

Northern Middlesex Council of Governments
40 Church Street, Suite 200
Lowell, MA 01852

Minutes of Meeting: September 21, 2022

I. The September 21, 2022 meeting of the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments was held in hybrid form via Zoom and in person at the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments office at 40 Church Street, Lowell, Massachusetts. The meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m. with Chair Andrew Deslaurier presiding. The following were in attendance:

Councilors

- Andrew Deslaurier, Chair, Billerica Select Board
- Chris Tribou, Billerica Planning Board
- Mary McBride, Asst. Clerk, Billerica Alternate
- Pat Wojtas, MPO Rep., Chelmsford Select Board
- George Zaharoolis, Chelmsford Alternate
- Phil Thibault, Dracut Alternate
- Daniel Rourke, Lowell City Council
- Gerard Frechette, Treasurer, Lowell Planning Board
- Chuck Walkovich, Pepperell Select Board
- Joyce Morrow, Pepperell Planning Board
- Stephen Themelis, Clerk, Pepperell Alternate
- Jayne Wellman, Asst. Treasurer, Tewksbury Select Board
- Steven O'Neill, Tyngsborough Planning Board
- Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen, Vice Chair, Westford Select Board
- Darrin Wizst, Westford Planning Board

Staff

- Jennifer Raitt, Executive Director
- Justin Howard, Assistant Director / Transportation Program Manager
- Bert Almeida, Financial Officer
- Chris Curry, Transit Manager / Associate Planner
- Christopher Hayes, Housing and Economic Development Planner
- Shrvanthi Gopalan Narayanan, Transportation Planner
- Katrina Garavanian, Executive Assistant

II. MINUTES OF MEETING: AUGUST 17, 2022

The minutes of the August, 2022 meeting were distributed to all Councilors for review. Based on a motion made by Jayne Wellman and seconded by Darrin Wizst, the Council voted to approve the minutes of the August 17, 2022. Steven O’Neill abstained as he was not present for the August meeting.

III. ELECTION OF NMCOG OFFICERS

Chair Andrew Deslaurier conducted the election process for NMCOG officers stating that nomination forms were sent to the Council by mail in July. Clerk Stephen Themelis and Assistant Clerk Mary McBride contacted each nominee to ascertain their interest in serving. Election ballots were provided prior to the meeting for Council consideration and also included in the meeting packet. Chair offered the Council an opportunity to submit nominations from the floor. There were none. Steven O’Neill withdrew his name from the ballot for the position of Assistant Clerk, as did Pat Wojtas for Chair, Chris Tribou for Assistant Treasurer, and Daniel Rourke from Vice Chair. Following withdrawals, one nominee was left for each office. George Zaharoolis motioned to elect the following slate of candidates: Andrew Deslaurier, Chair; Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen, Vice Chair; Jerry Frechette, Treasurer; Jayne Wellman, Assistant Treasurer; Mary McBride, Clerk; Chris Tribou, Assistant Clerk; and Pat Wojtas, NMMPO Representative. Steven O’Neill seconded the motion. On a roll call vote, the Council unanimously voted affirmatively.

Election results:

Chair – Andrew Deslaurier

Vice Chair – Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen

Treasurer – Jerry Frechette

Assistant Treasurer – Jayne Wellman

Clerk – Mary McBride

Assistant Clerk – Chris Tribou

NMMPO Representative – Pat Wojtas

1. Scheduling Officer’s Retreat: Ms. Raitt informed the Council that she plans to schedule an Officer’s Retreat with the newly elected officers for the purpose of strategic planning regarding NMCOG organizational direction, goals and priorities. She will contact officers to schedule a retreat as soon as possible.

IV. NMCOG OFFICE SPACE SUBCOMMITTEE – CALL FOR MEMBERS

Ms. Raitt reminded Councilors that NMCOG’s office lease expires within one year and therefore a need to determine either a longer term lease in the current location or search out a new location. Following her request for Councilors to volunteer for Office Space Subcommittee, Stephen Themelis, Jerry Frechette and Phil Thibault agreed to serve.

V. FINANCIAL REPORT AND WARRANT – INCOME AND EXPENSE STATEMENTS 08/18/2022 – 09/19/2022

Bert Almeida presented the Financial Report and the Warrant for review and approval. Based on a motion made by Jayne Wellman and seconded by Chris Tribou, following a roll call vote, the Council unanimously voted affirmatively to approve the Financial Report and Warrant. The Financial Report is included as Attachment #2.

VI. PERSONNEL COMMITTEE REPORT

Personnel Committee representative Pat Wojtas provided an update to the Council that there are two new hires. Jessica Boulanger, Transportation Planner, begins Monday September 26th. Pat reported that of the two finalists for that position, Jessica was an excellent choice. She has a strong planning background and comes to NMCOG from the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC). Jerry Frechette and Phil Thibault, fellow Personnel Committee members, voiced agreement that Jessica is a great fit for NMCOG. Sustainability Planner, Daniela Garcia Moreno, begins October 11th. Daniela was clearly the best fit of three finalists. The Personnel Committee are confident that Daniela’s training in the area of sustainability is timely and will contribute significantly to NMCOG. Ms. Raitt expressed her thanks to the Committee for their time and dedication to excellence in the hiring process.

