

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

**Minutes from Council Meeting February 15, 2023**

**I.** The February 15, 2023 meeting of the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG) was held in hybrid form via Zoom and in person at the NMCOG office at 40 Church Street, Lowell, Massachusetts. The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m. with Chair Andrew Deslaurier presiding. The following were in attendance:

Councilors:

- Andrew Deslaurier, Chair, Billerica Select Board
- Mary K. McBride, Clerk, Billerica Alternate
- Pat Wojtas, MPO Rep, Chelmsford Select Board
- Paul McDougall, Chelmsford Planning Board
- George Zaharoolis, Chelmsford Alternate
- Phil Thibault, Dracut Alternate
- Gerard Frechette, Treasurer, Lowell Planning Board
- Chuck Walkovich, Pepperell Select Board
- Joan Ladik, Pepperell Planning Board
- Stephen Themelis, Pepperell Alternate
- James Duffy, Tewksbury Planning Board
- Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen, Vice Chair, Westford Select Board
- Darrin Wizst, Westford Planning Board
- James Silva, Westford Alternate

Staff:

- Jennifer Raitt, Executive Director
- Justin Howard, Transportation Director
- Bert Almeida, Financial Officer
- David Tilton, Sealer of Weights & Measures/ Transportation Planner
- Christopher Hayes, AICP, Housing and Economic Development Planner
- Jeff Owen, AICP, Regional Planner
- Lesley Shahbazian, Executive Assistant

**II. Minutes of Meeting: January 18, 2022**

The Minutes of the January 18, 2022 meeting were distributed to all Councilors for review. Based on a Motion by Steve Themelis, seconded by Mary McBride, on a roll call vote, the Council approved the Minutes of the January 18 meeting as presented.

### **III. Financial Report and Warrant – Income and Expense Statements 2/23/2023**

Bert Almeida presented the Financial Report and the Warrant for review and approval. Based on a Motion by Darrin Wizst and seconded by Mary McBride, following a roll call vote, the Council unanimously approved the Financial Report and Warrant.

### **IV. Annual Budget**

This is Ms. Raitt's first presentation of a budget for NMCOG. Ms. Raitt and Bert Almeida worked together with input from Justin Howard and Chris Hayes. The budget reflects current and anticipated revenue. Jerry gave a report out from the Finance Committee which included Andrew, Jerry, and Bert. The budget being presented shows a projection for increase in revenue from prior years' budget.

A new line for direct staff planning costs was added, which includes an Indirect Rate for staff meetings and other meetings not associated with a specific project.

On the expense side, the budget for IT Services increased. Currently we use PCG – Portsmouth Computer Group in Portsmouth, NH, and have not had a contract. PCG provided NMCOG with a proposal for their essential services package, and also a premium services package which will include help desk support and all other services, cybersecurity costs and a one-time startup fee. Staff will procure and secure a contract for this service. Councilors are welcome to share names of IT companies to encourage responses.

Another expense the Finance Committee discussed was the rent. The number in the budget includes a cleaning cost and a moving fee. Our lease is expiring.

The current budget does not incorporate staff salary increases or adjustments. Ms. Raitt will present these to the Council in June.

With no further comments, based on a Motion made by Jerry Frechette and seconded by Darrin Wizst on a roll call vote, the Council approved the FY24 Budget as presented.

### **V. Personnel Committee Updates**

Pat's updates - Personnel Committee (Pat Wojtas, Phil Thibault, and Jerry Frechette) met last week. The committee has been very busy doing interviews and looking at how staffing can be adjusted and upgraded. Most positions that we are interviewing for are already funded and in the budget. With the Transportation Planner and Sealer of Weights and Measures leaving, we will be hiring for one full-time transportation position and would like to add a new position of part-time

Sealer. The full-time transportation position was included in the mid-year budget update. The part-time sealer position needs to be voted on by the Council.

Chris Curry has announced he will be retiring soon. We will have different titles for some of these positions. We are also looking to outsource traffic counting and will be posting a request for proposals soon. We will also be posting for a Deputy Director.

Based on a Motion by Pat Wojtas, seconded by Mary McBride, on a roll call vote, the Council approved the part-time Sealer position.

Bert Almeida and David Tilton are leaving NMCOG. Both were thanked for their years of service to NMCOG.

