



## Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

### Committee Members:

*Chair: Councilor Deborah Klemer*

*Vice-Chair: Councilor Garrick Perry*

*Councilor Jeremy Dubs*

*Councilor Quaverly Rothenberg*

### Meeting Minutes

**Date: December 15, 2025, 5:30 p.m.**

**Council Chambers**

**212 Main Street, Northampton, MA**

- Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5:30 p.m., Chair Deborah Klemer called the meeting to order. Present were Councilor Klemer, Chair; Councilor Garrick Perry, Vice Chair and Councilor Jeremy Dubs. Councilor Quaverly Rothenberg was absent on roll call. Also present was Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Vince Jackson and Administrative Assistant Laura Krutzler.
- Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**  
Councilor Klemer announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded.
- Public Comment**  
There was no general public comment.
- Minutes of October 20, 2025**  
Councilor Dubs moved to approve the minutes of October 20, 2025. Councilor Perry seconded. The motion passed unanimously 3:0 by roll call vote with Councilor Rothenberg absent.
- Updates and Announcements from Committee Members**  
This is unfortunately their last meeting, Councilor Perry reminded.

Yes, the two years went quick, and she really enjoyed working with them all, Councilor Klemer responded. "We accomplished a lot," she said. Councilor Dubs said he enjoyed working with them as well.

1<sup>st</sup> night is coming up, Councilor Klemer announced.

- Program Topic: Chamber of Commerce Update**  
*Update on Chamber of Commerce Projects and Initiatives. Discussion with Executive Director Vince Jackson.*

Councilor Klemer recognized Vince Jackson, Executive Director of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce.

Mr. Jackson said he appreciated the invitation; anytime he can talk about the work of the Chamber of Commerce and how it is a bridge to the community, he is all excited.

Mr. Jackson introduced himself as the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce's Executive Director and gave an overview of the organization. He has been in this role for the past six and a half years and it's been his distinct honor to lead this organization. At 106 years of age, it is the oldest and largest of the 12 Chambers of Commerce in Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden counties. He joined in its centennial year and its 500 members are referred to as 'investors' because they invest time, treasure and talent in the organization. Their membership is 75% small businesses, defined as fewer than five employees and less than \$2 million in annual sales. Another one-fifth, or 20% (about 100), are nonprofits, unique for a chamber. The rest are the 'fill-ins,' Cooley Dickinson Hospital (CDH), Smith College, all of the wonderful banking institutions and about a dozen of what he refers to as 'prestige' investors because they create jobs – i.e. Keiter Corporation, Western Mass Heating & Plumbing, DA Sullivan and Wright Builders - a good diverse mix, people who really care about this community. They are a staff of five with about 100 volunteers. The chamber is governed by a 17-member board of directors, and five standing committees meet every month.

The chamber has membership in a national organization called 'ACE,' Association for Chamber of Commerce Executives, of which the Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce Executives (MACE) is a state affiliate. Agency directors stay in touch with these agencies for organizational guidance, workshops and best practices, he shared. He is honored to serve as one of 14 directors on the board of directors of MACE.

The Chamber delivers three newsletters: two weekly publications, the Community Connector and the Northamptonist, and a quarterly, more investor-focused publication, Chambers News. The Northamptonist is out every Thursday and lets people know what's happening on the weekend. The Connector comes out every Tuesday. They manage these with a small team of five staff who also manage three social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Linked in.

The Chamber's Mission is to promote a thriving economy and community governed by the belief system that when the economy thrives, the community thrives. The two key words are economy and community. From an economic standpoint, the Chamber has two engines. One of the five standing committees is the Economic Development Committee, a volunteer group of about 40 engaged members, including residents. The old myth is that someone has to have a business to be a member, but their organization is open; anyone can participate and engage.

### **ECONOMIC ENGINES**

The two economic engines are the Northampton gift card program and the tourism program, he continued. The gift card program keeps local dollars local by encouraging residents, visitors and the community to spend with their local businesses. Businesses have to be Chamber members to accept the gift card as a merchant and 130 merchants are currently enrolled in the program, which is in its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. At the Doozy Doo Parade, he was a walking sandwich board advertising the program's 20<sup>th</sup> year. When he asked the Boston-based gift card processing company who they could turn to to learn more about this program, he was told Northampton is the gold standard. No one came close to the sales they do annually. They average \$355,000 in annual gift card sales, representing about 7,000 cards a year, and send redemptions to merchants of about a quarter million. People have seven years to use a card.

Sales have grown 7% year to date, but redemptions are down 7%. It is a great barometer for how the overall economy is doing. They like to see the mirror effect; if sales are up 7%, they love to see redemptions up 7%. They are seeing some softness in the economy through gift card redemptions, he observed.

In December alone, they do 50% of sales. The 2<sup>nd</sup> peak season is graduation and Mother's Day/Father's Day, teacher appreciation timeframe in May/June and the beloved Keiter card promotion that happens in August.

