwa, CMRPC

Ryan Saul, CMRPC

Sarah O'Brien, CMRPC

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1. Meeting began at 9:06 a.m.: Janet Pierce began the meeting at 9:06 a.m. Ryan Saul conducted a roll call of the board members present. Due to the lack of quorum, agenda items two and three were skipped, and the meeting began with agenda item four.
 2. Minutes: Due to the lack of quorum, the Quarterly Meeting minutes from December 16, 2021 and March 17, 2022 could not be approved and will need to be voted on at the next Quarterly Meeting.
 3. Vote for SWC EDO Board of Directors New Membership: Due to the lack of quorum, the vote on new members of the SWC EDO Board of Directors could not take place and will need to be voted on at the next Quarterly Meeting.
 4. EDA Project Updates: Southbridge was rewarded \$2.6 million through the EDA ARPA Travel,

Tourism and Outdoor Recreation grant for the Quinebaug Valley Rail Trail project. This is an important project for boosting tourism in Southbridge. It also will have regional benefits as it can connect with the trail in Dudley and trail systems in Connecticut. Kerrie thanked the group for sending a letter of support for the project. Secondly, the application for the Wright's Mill Recovery Master Plan in West Warren was fully funded. Many preliminary plans for potential uses exist for the site including federal data endeavors, housing, small businesses, etc. The application was submitted under the EDA ARPA Economic Adjustment Assistance funding opportunity and will provide for a complete needs assessment for the 600,000 square foot property. Thirdly, Kerrie stated that when she asked Debra about the status of the EDD designation request, Debra said that two other applications were successful in the region, one of which was the Douglas infrastructure project. Kevin Kuros asked Kerrie what the funding amount was for the Douglas project. Kerrie said she believes it is either \$3 million or \$3.2 million. Kerrie said she was excited to share the news of the three successful EDA applications this morning. Kerrie stated that Douglas has not received a formal award letter yet. Janet asked the group to please not share that information yet until the official announcement is made. Janet said it is great news for the region to see the funding coming in and thanked the group for supporting those projects.

Janet asked if anyone had any questions. Kevin Kuros asked if he was a full voting member of the SWC EDO Board of Directors, as he noticed his name was not called during the roll call and he believes he is a full voting member of the board. He said that if he is a voting member, then the group may have quorum. Janet asked Ryan to check the list. Kerrie said there are a handful of seats that have an advisory role. Trish said yes, and that Kevin, Shyla Matthews, and Barry Lorion serve in these advisory roles, which are non-voting roles. This is due to the state-wide nature of their roles. Ryan confirmed that this was correct, and said that this applies to Jon Niedzielski as well. Janet said that the group may want to reconsider the function of that role at some point and thanked Kevin for always participating and informing the group. Kevin said he enjoys helping. Sheila Cuddy asked how much funding was in the Warren grant. Kerrie said it was \$350,000 total. Janet said the funding was for a master plan on the mill.

5. EDD Designation Update: Kerrie Salwa said that when she asked Debra for an update on the EDD Designation request, Debra said that she and the EDA were very busy with ARPA funding applications, but that the EDA would get to it as quickly as they can. She said that the request was currently in the review process and is being routed through the appropriate channels. Janet asked if there were any questions. There were none. Janet said that the EDA hopefully has everything it needs. CMRPC has not received any further requests for revisions, so it is currently moving forward.
6. CEDS Update: Kerrie said that she had told Debra that CMRPC would need to submit an application for Planning and Technical assistance. This is because the CEDS Annual Report would need to be written soon, along with an update to the CEDS Resiliency Chapter. Further, the next full CEDS update will also be taking place next year, as the current CEDS is only good until 2023. Debra told Kerrie that she would be happy to schedule a time to speak to CMRPC

regarding such an application. Kerrie said she is looking forward to that, as the application is written and essentially ready to submit. Janet asked if there were any questions. There were none.

