

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) Advisory Committee Meeting

February 5, 2019 (January 29, 2019 meeting cancelled due to snow)

Berkshire East Ski Lodge, 66 Thunder Mountain Road, Charlemont, MA

Staff: Tom Matuszko (BRPC), Bob O'Connor (EOEEA), Peggy Sloan (FRCOG), Alyssa Larose (FRCOG), Zachary Feury (BRPC)

Members Attending: Greg Cox (Hawley), Larry Flaccus (Shelburne), Kyle Hanlon (North Adams), Jay Healy (Charlemont), Stacy Kontrabecki (Buckland), Beth Girshman (Conway), Ed Munch (Peru), Joe Nowak (Adams), Jim Perry (DRWA), Mark Phelps (New Ashford), Walt Quist (Rowe), Keith Ross (MA Society of Foresters), Art Schwenger (Heath), Melissa Patterson (FLT)

Others Attending: Tony D'Agostino (Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism), Peter Tomyl (Mohawk Trail Association Regional Tourism Council), Marti Ferguson (Buckland Board of Health), Bruce Lessels (Zoar Outdoor)

1. Introductions

T. Matuszko commenced the meeting at 6:08 p.m. A round of introductions followed. T. Matuszko introduced Zach Feury, a new planner at the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission who will be assisting with the MTWP project.

2. Review and Approval of October 16, 2018 Meeting Notes

E. Munch motioned to approve the October 16, 2018 MTWP Advisory Committee Meeting Notes. K. Hanlon seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, with M. Phelps abstaining.

3. Presentation on the Value of Tourism and Challenges to Increasing Tourism in the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Region

T. Matuszko noted that an area of concentration for the MTWP project is natural resource based recreational opportunities. B. O'Connor introduced Tony D'Agostino, Director of Research from the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT). D'Agostino explained the role of MOTT is to get people interested in coming to Massachusetts. A traveler is defined as someone traveling more than 50 miles or who stays overnight. The point is to track new money being spent in a region. The definition also allows comparison between states. Massachusetts compares favorably when it comes to tourism dollars.

D'Agostino noted that travelers can be counted in two ways – number of people and spending. Number of people is collected by survey and is difficult to estimate. Spending is easier to estimate because people leave a paper trail that can be validated. D'Agostino presented statistics on the origins of

travelers. 75% of domestic visitors are coming by car. New England states represent 56% of visitors, Mid-Atlantic states comprise 23%, and smaller amounts are coming from farther away. The #1 reason for domestic travelers to come to MA is to visit family and friends.

Historically about 1/3rd of international travelers originated in western Europe, and 1/3rd were from Canada, but this is shrinking. The number of Chinese visitors is growing tremendously, and MA accounts for 9.5% of all Chinese visitation to the U.S. The #1 reason for international travelers to visit MA is for vacation, but a close second is to visit friends and family. Students and travel for work does not count. D'Agostino explained that surveys are used over a two-year average to smooth out any volatility in the data. Massachusetts ranks 7th in international overseas visitors. MA ranks 11th in Canadian visitors. MA does not spend as much on marketing to international travelers as some states.

In 2017 the economic impact of travel in MA was \$23 billion, with domestic travel accounting for 82% of the spending. MA ranks 12th in direct economic impact from travel and tourism, which is huge for a small state. More populated states get more visitors. The things travelers are spending money on are transportation, lodging, food, entertainment, and general trade. Domestic travelers spend more on travel (international travelers pay for airfare in their own country) and international travelers spend more on general retail and trade. Tourism spending generates a combined \$1.5 billion in State and local taxes. Another \$2 billion goes to federal taxes. Approximately 150,000 jobs in MA are supported by travel and tourism.

On the county level, close to \$600 million was spent in by travelers to Franklin and Berkshire Counties in 2017. Most of this spending was in Berkshire County. Approximately 4,800 jobs were supported in the region. Jobs are counted based on the percent of business attributed to travelers. Jobs can also be estimated by city and town. MOTT works with the regional tourism councils to review taxes, events, attraction, etc. for each town in the region and estimate what percent would be attributable to tourism. The data can show the importance of tourism to a region or town in terms of jobs and tax revenue.

D'Agostino explained how meal, retail, lodging, and other sales can be tracked through credit card data and other assumptions. He noted that the primary purpose of international overseas visitors to come to Franklin and Berkshire Counties is for vacation (42%), followed by visiting friends and family (22%). Forty-eight percent (48%) of domestic travelers visit the region to see friends or family. Canadian visitors come for holiday and vacation (58%) and to see friends and family (16%). It is important to understand what motivates people to come to a region so that marketing can be tailored.