From a tourism standpoint, they are the parent or home for the Hampshire County Regional Tourism Council's (HCRTC's) Tourism and Visitor Bureau. While the gift card program is about \$355,000, the tourism program is about \$300,000. They get a state grant every year through the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism to promote Hampshire County as a visitor and tourist destination. The office promotes all 20 counties and the four cities and towns of the Greater Northampton Chamber, Amherst, South Hadley/Granby and Easthampton. A dedicated advisory council gives direction on what's hot and important to see so all of their county assets and attractions are featured in its marketing. A local visitor guide is in distribution all the way down to Washington, DC, in Grand Central Station in New York City (NYC) and up and down the '91 corridor.

As fun facts: Hampshire is the only county in MA that does not border a body of water or another state. "We're locked in," he reminded. "We are Massachusetts through and through." The other fun fact is that this is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary year for Hampshire County RTC. "We're young, we're strong and we're growing," he reported. The county had domestic visitor spending last year of \$231 million (up 2.5%) which drives local and state taxes of \$21 million dollars (up 2.1%). Folks who work in the hospitality industry have earnings of \$78 million, up 3.4% over last year. This industry supports about 3,000 jobs, up 0.3%. "We're growing on all major metrics and cylinders," he shared. About four million visitors are welcomed to Hampshire County every year. He mentioned the strength of the Five-College area, which has students representing all 50 states and 120 countries. Their brand is, 'the other side of Massachusetts.'

When he goes home, he is always asked "How's Boston?" and has to explain that he lives 90 miles away. They have so much fun with that tag line and part of their branding that says 'the other side of MA.'

The RTC primarily targets visitors geographically with Boston, NYC, Providence, New Haven (including Hartford /New Haven) and Philadelphia their top geographic markets. Philadelphia used to be an emerging market; a year ago, it ranked #12. Now, because of investments they have made, it is their #5 market. Washington, DC is another city in which they have made investments because of the Valley Flyer with the visitor guide being distributed at Union Station in Washington, DC, 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in Philadelphia as well as Grand Central in NYC. "We can't keep them on the shelves."

Canada and the UK are considered two international hot spots. Because of the daily nonstop flight between Bradley and Dublin they keep their eye on Ireland too. International travel to the states right now is down for a whole host of reasons.

Who are the visitors? They primarily skew older: 45+ but affluent households, usually married couples without children making \$100,000 or more a year. Why do they come? Three main reasons: their arts and culture scene and their festivals and performance venues as well as outdoor recreation and, of course, the scenic beauty with fall foliage. That's how they market the county and promote it. It is a welcoming place for anybody and everybody. They have a dedicated website [visithampshirecounty.com](http://visithampshirecounty.com).

A 'visitor' is defined as someone who is 50 miles away. When they market, they are not talking to people who live here, they are attracting people outside of the county. That's where the marketing dollars go. Per the terms of their grant, they can't promote to Northampton residents. For some of their marketing campaigns, they

partner with the Back Porch Festival, one of their biggest and most economically-driven partners. It can get people to come here for about three days, and they always invest about \$5,000 to support its marketing efforts. They do the same thing with the Northampton Jazz Festival. Some of the newer events they've invested in are the Doozy Doo Parade and the Great Northampton Haunt. They are now running a campaign featuring a museum trail with venues such as the Eric Carle and Emily Dickinson Museums and Smith College Museum of Art and botanical gardens. That campaign is going bonkers; they are really getting a lot of clicks and traffic to their website.

The grant is written into statute. They are one of 16 regional tourism councils across the Commonwealth. He has the honor of serving as the co-chair of the RTC collaborative where all 16 of them get together to talk about drawing tourism to the area.

The other tenet of their mission is community, not just for businesses but for the broader community. Their three C's are Connection, Collaboration and Community. They have three signature programs and all of them either create connections between individuals, foster collaboration across organizations or build community.

The first of the three signature programs is their monthly networking event, "Arrive at 5," which happens the first Wednesday of every month except August, when folks are on vacation. This event attracts a hundred folks on average and is hosted by various members.

Another program is the 'Link and Learn' educational program. Anyone can come and learn about a topic. Since the new strategic plan six years ago, all of their programs are free and open to the public. A recent program featured Jennifer Ewers, a financial advisor with Edward Jones, for a 'Link and Learn' on Social Security.

The third program is called netWORKS with the emphasis on 'work.' It is a networking opportunity in which they recruit volunteers to support one of their nonprofits in a day of service. Last Thursday, they helped build a Habitat for Humanity (H4H) house on Route 66. Members put in about 60 volunteer hours putting in slats for a ceiling. Days of service benefit the nonprofit community and have been held with the Western Mass Food Bank, Northampton Survival Center and Camp Norwich. They have a base of 100 volunteers.