7. **Presentation:** Janet introduced Sarah O'Brien of CMRPC to present on the Equity element of CMRPC's regional plan, Imagine2050. Janet said that members that have attended previous Quarterly Meetings will be familiar with Imagine2050 and Sarah, who is taking a lead on the regional plan. Sarah introduced herself and said she is assuming that many of those in attendance know what Imagine 2050 is, given the group's previous participation in two prior visioning sessions. However, she asked for anyone to please tell her to slow down or explain anything if needed.

- i. **Presentation on Imagine 2050: A Vision for Central Massachusetts:** Sarah provided a brief overview of the plan's timeline, the plan's three pillars, and the cross-cutting themes of the plan. She then explained that she would give a presentation that would provide an overview of the regional plan's Equity pillar, followed by a visioning session. Sarah began with an overview of equity and how its function in the plan. For the purposes of the plan, equity can be defined as the, "consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment." The understanding of equity in the plan includes fairness, access, responsible regionalism, and the recognition of past irresponsible regionalism. Sarah then presented data on the region's foreign-born population, environmental justice populations, and projections of over-60 population in 2030. Sarah then provided an overview of food insecurity in the region, the region's commuting habits, and data on living wage estimates for Worcester County.

Sarah then explained that CMRPC has done eighteen visioning sessions for Imagine2050, which has resulted in the collection of over 600 comments. In April, a preliminary analysis of those comments was used to help create the Imagine2050 survey. Sarah then shared some of the top comments related to the Equity pillar that were produced by responses to these visioning session questions: "What should equity look like in 30 years?" and "What concerns you about inequity in 30 years? What should we try to avoid?". Sarah also shared some of the top responses to the question, "How do you imagine these topics might impact regional equity between now and 2050?", which was asked in relation to the plan's cross-cutting themes. Sarah then showed a QR code and a link to the Imagine2050 survey. She encouraged anyone who had not taken the survey to take it and to share the survey amongst their networks. Sarah also mentioned that CMRPC is continuing to host visioning sessions at a variety of settings throughout the region, and asked for anyone in the group to email her if they or anyone they know is interested in having a visioning session for their community or organization.

- ii. **Visioning Session:** Kevin Kuros asked Sarah if the topic of senior housing has come up during the visioning sessions. He believes it is a potential solution to housing problems, as when older adults move into senior housing, that opens up a single-family home for younger adults. He said that senior housing developments also tend to be revenue-positive for communities because they do not add children into a school system. Sarah said that it has come up as a topic in other visioning sessions and thanked Kevin for a great question to start the visioning session off. Kathy Rentsch said she enjoys the Living Wage work that MIT does. She wants to see how the group can take such work and educate employers in the region about the ties between living wage jobs, affordable housing, and their workforce pipelines. Kathy said that this could apply to the EDO as a group, or to the organizations everyone represents, but that she would like to see more of that information getting to people who may not normally be exposed to it. Peter Dunn said the question of how the labor market relates to living wages should also be addressed. Peter said it is important to evaluate the context of a living wage, and how that can differ for people in different situations. It may not be correct to assume that everyone in the labor force is working to get a living wage. Peter specifically referenced the difference between someone working to support a family versus a young adult still living in a financially stable home who is working primarily to gain work experience or extra cash.

Peter Hoffman asked if CMRPC takes a stance on any of these issues? If yes, does CMRPC publish that stance? Janet said no, CMRPC does not explicitly take any stances. CMRPC will evaluate how issues are discussed and presented in the various public outreach efforts. If there is a strong voice about an issue, then CMRPC is likely to include that in its studies. CMRPC can also promote what it has found through its studies, but CMRPC does not take individual positions on issues.

Jon Weaver asked when this process transitions from identifying issues and problems to identifying solutions to the issues and problems. Sarah said that strategy development will begin in winter or spring of 2022 after all of the data from community engagement has been synthesized and analyzed, along with projection and scenario planning. Jon said that there is a housing supply problem in state, which has big impacts on equitable access to housing, transportation, and inability to build wealth, and other associated impacts. He said feels this problem is created largely by resistance to new growth in suburban communities. He is curious to see what CMRPC can produce for strategies to address that problem, as he thinks CMRPC would have an interesting perspective on the issue. Janet said that CMRPC is currently in the midst of a DLTA project working with the fifteen MBTA communities in the region. She stated that housing will be an important component of the regional plan's short-, mid-, and long-term goals, given its importance to the region's economic development and vitality. She also mentioned how many communities are revisiting or adjusting their zoning practices and by-laws, including some communities who are voting in inclusionary zoning.

