



**Committee on Community Resources
and the Northampton City Council**

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Garrick Perry

Vice Chair: Councilor Marissa Elkins

Councilor Alex Jarrett

Councilor Rachel Maiore

Meeting Agenda

Date: November 20, 2023

Time: 5:30 p.m.

212 Main Street

Northampton, MA

The November 20, 2023 Community Resources Committee meeting will be held in hybrid format giving members of the public the opportunity to participate and follow the committee's deliberations either in person or via Zoom. The meeting will be recorded for later broadcast and uploaded to the Northampton Government Video Archive on YouTube.

Live public comment will be available using telephone call-in or video conferencing technology.

"Jurisdiction. Matters affecting the community including economic development, local business, tourism, the environment, the arts, planning, zoning, sustainability, land use, housing and affordability, among others"

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CALLING IN OR JOINING THE MEETING

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MEETING ID: 897 6060 4223

PARTICIPANT ID#: #

PASSCODE: 216457

1. Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call

2. Announcement re: Audio/Video Recording

This meeting is being audio/video recorded.

3. Public Comment

4. Minutes of Previous Meeting

A. Minutes of October 16, 2023

Documents:

[10-16-2023_Community Resources Committee.pdf](#)

5. Updates and Announcements from Committee Members

6. Program Topic: Legislative Overview with Representative Lindsay Sabadosa

Update on Action at the State Level/Discussion of Priority Local and Regional Issues

7. Items Referred to Committee

None

8. New Business

9. Adjourn

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Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Garrick Perry

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Councilor Alex Jarrett

Councilor Rachel Maiore

Meeting Minutes

Date: October 16, 2023, 5:30 p.m.

Council Chambers

212 Main Street, Northampton, MA

- Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5:32 p.m. Chair Garrick Perry convened the meeting. Present were Councilors Garrick Perry, Chair; Marissa Elkins, Vice Chair and Alex Jarrett. Councilor Rachel Maiore was absent upon roll call but joined the meeting at 5:50 p.m. Also present were Senator Joanne M. Comerford and Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler.
- Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**
Councilor Perry announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded.
- Minutes of April 24, 2023 and August 21, 2023**
Councilor Jarrett moved to approve the April 24, 2023 and August 21, 2023 minutes as a group. Councilor Elkins seconded. The motion passed unanimously 3:0 by roll call vote with Councilor Maiore absent.
- Public Comment**
None
- Updates and Announcements from Committee Members**
None
- Program Topic: Legislative Overview with Senator Jo Comerford**
Update on Action at the State Level/Discussion of Priority Local and Regional Issues

Senator Comerford delivered a Powerpoint presentation (see Presentation to Northampton City Council, 16 October 2023, attached) with detailed information about the work of her office, her legislative priorities, the make-up of the Hampshire, Franklin, Worcester district, the FY2024 budget, direct aid to Northampton since 2019 and regional work and issues. She also described the steps in the legislative process and the timetable for the state budget process.

The district presently stretches from Northampton to Winchendon representing an hour and 45 minutes of travel time from end to end. As a result of the 2020 census, Franklin County and particularly Berkshire County lost considerable population, causing the district to expand geographically and adding four towns in Worcester County, making her foothold there stronger.

Within the Senate, she currently chairs the Joint Committee on Higher Education, is assistant vice chair of the Senate Ways and Means Committee and serves as acting chair of the Joint Committee on Agriculture since Senator Gobi's departure to be the Rural Affairs Director. Other memberships include the Committee on Global Warming and Climate Change, Rules Committee and Committee on Racial Equity, Civil Rights and Inclusion.

In discussing her legislative priorities (education, climate resilience and mitigation, health care equity, economic development, affordable housing and transportation), she noted that her agenda is grounded deeply in the 25 communities she represents. "My agenda is your agenda; I get ideas on what bills to file from you," she shared.

In comparison, she stressed the value to her of the council's support for the bills she sponsors; every time they raise their voice as a council it is helpful because she is able to present their statements of position to Senate leadership when advocating for a particular cause. Showing the Senate President a direct request from the people of Northampton - a large city she represents - is different from telling him, 'my heart thinks that we should do this,' she pointed out.

By way of response, Councilor Nash invited the senator to identify three bills she would most like them to get behind.

Senator Comerford cited the following pieces of legislation as among 'the more potentially-interesting issues for Northampton:'