D'Agostino presented the top activities visitors partake in when in MA. International travelers partake in outdoor activities more frequently (22.6%) than domestic travelers, according to surveys. Follow up surveys were conducted in 2016 for travelers to western MA. The top three activities were entertainment (79%), art & culture (70%) and nature/outdoor activities (66%). Nature and outdoor activities along with sports and recreation (17%) skew higher in western MA than in eastern MA. When asked what the region can do to entice people to come back, 52% said nothing, they will come back no matter what. Another 38% chose specials and deals, while only 4% chose improve awareness of the area. A question was asked if MOTT has data on where people are coming from who visit western MA.

D'Agostino said that he can send that information to the group. B. Lessels noted that 40% of visitors to Zoar Outdoor are coming from Boston, and about 10-12% of visitors are international. Visitors from Boston to our region get counted in the data as domestic travelers.

The top reasons identified from the survey for visiting western MA were presented, which included scenic beauty (61%), relax/activity balance (56%), and convenient (54%). Credit card spending statistics were collected but there are some issues with the data. In general, top origins of travelers to western MA are from the Boston area, New York City, northern New Jersey, and Hartford, CT. Top spending categories are for transportation and food. Spending on lodging is low.

MOTT can help with marketing. MOTT works with a lot of organizations across the State. While the budget for marketing is small, the MOTT and RTCs do a lot of online advertising. MOTT also brings in journalists to write about the area. The challenge is trying to communicate what you have here.

D'Agostino then answered questions from meeting participants. He identified other methods of marketing, such as email blasts, blogs, digital advertising, and niche marketing. It is difficult to track the success of specific marketing efforts. A comment was made that the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Northampton Chamber have worked with a firm in Springfield to run a campaign to market this area for outdoor recreation, and this effort could tag on or work with that campaign.

The Mohawk Trail Regional Tourism Council (RTC) buys billboards annually in Boston. Data shows 40-60% of visitors to hotels in the region come from the Boston area. The billboards feature simple icons of things like rafting, the Clark Museum, etc. with a tag line like "a short drive to a world away." In this area there are not a lot of large lodging properties, and smaller places don't report data. The RTC can also help coordinate fan trips.

A comment was made that an inventory of outdoor recreation assets, like trails, boat launches, parking, camping, etc. would be helpful in determining where there are gaps. Bathrooms are always a need. Tourism and marketing training for businesses would be helpful. Businesses need to market the region and reach wider audiences.

4. Update on Legislation for the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership and Next Steps

T. Matuszko passed out a letter from Secretary Matthew Beaton and provided an update on the legislation. The MTWP legislation passed last summer, but the governor amended a portion of it to include provisions for compliance with State Open Meeting, Ethics and Finance laws. The amendment with this language passed in the later part of the year, and a copy of the legislation is available. A question was asked about where to find the legislation online. B. O'Connor said he will send a link to the Committee. It is Section 89 of Chapter 209 of the acts of 2018. The amendment is in Chapter 279.

T. Matuszko said the next step is for communities to opt-in to participate in the MTWP. There are two ways to opt-in – through a vote of the Select Board/Mayor or a vote by Town Meeting/City Council. MTWP Advisory Committee members are asked to provide guidance on how to proceed in their town. Eleven towns need to opt-in before the partnership can receive funding which is the next hurdle.

Discussion ensued on what types of materials would be helpful to bring to Select Boards. Staff were requested to provide a summary of the legislation, an outline of possible benefits of the partnership, and a draft Town Meeting warrant article and Motion for a Select Board vote. Each town may have a different process and staff will rely on MTWP Advisory Committee representatives to help with how to approach their town.

Discussion followed about benefits of the Partnership, and how some towns may be more interested in some of the programs and not others which is fine. The MTWP was set up to have different options and towns will oversee what programs are offered given funding availability. The timeline for opting in was reviewed. Towns have 2 years from the effective date of the legislation, and after that, can opt-in after 5 years.

It was noted that discussions have started around Federal legislation, but at least 11 towns need to “opt in” and a funding commitment from the State would be very helpful. Staff are talking with the U.S. Forest Service about existing programs that could provide some resources. A question was asked about how to tie the MTWP effort into Senator Hinds bill to create an Office for Outdoor Recreation in Western MA. It was noted that it would be a complimentary effort, and a suggestion was made to send a formal letter from the MTWP Advisory Committee to the legislators that the Partnership would like to coordinate with them on the creation of a recreation office in Western MA. The Rural Policy Advisory Commission and Rural Jobs Act bills are all complimentary. The Advisory Committee agreed to a formal letter once enough towns have opted in.

5. Committee Member Comment/Public Comment/Other Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance of the meeting/Adjourn

K. Ross commented that getting support from the Conservation Commission and Board of Assessors when working on a CR approval is helpful, and getting support from these groups could also be helpful for the partnership.

The next meeting date was tentatively scheduled for May 14, 2019.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.