Jon also mentioned how the cost of construction is unsustainable. The high costs make building affordable housing difficult because the rents or prices needed in order to recoup the construction costs are too high to make it affordable. Jon said this can then result in gentrification, so alternative forms of construction may need to be examined. He also supports a Gateway Cities stretch code, which can result in a reduction in costs for Gateway Cities to get construction underway. He feels there is not enough public subsidies being put in to help make the housing supply that is needed now. Janet said that through CMRPC's Rural Caucus and the Rural Policy Commission, they have heard that the prevailing wage is a concern for rural communities. It can result in them having less ability to support transportation, infrastructure, and other needs. Kevin Kuros said that through his experience, the prevailing wage is the "third rail that no one will touch." Alex McNitt added that she agrees with Jon about the issue of housing shortages. However, if a percentage reduction of costs is only provided to Gateway Cities, that cuts out rural communities that also need the same help. Alex referenced Southbridge as an example and said that there needs to be some sort of incentive to help developers make the housing affordable and make a profit. Jon said that he agrees and said that the current economics do not work in almost every community outside of I-95. He feels there needs to be common sense methods to make housing safer, increase the supply, and not price residents out.

Mackenzie May said she would like to equitable access to more healthy and local food. She said this is an issue in some of the region's cities where people may only have access to get food a local bodega.

Elizabeth Cruz said that small and underserved businesses need to have access to capital funds and grants. She said that is significant way to help such businesses, which she feels are critical to the region's economy and improvements in equity.

Jon Weaver said that it is important for advanced manufacturing to bring people of all education levels into the industry. This can be accomplished with targeted training programs, like Kathy is helping support at QCC. He feels it can be a great way to transform lives for underrepresented populations.

Alex McNitt asked how the planning process will not only plan for what currently exists, but also plan for what is coming in the future. She gave the example of the trend of warehousing and distribution centers becoming more and more prevalent, amid the struggles of many main street businesses. Communities need to plan for what exists. Sarah said that the regional plan process will include scenario planning, which has other opportunities for engagement. Trish said there are several "what-if's" that will be addressed in the scenario planning process. She gave the examples of increased climate migration and the impacts that an increasing number of large distribution-center or warehouse-like facilities will have on the region's economy, its environment, and equity considerations. Trish said that CMRPC will be looking towards people like Alex to help CMRPC develop the scenarios and issues that they want to be prepared to potentially address in the years ahead. Alex agreed that there is the potential for people along the

coasts to move inland in the future due to climate change. Trish also gave the example of short-term rentals, as the region does not have many of those now, but it may in the future. Thus, it is examples like these that show why it is important to plan for these scenarios so that communities are prepared to address them thoughtfully when they arise.

Kathy said it is important to think about how can rural communities help and welcome all kinds of people, especially recently-arrived immigrants, so that they stay, hold jobs, and actively participate as a member of the community. She gave the example of the recently-arrived Afghan refugees. She said it is expensive to find housing in Worcester, or in other Gateway Cities, but as immigrants move beyond them to more rural communities, that many of the support services and networks are not as available. Elizabeth said that from her experience in residential and commercial real estate, many immigrants, disadvantaged populations, and first-time homebuyers are going west to Southbridge, Springfield, etc. because of the cost of housing and general costs of living or doing business.

Tony Sousa said he would like to expand access to healthcare facilities, especially in rural communities. He mentioned how owning a car is often a necessity for healthcare access in rural communities, which creates inequitable access to healthcare for some populations. He said that, in rural communities, healthcare facilities could possibly become more integrated in settings like community centers, senior facilities, or school systems to improve access. Sheila agreed with Tony's statements. She said that not a single health center in New England received funding in the last round of federal funding for community health centers. She understands that some of the region's demographics may not line up on a national level, but it is a need in many of the rural areas and is an equity issue.