Mr. Jackson highlighted the magazine and online annual publication, Thrive, so named because it promotes a thriving community. When the economy thrives, the community thrives and vice versa. He is very proud of this magazine. It is a revenue-sharing opportunity which allows them to diversify their revenue stream and not rely so heavily on dues.

They are now in a position where they are taking advantage of every grant opportunity they can find. The state is still offering grants. Through the great leadership and commitment of Senator Jo Comerford, the chamber received an earmark of \$40,000. It was frozen for a while, but the governor has now released all earmarks. The chamber will deploy it to help promote the Ice Art Festival in conjunction with the Downtown Northampton Association (DNA) and shore up the marketing of the POP program to keep people coming downtown during the Picture Main Street construction process. Money is also being used to provide lunch to families in need during the February school break in partnership with the Northampton Survival Center and Bueno Y Sano.

He is also excited about the Destination Development Capital Grant, a program for small nonprofits like the chamber through which they received \$38,000. This is their second grant. The first grant paid to upgrade, paint and replace carpet in the chambers office and the second grant will allow them to replace the 20-plus year old roof, repave the parking lot to get rid of puddles and install an alarm system.

The Chamber office at 99 Pleasant Street is a Visitors Center with a public restroom and place folks can pick up passes for First Night and bags for Bag Day. With his formal presentation ended, the director offered to take questions.

Councilor Dubs left at 6:05 p.m.

Councilor Perry said he loved the idea of the museum trail tour. He and his family just had the pleasure of going to Mass MOCA. Part of what they enjoyed was that free passes were available at Forbes Library. He wondered if the chamber had paired with any of the libraries to promote this tour.

They have not, but they have an ongoing partnership with Forbes Library, Mr. Jackson confirmed. The library is getting ready to remodel and renovate the Coolidge Museum; in fact, that's where the board of directors meets every month. With the new amphitheater there, they will be doing more to promote the library.

Councilor Perry said he worked with the executive director on the Vibrancy project which he believes is the kernel that led to POP. He asked what other work the chamber is doing for POP.

The chamber is part of the team/steering committee to make sure information is available, Jackson said. The team meets monthly and has four subcommittees, including a fundraising committee. The city applied for and received funding from two sources, the Casino commission (\$75,000) and another as well as the \$40,000 state earmark. Marketing is one activity. The team is comprised of city folks (Office of Planning and Sustainability and Mayor's office staff) and business owners such as Thornes. It is great to have that input and also the input of residents who are champions of the project to help them navigate some of the uncertainty and unknowns and, quite frankly, misinformation 'lurking around.'

He is excited that the formula from the Vibrancy project is transcending over to this new opportunity, Mr. Jackson volunteered. He is glad to have technology on their side to push information out to keep residents abreast of what's happening and when. Instructions for signing up to receive text messages are on the city website.

Councilors asked questions and offered comments and Mr. Jackson fielded additional questions from the public.

'Arrive at 5' happens the first Wednesday of every month from 5 to 7 p.m., Mr. Jackson advised. In January, it will be at the Foodbank of Western MA in Chicopee. If anyone has not had an opportunity to visit its new facility, it is awesome. All of their programs are open to the public free of charge, he stressed.

Director Jackson spoke of other chamber initiatives, such as its partnership with the local Five Colleges, three of which are greater Northampton chamber members. Mount Holyoke College (MHC) recently hosted an 'Arrive at 5.' The chamber has a program to place students in local businesses for internships. If a business is unable to pay, funding is available to pay the student. The hope is that the student's intern and collegiate experience will be so great that they will decide to stay in the area. UMass Amherst also has a strong entrepreneurial program, which the chamber supports in different ways.

Folks in the hospitality industry are very serious about youth programs and partnering with the colleges too, he continued. One initiative is to bring more youth sports to expose youth outside the Valley to the area. The chamber partners with the Norwottuck Rail Association to promote biking and help finish rail trails across the Commonwealth.

Among other things, Councilor Perry said he has been working with the Youth Commission and they really want to have a Juneteenth celebration. He asked if directing them towards funding or grant opportunities would be something the chamber could help with.

That probably wouldn't be in their wheelhouse because they are new at the grant game, Mr. Jackson said. He would start first with their state elected officials and encourage them to look to other communities with successful celebrations. For example, seeing what Juneteenth looks like for the Freedom Trail in Boston and what its funding source is. The chamber can help facilitate introductions. "We are a matchmaker when we know we are not an expert," he noted. "We know someone."

Councilor Klemer thanked Mr. Jackson for his presentation.

**7. Items Referred to Committee**

None.

**8. New Business**

None.

**9. Adjourn. There being no further business, Councilor Perry moved to adjourn. Councilor Klemer seconded. The motion carried 2:0 by roll call. The meeting was adjourned at 6:33 p.m.**

Prepared By:

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