

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Municipal Finance Committee

Meeting Minutes

September 13, 2021

Committee Present: Chair Ed Munch, Art Schwenger, Doug McNally, Kyle Hanlon

Others: Elise Cannon, Robert O'Connor, Henry Art, Board Chair; Lisa Hayden, Agent

Next meeting: Tentative date October 13, 2:00 PM

Called to order by Ed Munch 3:04 PM

1. Discussion of proposed revisions to Massachusetts Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program formula – any votes needed to make recommendation to the full Board

Purpose of meeting stated by Ed: Committee to make recommendation to full board as to state Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) inequalities for member communities.

Doug McNally discussed how October Mt. State Forest sends more money to Lenox than to Windsor based on their higher tax rate.

Ed Munch referenced Susan Bump (State Auditor) study demonstrating existing PILOT rate is around \$9.00 per thousand while \$14.00 is a more realistic rate. Things have changed significantly since the program's inception in 1910. Believes MTWP should send letter to Boston applying pressure to state legislature to change program formulas.

Doug McNally suggested applying flat rate to level playing field between towns with higher tax rates and towns with lower, while keeping a "no harm" policy wherein no payments drop below current levels (auditor's report notes some towns receive lower payments even if the amount of eligible land has not changed).

Bob O'Connor preferred equal value per acre and wondered if land with buildings such as state colleges have higher rates.

Meeting was disrupted for period of time from Zoom Bombing. Meeting reconvened, less Ed Munch, who rejoined meeting via phone call.

Bob O'Connor noted the PILOT fund is a fixed amount and proportionately, much more money goes to eastern part of state. He suggested possible financial relief for communities through timber sales revenue in conjunction with DCR.

Hank Art suggested attaching value to acreage using recreational use and open spaces as criteria and questioned if buildings on land has any more value than land in its natural state.

Doug McNally agreed and added sequestration as an added value as well.

Art Schwenger noted costs incurred to local communities to maintain roads and public services to support tourist economy. Doug told of Windsor's 2.6 million dollar cost to upgrade town road that provides access to state forest.

Ed Munch agreed town infrastructure cost is an issue, but small when compared to land coming off taxes rolls when state purchases it. Suggested legislative change to allow state owned land with road frontage to be sold, allowing it to become taxable again while not affecting the bulk of the state-owned parcel.

Doug offered to contact Senator Hines office for more information as to any possible pending legislation.

Ed stated there is no current bills being considered by the House and wants a more formal set of instructions from the whole board prior to the municipal finance committee taking any action.

Henry Art will put formulating committee rules and purview on agenda for the Executive Committee meeting.

Bob O'Conner referenced s.1875 as current bill under consideration pertaining to PILOT program, sponsored by Senator Hinds. The Partnership could consider offering testimony at public hearing.

Ed suggested vote on recommendation, moved by Art Schwenger, seconded by Ed to the effect of:

Recommend to the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Executive Committee that members of the board meet with elected officials to raise concerns about the inequities and inadequacies of the current PILOT formula for towns (as outlined in a recent state auditor's report) and authorizes the Municipal Finance committee to investigate and advocate for suggestions for revising the formula to address these issues.

Approved unanimously.

Kyle Hanlon asked for information concerning apportionment of funds but withdrew question as it was out in front of committee's current assigned task.

Henry Art noted that eventually these conversations will include conservation restrictions and their tax liability to small towns.

3. Discuss drafting of Municipal Finance Committee mission statement to guide work

Ed Munch stated that the Committee's mission statement going forward should be researched and recommendations to the main board, based on the motion as stated.

4. Homework for next meeting to prepare for focused discussion: Review parts of the 2015 MTWP Plan, that are pertinent to the Municipal Financial Sustainability Standing Committee

Ed Munch suggested homework for next meeting to be consideration of committee guidelines and focus for future meetings.

Henry Art thanked Ed for volunteering to chair committee, and asked standing committees to review overall MTWP plan and offer ideas for revisions and updates to initial plan, to be reviewed by public and formalized by full committee in early 2022.

5. Schedule next committee meeting

Lisa Hayden stated next executive committee scheduled for Sept 23 at 2:00 PM., with another tentatively scheduled for October 13 with possible attendance by members of our legislature.

Ed Munch would like to see committee meeting to be schedule as soon as possible after the executive committee meeting of the 23rd. At that time the committee's role will be defined and can move forward with contacting representatives, researching and making recommendations.

Joint meeting with Executive Committee proposed by Lisa Hayden for Wednesday October 13, at 2:00 PM.

All in attendance authorized sharing of phone numbers/email addresses to committee chair.

Robert O'Connor mentioned Senator Hinds bill s.1880 concerning chapter 61 and global warming trust fund payments, and possible revenue steam for communities.

Brief discussion of techniques to filter public into zoom meetings with email responses requesting access to mitigate future zoom bomb events at meetings.

Ed Munch motioned to adjourn at 4:19 PM, seconded by Art Schwenger, all in favor.

-Respectfully Submitted by Kyle Hanlon