

Southeastern Massachusetts Commuter Rail Task Force

Minutes of the January 14, 2009 meeting held at the MassHighway District 5 office in Taunton at 4:00 PM.

Present:

John Bullard, Vision 2020	Pat Ciaramella, OCPC
Kristina Egan, EOT	Jed Cornock, OCPC
Lou Gitto, Stoughton	Steve Smith, SRPEDD
Charles Kilmer, OCPC	Nancy Farrell, RVA
Linda Grubb, Lakeville	Karen Winger, OCPC
Jim Whitin, Westport	John Lipman, Lipman Development Strategies
Kyla Bennet, PEER	Priscilla Chapman, Mass Audubon
Byron Holmes, Fall River	Lilia Cabral, SRPEDD
Carolyn Lamarre, TRWA	Alfred Lima, Greater Fall River Land Conservation
Steven Ouellette, Westport	Jill Maclean, New Bedford
George Spatcher, Attleboro Chamber	Roland Hebert, SRTA
Heather Graf, Norton	Ruth Geoffroy, Middleborough
Robert Gregory, MHD District 5	Lisa Pacheco, Freetown
Melinda Ailes, MSBDC	Louise Hardiman, SRPEDD
Robb Johnson, TNC	Mark Hess, New Bedford
Rick King, Norwood	Greg Guimond, SRPEDD
Susan Peterson, Rochester	Nancy Durfee, SRPEDD
Susan Jennings, UMD	Peter Kortright, New Bedford
Richard Shafer, OECD/TIDC	
Todd Castro, Taunton	
Leonard Flynn, Mansfield	
Jim Oliver, Foxborough	

1. Call to Order

Task Force Chair John Bullard called the meeting to order at 4:07 PM.

2. Minutes of the Meeting, December 10, 2008

There was a comment made regarding Stoughton's involvement in priority protection and development being missing from the minutes and being missing from today's presentation. Nancy Durfee stated that Stoughton was included in the regional map.

A comment was made regarding a missing response from last month's meeting. It concerned this project taking credit for saving greenhouse gases and saving wetlands and if this is true, then it needs to be well documented since a number of people are skeptical of this claim. John Bullard asked Robb Johnson to write a brief sentence summarizing this response for inclusion into the minute of December 10.

3. Priority Development Areas/Priority Protection Area

Steve Smith started the discussion by explaining past efforts such as Partnerships for Planning in 1997 and Vision2020 in 2002.

Nancy Durfee continued the presentation by explaining the process of meeting with 27 communities in one year's time. There were over 100 meetings identifying Priority Protection and Priority Development Areas including planning boards, conservation agents, historians, farmers, developers, selectmen and citizens. All 27 maps are online. Jim Whitin of Westport continued the presentation with his town's experience and displayed maps of the results. He reviewed Westport's process and the town's priorities, including farmland, commercial, mixed use and village areas. They included historical and ecological values as well. This will become an ongoing process for the town to continue discussions for zoning, etc.

Nancy Durfee continued to explain the thought and effort put into this process including the mappable layers used as a visual aid, master plans, open space plans, etc. The map layers include water resources, rare species, priority habitats, soils, historic districts, development parcels, protection parcels, roads, utilities, etc.

Steve Smith continued by explaining how all the town's priorities need to be combined for a more regional view. The regional map represents the collective effort of all the communities for the areas to protect and the areas to develop. Feedback is necessary for this to make sense regionally, to identify areas of regional significance. The intent is not to overrule any community, but to assign areas of regional priority and significance.

A question concerning Stoughton's and Easton's priority protection areas being included on the map was asked and answered "yes, they would be added." A comment was made that the Hockomock Swamp is not included on the map.

A question concerning areas already protected being included on the map was asked and answered "yes."

Steve Smith continued by explaining items that can be used as 'regional filters.' These items include consistency among communities, eliminating conflicts between communities, regionally significant areas, connectivity of resources, utilizing existing infrastructure and adherence to smart growth principles. There are inconsistencies in some communities.

John Bullard stated that we need to put our 'regional hats' on. When working with communities, the concern is with that community, but adjustment might have to be made when considering surrounding communities and the region as a whole. We also need to distinguish clearly what is already protected and what is a Priority Protection Area.

It was then explained how complicated the map layers can be and how each town decided to map their own areas and as a result of that, there are variations from town to town.

There were suggestions how to distinguish the already protected areas from the Priority Protected Areas and how important it is to distinguish between these two separate things.

John Bullard pointed out how important it is to identify protected parcels for a more accurate depiction of what is already done and what needs to be done. He then asked if there are suggestions for other regional criteria, to please let the group know.

There was a comment concerning the depiction of the maps and how difficult the map is to see and a question of how accurate the depiction is that we are seeing for the first time today.

The group was informed again that these maps are on the website for further study.

It was pointed out that the Taunton River Watershed has already done a lot of this work and that there are 10 environmental groups that compose the Watershed campaign and it should have been included in this process. There are so many resources out there already and these already identified areas are not on these maps and this regional work has already been done.

It was pointed out that this info was included in the base maps, but is not there now and some of these already protected areas are not really protected.

