



Metro Regional Coalition Agenda

January 9, 2024

Noon to 1:30 pm

Hybrid meeting – In Person at GPCOG and Via ZOOM Conferencing

If attending via Zoom, please click the link below to join the webinar:

Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87406527810>

Webinar ID: 874 0652 7810

This meeting will be conducted in person and remotely in accordance with the requirements of GPCOG Executive Committee policy, [LD 1772, PL 2022 Ch. 666](#), and [1 MRSA Chapter 13, Subchapter 1](#).

Participants are reminded that this meeting will be recorded and posted on the GPCOG website.

1. Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Chair Michael Foley will call the meeting to order, remind attendees that the meeting is being recorded, and ask attendees to briefly introduce themselves.

2. Acceptance of minutes from the December 12, 2023 (Attachment A)

The minutes from the December 12, 2023 MRC meeting are found below as Attachment A. A motion for acceptance is in order.

3. Public Comment (3 minutes per person)

Residents of the region are invited to share up to 3 minutes of comment on any topic, including items on the agenda.

4. Municipal Workforce – Challenges & Opportunities (30 minutes)

Staff report: Peter Osborne, Maine Municipal Association’s Director of Educational Services, will join us for a conversation about municipal workforce challenges and how to meet them. Peter will share MMA’s perspectives and lead a discussion about emerging strategies that members can consider.

Action: Information and exploration of how Metro Coalition members can meet their workforce needs.

5. Economic Development Update (15 minutes)

Staff report: Paul Johnson, GPCOG’s Economic Development Director, will give members an update on the progress GPCOG has made administering two recent contracts from the Department of Economic and Community Development, both providing grants to new and expanding Maine businesses.

Action: Information and insight into funding availabilities for local employers.

6. Legislative Update (15 minutes)

Staff report: Belinda Ray will provide updates on three legislative issues that directly impact our region:

- [LD 1721](#), *An Act to Create Transitional Housing Communities for Homeless Populations in the State*, submitted by Senator Jill Duson in collaboration with the MRC.
- [LD 602](#), *An Act to Provide Regional Support to Deliver State and Federal Programs to Cities and Towns in the State*, legislation to strengthen regional planning organizations in Maine.
- General Assistance reform, following up last month’s meeting with Rep. Graham with any recent developments.

Action: Learn about recent legislative developments and prepare for engaging in legislative action in the upcoming session.

7. MRC Member Roundtable: Extreme Weather (15 minutes)

Staff report: For today’s meeting, this standing agenda item will ask Metro Coalition members to share their thoughts on the impact of recent extreme weather events, and the capacity of municipal staff and resources to continue to deal with accelerating damage from weather events.

Action: Information and an opportunity to share member experiences with each other.

8. Adjourn

Upcoming Meetings (all Noon to 1:30 pm both in person and remote via Zoom)

February 13, 2024

March 12, 2024

April 9, 2024

May 21, 2024

June 18, 2024

Attachment A

Metro Regional Coalition Meeting Minutes

December 12, 2023

In Attendance:

Name	Affiliation
Michael Foley	Westbrook
Hope Cahan	Falmouth
Nathan Poore	Falmouth
Penny Jordan	Cape Elizabeth
Matt Sturgis	Cape Elizabeth
Virginia Wilder-Cross	Gorham
Ephrem Paraschak	Gorham
Misha Pride	South Portland
Scott Morelli	South Portland
Mark Dion	Portland
Danielle West	Portland
Jim Gailey	Cumberland County
Gail Kezer	Office of Senator Angus King
Sarah Lawrence	Office of Rep. Chellie Pingree
Guest	Representative Anne Graham
For GPCOG	Kristina Egan, Chris Hall, Belinda Ray, Matt Panfil, Dani Deason, Tom Bell

1. Welcome and introductions

Chair Michael Foley called the meeting to order at 12:04 pm and welcomed everyone. He welcomed new Metro Regional Coalition members Cape Elizabeth Councilor Penny Jordan, South Portland Mayor Misha Pride, and Portland Mayor Mark Dion. Attendees gave brief introductions.

2. Acceptance of minutes from the November 21, 2023 meeting

Hope Cahan moved acceptance of the minutes of the November 21, 2023 MRC meeting seconded by Matt Sturgis. The motion passed without objection.

3. Public Comment

None.

4. Update on Portland Shelters and Encampments

Portland City Manager Danielle West shared information about Portland's two shelters, as well as the current situation at encampments in the city. She discussed next steps in Portland, and how neighboring municipalities can continue to support the city as it supports in the unhoused.

West detailed that the new shelter on 166 Riverside Street, plus the upcoming addition of 50 more beds to the existing Homeless Services Center, has opened up capacity to shelter people living in tents in Portland. As of the meeting date approximately 120 tents remained in the city, but not every tent is occupied – some are used for storage.

Dozens of tenters have moved to the HSC already, and more are expected to make the transition in the coming weeks. City staff and nonprofit partners are continuing to collect information about unhoused people in Portland and continuing to try to remove or reduce barriers to using shelter beds for tenters (for example by moving the HSC curfew from 9 to 11 pm).