VII. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ms. Raitt highlighted various items in the Executive Director’s report. First, she commended Shrvanathi Gopalan Narayanan and Justin Howard on their work toward a new Community Engagement and Outreach participatory process for the building of the next Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). Jennifer stated that it is critical to change the way NMCOG does outreach. She is currently in Washington DC to attend meetings with officials from the Department of Transit and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Federal leadership has impressed the need for MPOs and Regional Planning Agencies across the country to work on equity and community engagement strategies. These strategies should be embedded into all of NMCOG’s programming. NMCOG has organized a subgroup of employees across the organization to look at community engagement and participatory strategies in different ways. There will be more updates to the RTP over the course of the next month and

following the September 28th MPO meeting there will be dates and additional information to share around the RTP process.

Jennifer thanked Chris Curry, NMCOG's Transit Planner who provides support to the LRTA. Chris has completed the lengthy process of an ADA paratransit application review, providing extra support to LRTA as needed. This review is a key element to providing equitable access to transportation.

Jennifer commended David Tilton for putting together a proposal in response to the Town of Westford's request to be part of NMCOG's Weights and Measures program. Westford will add this proposal to their Special Town Meeting this fall. She stated that the Weights and Measures work that David Tilton and Moe Lefebvre do is quite arduous, physical and intensive but an important part of NMCOG support to its communities.

Jennifer stated that there are many upcoming events including a Northern Middlesex Stormwater Collaborative (NMSC) meeting on September 28th to talk about MS4 permitting and share educational strategies with local communities. The Regional Energy Planning Assistance (REPA) workshop will be held October 12th, the day after Daniela begins with NMCOG. Daniela will be jumping right in on training and assistance to the communities. The Mass Clean Energy Center has committed to be on the panel to discuss training needs in communities. Also, this Saturday Jennifer will be participating in a cleanup and restoration effort with Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, Middlesex Community College, and other partners. She invited any councilors to join if available. The cleanup is funded by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation. There is a need for this additional funding in the Greater Lowell area as part of connecting greenways.

Jennifer commended Christopher Hayes for his work on housing planning. The Dunstable and Lowell Housing Production Plans have now officially kicked off. NMCOG is in the process of determining how long it will take to complete those plans. Most likely this will range a couple of years, slightly longer than projected, however the results will have a big impact. In Lowell's case the HPP will dovetail with the Lowell Forward comprehensive planning process, of which Chris is also serving on the Steering Committee as a Lowell resident.

Jennifer mentioned an ARPA webinar that she is working on with Health Resources in Action. The webinar date will probably be late October or early November. Also, the Sierra Club is creating a Northeast Climate Leadership Summit that is being planned in various places across the state and has asked NMCOG to be a part of that group. This will be a weekend program to train local leaders involved in climate planning.

Jennifer reported that she and Justin Howard concluded meetings in all nine of the NMCOG communities. Meetings in each community offered robust and interesting dialogue. The team is learning much about community needs, gaps, areas where we can grow as an organization and make changes in the future. She is excited to embark on that work.

She noted some of the emerging top issues, first being housing which seems to be an issue resonating in all of the communities. This offers an opportunity to be strategic about regional housing, supply and demand and creating a blueprint for how the region can move forward to address housing at all different income levels. She will be working with other regional partners such as The Lowell Plan and Middlesex 3 Coalition - preliminary conversations have begun with these partners - and will provide additional information to the Council when available. The second is infrastructure needs, particularly water and sewer. Jennifer has already begun dialogue with Congresswoman Trahan's office as well as others working on this issue. She informed the Council that there is a lot happening independent of NMCOG with Town/City Managers/ Administrators and others. NMCOG should be involved in those conversations as it is important to many other initiatives. The last topical area which seems to be resonating highly is regional/ municipal service collaboration and finding other ways that NMCOG can support our communities through regional collaboration and coordination of municipal services. We currently have collaborated in areas such as Weights and Measures, and the regional emergency call center, however there are other areas to explore which could be impactful.

Jerry Frechette expressed the need to keep in mind regional outreach and not just the urban center. Chris Tribou requested information regarding ADA applications for paratransit routes for citizens needing assistance to file. Chris Curry provided the address of transportationaccess@lrta.com for submissions, stating that applications are also available online at LRTA.com. He will follow up with Chris Tribou this week. Jayne Wellman complimented Jennifer on her Executive Director's Report, particularly its detail displaying the variety and depth of work that NMCOG staff are conducting. Jayne supported Jerry Frechette's regional comments as well.