## **VI. Strategic Planning process, committee, and timeline-presentation, discussion, and vote**

Following the kick-off meeting, Ms. Raitt met with the Officers and senior staff to discuss a proposed strategic planning process. Ms. Raitt reviewed the 5 phases of the Strategic Planning process. The first step before all others is to form a Strategic Planning Committee to help with the development of the plan. The Committee would consist of the Officers, plus two additional members of the Council, two NMCOG staff, one person from the LRTA and one MPO representative. The Committee would work with Ms. Raitt, the Council and other staff to assist with all aspects of the plan.

Based on a motion by Phil Thibault, and seconded by Mary McBride, the Council unanimously approve the proposed Strategic Planning process and approve the forming of the Strategic Planning Committee.

## **VII. Office Space Update**

Ms. Raitt followed up on her beginning efforts to determine the types of office spaces that are currently available, size, cost, and amenities. The rents range from \$9.50-\$15.00/sq. ft. Ms. Raitt discussed potential improvements with the current landlord, and these improvements would likely be part of any proposal the current property owner might submit as part of the competitive RFP for Lease Space. Ms. Raitt will reconvene the Lease Subcommittee to review the draft RFP.

## **VIII. Report of the Executive Director**

The Executive Director's Report was distributed for review to the Council in advance of the meeting, and was extensive. Ms. Raitt shared some highlights:

Lesley Shahbazian has been hired as Executive Assistant. The Council welcomes Ms. Shahbazian.

The new Deputy Sealer of Weights and Measures, Mark Normandin, has been hired. David Tilton has been training him.

The next Envision 2050 forum is on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and we are hoping for wide attendance from the Council. The transportation team has done excellent work moving this project forward.

Ms. Raitt also thanked Chris Hayes and Jeff Owen for their work on the CEDS and for pulling together the Annual Report. She also congratulated them on a successful formation and implementation of work through the Tourism and Marketing subcommittee.

NMCOG filed for Economic Development District Designation in 2019 and it has been stagnant since that time. Following a meeting staff held with representatives from the Economic Development Administration, staff will be updating the application previously submitted to get it on the fast track for federal approval. This would be a very important designation for NMCOG and the region for economic development, opportunity, resiliency, and recovery.

We are also working on the regional application through the Massachusetts Broadband Initiative Digital Equity Program.

Ms. Raitt thanked Daniela Garcia Moreno who is pulling together the regional energy workshop being held on February 23 at 1:00 PM.

All of our communities have complied with the Action Plan filings for the MBTA Communities program. Three of those communities have an approved plan – Westford, Lowell, and Dracut. NMCOG was able to secure additional funding to work with Tyngsborough to assist with their planning efforts.

Ms. Raitt thanked Daniela and Jeff for their work on the Dracut Open Space and Recreation Plan kick-off and community engagement planning process.

We are still continuing monthly meetings with the Northern Middlesex Managers Group. NMCOG has been providing support with these meetings, including organizing topics, agendas, and providing facilitation.

## **IX. Community Exchange**

Jim Duffy thanked Ms. Raitt and Justin Howard for providing outreach materials for Tewksbury. Informing residents is a great idea to introduce them to NMCOG and our services.

Jerry Frechette informed us that in January in Lowell the Planning Board gave a non-binding recommendation to the City Council to eliminate the parking requirement in the downtown mixed used zone to help the redevelopment of some key properties in that area. The City Council adopted that change.

Westford welcomed their new Town Manager: Kristen Las.

Chuck Walkovich thanked Ms. Raitt for facilitating the Town's first joint Select Board and Planning Board session to get their goals aligned for the Master Plan.

Stephen Themelis spoke about the excellent turnout for an informational meeting in Pepperell about the roundabout at Rt. 111 and Rt. 113. The Town received a \$400,000 redevelopment grant. The project will kick off in the summer.

## **IX. Reminders and Announcements**

- **Council Meeting**  
March 15 at NMCOG Offices at 7PM

## **X. Other Business Not Known at Time of Posting**

## **XI. Adjournment**

### **CLERK'S CERTIFICATE**

I certify that this is a true copy of the Minutes of the meeting of February 15, 2023.



Attest: \_\_\_\_\_

Mary K. McBride, Clerk