- ❖ Municipal building bill – she believes the state has to have a stake in municipal buildings, including everything from DPW salt sheds to fire stations. The bill would create something like the MSBA (Massachusetts School Building Authority) or MBLC (Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners) for municipal buildings, making the state a joint stakeholder. As the source of funding, she proposes diverting some of the marijuana excise tax before it hits the General Fund (GF). "Let's get the bill for municipal buildings out of committee," she urged.
- ❖ State Action for Public Health Excellence or so-called SAPHE bill. The legislature passed a bill during COVID which set up the public health excellence (PHE) grants Northampton now administers and they have been trying to pass another, she related. Thanks to Commissioner O'Leary, they are now a district. Before COVID, they allowed zip codes to establish public health protections to their shame, she observed. The SAPHE bill was vetoed by Governor Baker in the final moments of his term. They need municipalities to say, 'we need to pass SAPHE into law.'
- ❖ Equitable Approaches to Public Safety (EAPS) - this is another area of advocacy as they gear up for the FY2025 budget. The Division of Community Care is funded through EAPS and this money isn't guaranteed. In Gov. Healey's last budget, she didn't fund EAPS at all. The house funded it at \$200,000, which would have been devastating for Northampton since it receives \$450,000 from that source. They were able to rectify that in the Senate and it's now about \$3.6 million. They have

to make the case to the governor and Massachusetts Department of Public Health Commissioner Robert Goldstein that EAPS is making a huge difference in Northampton for the DCC. Northampton is one of only two municipalities doing straight-up non-police crisis response, mental health first. It is clearly still not solidified in the administration because it wasn't in the governor's budget.

These are three areas where Northampton is uniquely poised to make a statement, she suggested.

Thinking ahead to the next term, Councilor Elkins wondered if it made sense for the council to consider appointing someone as a liaison to the legislature, maybe asking to be included in some of the meetings in the mayor's office. That level of involvement and understanding of what's going on at the state level would be helpful, she suggested. She's had the opportunity now to testify at public hearings and thinks councilors bring something to the table that's different from the executive when they speak.

"You have great gravitas in hearings," Senator Comerford agreed. She would welcome a closer relationship with the council, whether it means appointing someone to come to the meetings with the mayor or meeting separately with her. The answer is 'yes.'

Education Funding

Councilor Jarrett raised the issue of insufficient state funding for education. "How can we get the governor to recognize the situation Northampton is in and how can we help you advocate for that?" he asked.

The Student Opportunity Act of 2019 was long overdue; education reform was 25 years old and school spending had really languished, Senator Comerford reminded. However, the bill disproportionately helped low income, high immigrant, high poverty, high community of color schools. That had to happen since, as with public health excellence, zip codes were determining the quality of student education because they didn't have a foundation budget or a process that would allow the state to have more skin in the game.

A cohort of schools, including districts like Northampton and all of the rural schools like Amherst, Mohawk, Pioneer, etc. were completely left out of the huge gains of the Student Opportunity Act, she confirmed. They're getting some gains but are not seeing the meteoric gains places like Springfield, Chelsea, Fall River and Brockton are seeing.

A little while ago, she partnered with the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) to invite the new education secretary Pat Tutwiler out. Northampton has long been understood to not benefit as fully from the Student Opportunity Act and yet they don't yet have a good fix for why that is.

Northampton is classically called a minimum aid district because it benefits from a 'hold harmless' provision in Chapter 70 funding which prevents it from getting less money each year than it did the year before, which is good. However, it has told almost a false story to city councils and mayors over time. It hasn't told them that their declining population is such that, as the Student Opportunity Act is rolled in, it is being undercut by what is referred to as a 'hold harmless buffer.'

Minimum aid has been going up but student population has been declining. Northampton hasn't seen the impact because, as a minimum aid district, they have continued to receive increasing amounts of Chapter 70 funding even though student enrollment has declined. However, before the district can benefit from the Student Opportunity Act, it has to eat through the 'hold harmless buffer' which has developed over time.

The Student Opportunity Act is being implemented over five to seven years and according to an algorithm which assigns a value to communities based on factors like income and immigration status. Districts like Brockton are assigned a value of 12 while Northampton is a 5 or 6. So state aid is increasing for Northampton but at a slower rate and hasn't yet broken through the minimum aid buffer.

Unless they fix the Student Opportunity Act, some school districts in her senate district will never make it through the minimum aid buffer since that buffer is so great. Her proposal for fixing the Student Opportunity Act is to give greater weight to special education by allowing school districts to count the actual number of students on IEP's, she explained. If they put that into the formula, it would necessitate that Northampton get more money.

"School population is everything" along with special education reforms, she stressed. A special education bill and a rural schools bill with the special education component is pending before the Joint Committee on Education.

Councilor Jarrett encouraged Senator Comerford to let them know when the optimal time is to put their support behind this bill, and she said she would.

Discussion continued, with Senator Comerford responding to questions and comments from councilors on a range of topics. Councilor Jarrett commented on the importance Northampton places on sustainable development and the challenge of trying to accommodate a growing population without increasing reliance on automobiles given the limited access to public transportation. Senator Comerford informed councilors that she expects a pending housing bond bill to address the need for more robust public transportation and to incentivize denser housing development. When it comes, Senator Comerford urged councilors to let legislators know which of its proposals work for the city.

Councilor Jarrett suggested potentially discussing the housing bond bill in Community Resources in November.

7. **New Business**

None

8. **Adjourn.** There being no further business, **Councilor Elkins moved to adjourn; Councilor Jarrett seconded. The motion carried 4:0 by roll call. The meeting was adjourned at 7:09 p.m.**

Prepared By:

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