Alex recalled the previous conversations about recently-arrived immigrants and refugees and said that, through her experience living in rural Southern Worcester County, those populations often have a more difficult time integrating in such communities due to community resistance. She said if there was a system that was incentivized in which community churches could sponsor families to support them and help them integrate in such rural communities. She said there are several churches in Worcester that do this well, and she would like to see similar models expanded to rural communities, as that may be a good way to support immigrants in more rural communities.

Sarah thanked everyone for her time and said that she put her email in the chat if anyone has other thoughts they would like to add. She also said that CMRPC would be happy to do more visioning sessions for any group that was interested. Many groups that have participated in visioning sessions have found it beneficial to not only get a bigger picture of the region's future, but also a bigger picture of their own organization's vision and role in that future. Janet thanked Sarah and thanked the group for their participation. She also said that CMRPC would be doing Imagine2050 community

engagement on the Worcester Common during the Out to Lunch events. Her and Sarah also did a recent visioning session in Southbridge with several officials and are hoping to do a night session with more participation from the general public. Alex asked to Janet to tell her when that is and she will send it out to her Chamber's members. Sarah and Janet said the event would be on August 18th at 6:00 p.m., likely at the library in Southbridge. Janet said CMRPC would gladly hold visioning sessions for any of the group's organizations at any time.

She also asked the group to continue to promote the Imagine2050 survey. Janet said CMRPC has paper surveys in all of the communities at the Town Halls, along with some libraries and senior centers. If anyone has any other locations they would like paper surveys at, please let Sarah know. Janet thanked the group for their participation and said that CMRPC wants to hear from as many voices as possible, especially the youth. Peter said that much of what he heard today aligns with the Community Health Improvement Plan of the Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester. Peter also mentioned how many other similar plans are also underway right now in the region. He said that it is important to find ways to align, connect, and integrate such planning efforts, rather than have them take place in silos. Janet agreed with Peter, and said that CMRPC is looking to integrate these many different plans into the regional plan. She specifically mentioned the Chamber's housing plan and all of the communities' master plans, including the City of Worcester's. Janet said that she believes CMRPC's Sujatha Krishnan sits on the board of Worcester's master plan, and that CMRPC's Yahaira Graxirena works closely with the Board of Health's on its planning efforts. Janet thanked Peter for making the point, as it is important to not have conflicting strategies, implementation, or community engagement efforts, especially at the local level. Kerrie also mentioned that CMRPC's Faye Rhault is involved with the Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester and healthy aging efforts.

Alex said that her wife just started working in Worcester at Community Legal Aid. The organization's primary challenges are associated with housing issues such as evictions. Alex asked if there were channels to reach populations like the one served by Community Legal aid, and other underrepresented populations, as the survey data from such populations may be very different than what has been received thus far. Janet said that reaching those types of populations is exactly what CMRPC is interested in as part of the plan's community engagement process. She said that often times CMRPC receives pushback or apprehension from communities, so she would appreciate any third-party introductions to reduce any fear or apprehension to engage. Trish said that would be happy to do one-on-one interviews, group visioning sessions, or something in-between. She said that CMRPC's connections are so often with state officials, people like those in attendance today, or municipal officials, so it is especially important for CMRPC to hear the voices of groups they do not interact with as much. Trish asked Alex to follow up with that connection and CMRPC would be glad to set something up. Trish encouraged the rest of the group to do the same. She specifically mentioned that CMRPC would like to speak with the Worcester Community Housing Resources Group, the Higher Education

Consortium of Central Massachusetts, and various healthcare organizations. Janet said that her or CMRPC staff will go anywhere to speak with communities. She said is critical to hear as many voices as possible, as there may be issues like homelessness, opioid addiction, etc. that will be prevalent, but often are overlooked. She asked if the group had any other questions or comments on the Imagine2050 presentation and visioning session. There were none.