While the Council recently reaffirmed its rules against outdoor camping, in 2024 the City Council's Health & Human Services Committee, Chaired by Councilor Fournier, will examine a range of solutions for unhoused people.

West concluded by asking again that surrounding communities do all they can to help meet the needs of the unhoused, and to support the City of Portland as it works to provide services to everyone who needs them.

Mayor Mark Dion shared his comments, asking members to engage with Councilor Fournier if they have any helpful suggestions or innovative ideas.

Dion observed that Portland is dealing with a nationwide challenge serving the unhoused. At a recent conference at Harvard, Dion learned every city is struggling on its own to deal with homelessness, that many cities felt they had waited too long to address encampments, and that a state or regional solution was critical to long-term sustainable outcomes.

Mayor Foley agreed, saying that many decision makers in Augusta see this as a 'Portland' problem, but in reality, it is not – it's a regional and a state problem. He said any workable solution will spread the cost and effort of supporting the unhoused across an entire region, and the state.

Foley also said that General Assistance was never designed to provide long term housing, and a new approach is needed at the State House. He observed that if asylum seekers are seen as a benefit to Maine's need for new workforce, the state has the responsibility of making sure they are appropriately housed.

Member discussion followed and included the following:

- It takes too long to stand up a new shelter facility.
- Portland staff collects information about where unhoused people originate – the proportions of unhoused people from Portland/from other Maine communities/from outside Maine remain roughly as they have been, about one-third each.
- Many thanks were extended to all the municipal staff from neighboring communities (and from further away) who volunteered to help set up 166 Riverside at the end of November.

- Members were reminded that their voices matter at the State House, and they were encouraged to engage with legislators to support housing and General Assistance initiatives that respond to the issues discussed.
- Mayor Dion raised the issue of the drug crisis and its impact on unhoused people. With more support needed, the use of Maine’s funds from the national opioid settlement was suggested as a resource to provide more support to those who need it.
- The impact of unhoused people on local school districts was discussed, noting rising costs (especially English as a second language supports), educational deficits for children who move frequently because of being unhoused, and rising tax burdens for the community. Additional state funding for these education costs was supported by members.

5. Discussion with Representative Annie Graham

Representative Graham (District 105 North Yarmouth and Gray) serves as a member of the Legislature’s [Health and Human Services Committee](#), which is working on reforms to General Assistance. Rep. Graham updated members on the Committee’s work to date and urged member engagement in the debate over changes to General Assistance in the upcoming legislative session. She provided a summary of pending legislation impacting General Assistance (see Attachment A below) and made the following points during discussion:

[LD 1426](#), *An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance* was submitted by Maine Municipal Association and has been carried over to the coming session. See below for details. The HHS Committee needs to hear from member municipalities on this bill in the coming weeks.

Regional solutions are welcome but specific proposals are needed. Balancing the burdens and benefits of any regional solution will require thoughtful consideration. York County is doing good work with their CAP agency and could be a model for other counties to consider.

During Q&A the following points were made:

- Members urged the state to establish a comprehensive database of people receiving General Assistance to ease administrative confusion and increase efficiency.
- Increasing state reimbursement for municipal General Assistance expenses from 70 to 90% was critical to many members. There are bills before the legislature to do so but they need support.
- Members did not support changing the existing durational limits in existing General Assistance law.
- Some members did not support LD 1675 (see below), feeling that changing General Assistance into a housing program would lead to higher municipal costs and property taxes.
- Asked about breaking housing off from General Assistance, members were conceptually open to discussion but concerned about the specifics of administration and finance. If poorly structured, this could lead to confusion and costs as the state and municipalities try to redefine roles and responsibilities, especially for short term shelter.

- The Office of New Americans was seen as a vehicle for state housing support for asylum seekers, as MRC has said in written feedback to the Governor’s Office of Planning, Innovation, and the Future.
- Work authorization for asylum seekers remains too slow, and unfortunately no action is expected from Congress this year.

In response to a question from Rep. Graham, Jim Gailey detailed work the County is doing to provide General Assistance services to seven smaller municipalities in our region. The County is building capacity to serve more communities (on a fee for service basis). He also shared the many ARPA investments in housing made by the County Commissioners, including support for Tedford House, a Lakes Region homelessness survey, and funding for municipal land purchases to support affordable housing development. He noted that the County has no expertise or capacity to run shelters.

6. Legislative Update

Chris Hall provided a brief update on [LD 1721](#), *An Act to Create Transitional Housing Communities for Homeless Populations in the State*, submitted by Senator Jill Duson in collaboration with the MRC. He said the bill may be up for a work session in the Housing Committee before the next MRC meeting on January 9th, and he encouraged members to communicate their support for the legislation. Contact information for the Housing Committee members can be [found here](#) by clicking the ‘+’ sign in front of each Committee member’s name.

7. MRC Member Roundtable: Council Challenge for 2024

Members ran out of time for this item but noted that housing and homelessness remain top issues for every Council in the MRC.

8. Adjourn

Mayor Foley adjourned the meeting by acclamation at 1:31 pm.