VIII. SPECIAL PROJECT PRESENTATION BY JEFF OWEN, AICP, NMCOG REGIONAL PLANNER

Jeff Owen gave a presentation on the Greater Lowell Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan, Phase II. A draft of the plan was shared in advance via web link to the Council. Jeff detailed the Plan, funded in 2020 by an Economic Adjustment Assistance Grant from the EDA and locally matched by NMCOG. The Plan includes four focus areas: Health Care, Economic Development, Housing, and Food Security. Jeff provided background information on Phase I which documented the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and made recommendations to address

specific impacts. Phase I was submitted to EDA in January 2022. Phase II recommendations are focused mainly on resiliency planning and preparation for future pandemics. On September 1, the NMCOG Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Committee voted to recommend that the NMCOG Council approve Phase II for submittal to the EDA. Jeff highlighted key issues and goals in each of the focus areas and provided details on a timeline for submission and approval. The full report is available at nmcog.org/errp. Jeff stated that a vote to accept the final draft of the ERRP Phase II will be held during the October Council meeting following public comments and before submission to the EDA.

The Phase II plan includes an implementation table with a short term through long term timeline and action items to be facilitated through NMCOG and partner agencies. Christopher Hayes mentioned that the next item is the CEDS Annual Report which includes a schedule of goals for 2023. The short term recommendations on the timeline will be integrated into that schedule of goals. Christopher will reach out to appropriate CEDS Committee members and representatives from the towns to ascertain progress on each of those goals and to see how NMCOG can help to ensure goals are prioritized and implemented prior to the end of 2023. Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen inquired on the ability to show commitment from partner agencies when submitting future applications for implementation grants and thus create a higher likelihood of obtaining approval.

Based on a motion by George Zaharoolis and seconded by Jayne Wellman, on a roll call vote, the Council voted unanimously to approve the draft Greater Lowell Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan, Phase II, as presented.

IX. MBTA COMMUNITIES – UPDATE ON FINAL GUIDELINES AND NMCOG ASSISTANCE

Ms. Raitt stated that DHCH finalized and issued the final MBTA Community guidelines in August and hosted a webinar with training by their partners at the state level, Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, Massachusetts Housing Partnership, and NMCOG, alongside some of the neighboring RPAs. NMCOG is now one of the service providers which could mean that if there is additional technical assistance requested from any of its communities NMCOG would be available to provide those services. We are learning about different modeling tools the state will be using, including a location assessment tool and mapping of what the potential district may look like in each community.

Ms. Raitt mentioned to the Council that the team who will be working on this will include herself, Christopher Hayes, Jeff Owen, and Carlin Andrus, who will be helping with mapping, drafting, zoning, public participation processes, analysis of existing conditions and whatever may need to be done for community compliance. The team is still determining a scope of work

for each of the communities who have requested NMCOG assistance. We are adapting what the exact scope will be in each of the four communities who have requested assistance and will also be available to any of the communities who are interested in additional support moving forward. Jennifer gave an example of attending a joint meeting in Chelmsford this week with the Select Board, Planning Board and Finance Committee, giving a presentation and answering questions about how to proceed and next steps. She believes NMCOG will be a partner and support communities in this process. We are currently shaping what our technical assistance will be in the communities that have requested assistance and how we can help additional communities with their needs and requests.

X. COMMUNITY EXCHANGE

Stephen Themelis informed the group that the Town of Pepperell has received a \$200,000 Shared Streets and Spaces grant for Railroad Square which was spearheaded and written by Town Planner, Jennifer Gingras. The Town also received a \$400,000 Complete Streets grant for its rotary. Both projects will begin in the spring, and there was a public meeting last Thursday to present plans to residents and businesses. The Town is looking forward to get these projects underway.

Chuck Walkovich mentioned that the Town of Pepperell has a 4OR vote on the Fall Town Meeting ballot and he asked that any Councilors having experience with 4OR in their own towns share information with him by email to cwalkovich@town.pepperell.ma.us.

Joyce Morrow provided her observations on the lack of communication to educate residents as to facts versus fiction. She expressed the importance of having a mechanism to educate the general public on changes in zoning and bylaws. She also requested and any councilors having tips to counter false education please email her at jmorrow@town.pepperell.ma.us.

Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen informed the Council that the Library Expansion Grant in Westford's construction costs went up 52% from the initial provisional grant and the Town is expecting a tough public response.

Chris Tribou updated the group that the Howe School and Peggy Hannon Rizza Park Project are expected to be completed by the end of October.

XI. REMINDERS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING – OCTOBER 19, 2022

Ms. Raitt mentioned that the Annual Meeting is progressing nicely and will be a different format than in previous years. She requested the Council help promote within their communities as well. She is excited to hear from guest speaker Jay Linnehan, President & CEO of the Greater Lowell Community Foundation, and believes his message will be beneficial to member communities.

2. DATE OF NEXT REGULAR MEETING – NOVEMBER 16, 2022

XII. OTHER BUSINESS NOT KNOWN AT THE TIME OF POSTING OF THIS AGENDA

There was none.

XIII. ADJOURN

Following a motion made by Jayne Wellman and seconded by Steven O’Neill, on a roll call vote the Council voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:15 pm.

CLERK’S CERTIFICATE

I certify that this is a true copy of the Minutes of the meeting of September 21, 2022.

Attest: _____

Mary McBride, Clerk