



# DRAFT

## Metro Regional Coalition Meeting Minutes

February 8, 2022

### In Attendance:

Name	Affiliation
Amy Kuhn, Chair	Falmouth
Nathan Poore	Falmouth
Scott Morelli	South Portland
Susan Gillis	Cape Elizabeth
Matt Sturgis	Cape Elizabeth
Virginia Wilder-Cross	Gorham
Kevin Jensen	Gorham
Michael Foley	Westbrook
Jerre Bryant	Westbrook
Kate Snyder	Portland
Anne McGuire	Portland
Kristen Dow	Portland
April Sither	Scarborough
Tom Hall	Scarborough
Gail Kezar	Office of Senator King
Jim Gailey	Cumberland County
<b>For GPCOG:</b>	Kristina Egan, Chris Hall, Tom Bell, Vanessa Farr

### 1. Welcome and introductions

Amy Kuhn called the meeting to order at 12:02 pm and welcomed everyone. Attendees did quick introductions.

### 2. Acceptance of minutes from the January 11, 2022 meeting

Amy Kuhn moved acceptance of the minutes of the January 11, 2022 MRC meeting by acclamation – all voted in favor.

### 3. Public Comment

No public comment was offered.

### 4. Housing Crisis – Asylum Seekers in Portland

The City of Portland continues to face unsustainable staffing and financial burdens as a result of increasing numbers of newly arriving asylum seekers in need of temporary emergency shelter and services. Members heard from City officials and discussed how the MRC can engage to help address the crisis.

Mayor Snyder gave an introduction and background to the current crisis. Since the fall of 2021 Portland has seen an increasing number of asylum seekers arriving in the City and asking for assistance, including housing and General Assistance (GA). In response, City officials began meeting with Mills Administration officials to ask for state help.

Specific requests from the City to the State include:

- 1) a state commitment to fund Portland's municipal share of GA costs (30%, estimated at \$9 million per year) if and when federal funding of those costs ends (scheduled to happen this April), and
- 2) that the State establish an Office of Resettlement Services to take on the administration and coordination of providing social and support services to asylum seekers.

City officials have met with our Congressional delegation's staff, as well as with state lawmakers. In response, Representative Pingree submitted a bill to reduce the waiting time for asylum seekers to obtain a work permit from 365 days to 30 days ([PPH](#)).

Kristen Dow, Portland's Director of Health & Human Services, provided additional information. Currently Portland is providing temporary emergency shelter for 1200 persons, of which approximately 700 are asylum seekers. The remaining 500 come from all parts of Maine, and beyond, with a minority coming from Portland.

Hotels from Freeport to Old Orchard Beach are being used to provide shelter, necessitating Portland staff to work across municipal lines to coordinate services and support. At times Portland's lack of jurisdiction and authority creates problematic barriers to efficient, effective service delivery. Transportation, medical services, and translation services are all complicated by the regional dispersal of people needing help.

Kristen emphasized that the current crisis is very different from the 2019 asylum influx. The Expo, and programs like Host Homes, are not viable now. New solutions are required.

Mayor Snyder noted that Portland's temporary emergency shelter capacity is less than 200, far less than what's needed today.

During Q&A the following points were made and discussed:

- Talks are ongoing with County and State Emergency Management officials to extend FEMA funding of City GA costs. It remains to be seen if federal funding will be extended.
- Construction of the new Riverside Homeless Shelter will not alleviate the crisis since its capacity (about 200 beds) will replace existing facilities).
- South Portland is also experiencing cost burdens as hotels in South Portland provide temporary shelter, increasing the costs of City services. Long term funding for those increases has not been secured yet.
- Beyond asylum seekers, Portland is also serving many people suffering homelessness who come from other communities – only about 30% of the 508 non-asylum seekers in temporary shelters are from Portland.
- Durable permanent solutions are needed, and go beyond the GA system. State funding will be central to finding new housing types and locations that can reduce the dimensions of the current crisis and work to prevent future occurrences.

Kristina Egan offered a framework for crafting solutions:

1. Metro Regional Coalition advocacy to the Governor to support Portland’s existing requests (regarding GA support and a Resettlement Office);
2. Identification and location of innovative housing solutions;
3. Changing the public narrative around asylum seekers into one of economic and demographic opportunity.

Members were strongly in support of #1, and voted unanimously to do so on a motion by Mayor Foley and a second by Councilor Wilder-Cross.

Members were also supportive of #2 and #3, and in discussion members began imagining what it would take to create and locate innovative housing opportunities outside the saturated housing market. Repurposing empty commercial space was one thought – all members agreed to think more closely about innovative places and housing types that could contribute to a solution.

Kristina summarized the member direction: work with Portland to advance these three items, and work with MRC members (and others) as needed to advance housing solutions.

## **5. Housing Progress report**

Vanessa Farr updated members on preparation of the 2021-2022 MRC Housing Choice Progress Report. Vanessa described the development of a cloud-based mapping system that would allow users to see

building data at a glance throughout the region, modeled on an existing platform developed by MAPC (see [MassBuilds](#)).

When completed, the tool will be used in many planning projects, helping to understand housing location in other contexts including transportation, climate, and economic development.

To begin, Vanessa is asking all MRC members' staffs to provide the following information in the next three weeks – she will follow up as needed with each community:

**2021 Residential Building Permit Data**

Permits issued for all new housing construction

- by unit type (Single Family, duplex, multi-family, Accessory dwelling unit
- rental or ownership,
- affordable (LMI deed restricted) or market rate

Vanessa and other GPCOG staff will use the data to produce the next Housing Choice Progress Report for release near the Annual Summit in later May.

## **6. COVID-19 Roundtable**

With brief time remaining members quickly discussed Council actions around the region on masking requirements, the continued availability of testing in Westbrook, and available mask supplies at the Cumberland County Emergency Management Agency.

## **7. Adjourn**

At 1:33 pm Amy Kuhn adjourned the meeting by acclamation.