Kristina Egan explained how this process was intended to be started at the local level and in the course of the process would be working toward consistency and an overall consensus.

There was a comment made that it feels that doing it this way is taking 20 steps back.

Steve Smith responded that the locals had this information, but chose their own priorities.

Sue Peterson explained that each town had a different priority and Rochester's priority was aquifers and this was different from another town's priority, but every value has to be considered, including environmental, business, cultural, historical, etc.

A suggestion was made that the SRPEDD staff needs to look at these and tell us what the common concerns are, where there are discrepancies, how to read these maps and bring it all together for the rest of us.

A comment was made that this should also be looked at as a regional sustainability plan; to look at where we are in terms of water, farms and food, climate change, places for wind farms, etc.

A request was made for Kristina to talk about how this mapping project fits into the larger smart growth plan and how this will be used in the context of the route alternatives. How will this map be used?

Kristina responded that the process was intended to get local priorities from the communities and then the task force, SRPEDD, OCPC, MAPC and Goody-Clancy would take a look and filter down to regional priorities. We need to look at market potential, take sustainability principles that the state has adopted and ask each Cabinet Secretary (i.e. Housing, Transportation, Economic Development, Finance) to give us their perspectives and how to direct state resources. The Cabinet Secretaries want this to become a national model on how to use a major infrastructure project to catalyze smart growth throughout a region. The other hope that we have is that zoning changes can take place through policy change and technical assistance to towns will continue. The state wants to assist with land use planning, as well as education about smart growth, technical assistance with zoning, etc.

John Bullard suggested that due to time constraints, the group needs to get to some meaningful recommendations. Regional planning means local and state elected officials and lots of interest groups to reach a vision and this could influence future attention from the state. This also means looking at other criteria and it involves political power. We need to go back to the municipalities and have them consider boundaries and regional priorities and endorse this as a regional plan.

A comment was made on how the group seems to be wandering and we need to get back to where exactly the train is going and what exactly does protected mean in this context?

John Bullard responded that the assumption is that the entire region will be affected by the train and we need to guide growth at the same time. This is an opportunity for the entire region.

A comment was made that this group will not be choosing the route. It is the Army Corp of Engineers that will be making the choice.

John Bullard suggested that when the funding for this is up for a vote every state representative and state senator will want to know what's in it for their district, for their community, so this process is practical.

A question was then posed as to what is the purpose of this group? The focus should be on the commuter rail. Smart growth is valid, but it's taking over the task force. It seems to be the sole focus.

Steve Smith responded that the group was originally formed as a land use group, but it is not the sole focus of the group.

Kristina Egan stated that this group should be focused on smart growth right now, but we will be doing environmental reviews.

A suggestion was made to change the name of the task force and that the group's input as professionals who represent stakeholders was not included in the ENF.

Kristina stated that we will attach all of the task force minutes to the DEIR and will post them on the website.

A question was posed as to the state's role in filtering or overlaying these maps.

Kristina responded that these maps will become part of the Smart Growth Corridor Plan and will be sent, with all of the group's input, to the state and hopefully, through this process, nothing will be missed. We need to take the state's priorities back to the communities and ask them if they can sign off on those. In the meantime, we need to hear from everyone, we need feedback for a consensus on the regional map.

Discussion ensued on the process involved to do this, time constraints, etc.

A suggestion was made that 3 things need to be done to complete this process. The first thing is that the RPAs need to look at the big map and find the missing links and the discrepancies. The second thing is that we need a meeting of 6 or 7 towns together to get perspectives of abutters and iron out these things. The third thing is that these various groups that have necessary data need to figure out how to convey these data layers to improve the accuracy of these maps.

John Bullard suggested that we could possibly combine some of these steps.

There was concern expressed that the industrial/commercial representation is low and the green representation is high and we need more even levels of engagement.

A question was raised concerning the lack of invitations to these certain groups.

Kristina responded that input is needed from these groups now.

There was a comment made that many of these communities have Master Plans, which include Open Space Plans, and this data should have been utilized.

A request was made of Kristina to make a list of what exactly needs to be accomplished in the next month to take back to the communities and she agreed.

John Bullard then suggested that the RPAs could take and modify a plan to represent the express desires of the official bodies of each town, so by the next meeting, we can figure out what we've missed. SRPEDD can then present what it thinks is a good regional plan and how big a departure that is from the local's plans and how many communities and discrepancies are involved. This would give us another level of specificity in this process.

A comment was made that inclusivity is the key to this process and whatever plan we arrive at is a suggestion, not set in stone.

Kristina reminded everyone of the upcoming station area workshops: Wednesday, February 11, 2009 from 7-9 PM in Stoughton; Thursday, February 12, 2009 from 6-8 PM in Taunton; and on Wednesday, February 18, 2009 from 6-8 PM in Middleboro.*

A reminder for the next 2 Commuter Rail Task Force meetings on Wednesday, February 11 and Wednesday, March 11 was made and Chairman John Bullard adjourned the meeting at 6:15 PM.

*This was a correction/addition to the original minutes.