8. Organization and Partner Updates:

- Mackenzie May: The White House is hosting a conference on hunger, nutrition, and health in September. This is only the second time such a conference has happened, which makes it a significant event. The first such conference that was held resulted in the creation of the Stamp program. It is expected that progressive legislation will be created through the process of this second conference. Listening sessions have been taking place throughout the region recently. Casey Burns of the Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester and her project partner are planning on hosting two listening sessions in Worcester in the next month, as all comments must be collected by July 15th. Mackenzie said there is a feedback form if anyone has any comments. She said some of the comments gathered through the Imagine2050 community engagement process may be valuable. Janet thanked Mackenzie for sharing and said that it will be great to have any data from that process as part of the regional plan and the CEDS update.
- Sheila Cuddy: CDFI, QVCDC's small business loan entity, has started a rebound loan program. The loans are 1% interest fixed for the first year to help businesses recovering from the pandemic who are ready to reinvest in equipment or need additional working capital. QVCDC is also providing support with the Empower Digital Grant and Biz-M-Power Grant programs through the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation. QVCDC is also providing technical assistance with its staff and its consultants to help small business owners and micro-entrepreneurs put together business plans, loan packaging, and direct or indirect loan assistance from QVCDC. Sheila said she is happy to have anyone referred to her. With the price of gas continuing to increase, the demand for QVCDC's Quaboag Connector transit service continues to exceed the supply. 60% of the rides provided were bringing riders to places of employment, and 30% of the rides were for people aged 60 years or older. It continues to be \$2 a ride no matter the destination. QVCDC is launching its fixed route service on Saturdays and will look to expand that to weekdays as originally intended. QVCDC also continues to provide the driver for the PVTA's B79 route from Amherst to Worcester, which is a critical transportation gap along Route 9 in the state. QVCDC is hearing lots of positive feedback from both riders and employers on how beneficial the service is.

QVCDC is also working with the Town of Ware on three health initiatives relating to the CHIP and rural vaccinations and health equity. Sheila said she will be interested in reaching out to members of the group about the Boards of Health in some of the rural communities, which have recently been stretched thin. Through the help of a Better Together Grant, QVCDC is also working on a youth education to employment initiative.

This will include a lot of outreach to youth to hear their voices and gather their feedback, which is often overlooked. Trish asked Sheila if CMRPC could connect with the youth group to help further inform the youth component within CMRPC's regional plan. Trish said the youth component is an important part of the regional plan, as the youth today are going to be the working age adults in 2050. Sheila said yes, and that they are currently in the hiring process to manage those three initiatives. Janet asked Sheila if she could share the location of the Quaboag Connector's fixed route service. Sheila said it runs from Belchertown to Spencer. Sheila said that the fixed route service is only \$1 per ride.

9. New Business: There was no new business.

10. Review Meeting Dates/Locations and Other Important Dates: session.

- i. **Quarterly Meeting**: Kerrie said the next Quarterly meeting will be on Thursday, September 15th at 3:00 p.m. Janet suggested that the group keep the Quarterly meetings at the same time as previous Quarterly and Executive Committee meetings on Thursdays at 3:00 p.m., but asked the group what works best for them Alex said she is unable to make the next Quarterly meeting, but that she prefers afternoons at 3:00 or 4:00. Mackenzie said that anytime after 3:30 works for her. Janet suggested that Ryan or Kerrie send out a Doodle poll to the group to gauge preferences.
- ii. **Executive Committee Meetings**: The next Executive Committee meeting will be on Thursday, August 4th at 3:00 p.m., and the September Executive Committee meeting will be on Thursday, September 1st at 3:00 p.m. Janet said that the group had decided to not have an Executive Committee meeting in July due to the lack of any pressing needs and the many conflicts with vacations and other responsibilities.

11. Other Announcements: There were none.

12. Adjourn: Due to the lack of quorum, there was no formal adjournment. Janet wished everyone a good weekend and a Happy Father's Day, and told them to reach out if they had any ideas or events for Imagine2050. The meeting ended at 10:10 a.m.