

Governor's Rural Affairs Council Meeting

Minutes May 14 2025

1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

2. Roll Call:

Member Agencies Present:

Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton

Department of Agriculture, Tyler Bohannon

Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Monica Bristow and Kala Lambert

Illinois Department of Employment Security, Tory Davis

Illinois Department of Human Services, Diane Campbell

Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Todd Strole

Illinois Department of Public Health, Kristen Nolan

Illinois Department of Transportation, Michael Vanderhoof

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis

Illinois Finance Authority, Chris Meister

Illinois Housing Development Authority, Amy Bashiti

Illinois State Board of Education, Shawn Walsh

Southern Illinois University, Laura Kessel

Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Christopher Merrett

Illinois Agricultural Association, Ryan Tate

Rural Partners, Brian Moody

Citizen Members Present:

Heather Hampton-Knodle

Neophansya Robinson

Sonja Reece (Phone)

David Ardrey

Norman Walzer

Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:

Nikki Giancola-Shanks, Policy Director

Paris McConnel, External Affairs Manager

Taylor Brown, Communications Manager

Charles Watkins, Chief Strategist

Eryn Jones, Legal Project Manager

Maria Peters, Dunn Fellow

Eva Shongue, Staff Attorney

Alex Sprinkle, ISPP Scholar

Guests Present:

Sandy Wittig, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

Paul Larson, Illinois Birth to Five

Gabrielle Lyons, Illinois Humanities

3. Quorum Determined

Yes

4. Approval of Virtual Attendance

The Lt. Governor noted that having established a quorum, she would entertain a motion to approve members who requested to attend virtually: Heather Hampton Knodle, Neophansya Robinson, Kala Lambert, Sonja Reece, and Diane Campbell. Laura Kessel offered a motion to allow the virtual attendance. Todd Stole seconded the motion. Motion carried.

5. Approval of Minutes from May 5, July 2, and November 14, 2024 and February 2, 2025.

Todd Stole noted there needed to be a correction. The dates were incorrect. The Lt. Governor noted that the dates would be changed to May 2, July 24, and November 14, 2024 and February 4, 2025. Monica Bristow made a motion to approve the minutes. Chris Meister seconded the motion. Motion carried.

6. Approval of Agenda

The Lt. Governor asked for a motion to approve today's agenda. Heather Hampton Knodle made a motion to approve the agenda. This was seconded by Sonja Reece. Motion approved.

7. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks**Opening**

The Lt. Governor welcomed everyone to the second quarterly meeting for the GRAC. She announced that she recently spoke at the Black Farmers and Growers Lobby Day about the importance of making space for every Illinoisian in Agriculture, especially given the attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The work of this Council in particular is directly impacted by the ridiculousness of Trump's tariff game; the whiplash imposed by this Administration has put a strain on our farming communities that continues to worsen. Illinois' Agriculture industry does more business with China than any other industry in our state. A tariff increase of any kind hurts our farmers bottom line, and the uncertainty makes it almost impossible for farming families to plan ahead.

She also noted that both the Cabinet and Congressional Republicans are pushing hard to make changes to Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP) funding. If these proposed cuts succeed, the result will be catastrophic for Illinois' rural communities. She explained that any loss of federal Medicaid revenue will severely harm rural hospitals. The Lt. Governor stated that a study done by the Center for American Progress shows that 10% of Illinois rural hospitals are at immediate risk of closure should cuts to Medicaid succeed (Source: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/medicaid-cuts-would-threaten-rural-hospitals/>).

The Lt. Governor noted that this Council often talks about rural Illinois food deserts. She noted that the Local Food Purchase Assistance program has been eliminated. That coupled with proposed SNAP cuts will increase avoidable hunger for thousands of people and a rippling economic effect. Research shows that every \$1 in SNAP spending creates \$1.50 in local economic activity (Source: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-case-for-boosting-snap-benefits-in-next-major-economic-response>). SNAP also directly and indirectly provides jobs in our state. She explained that the State of Illinois will not be able to fill this gap. The Council's work is now more important than ever.

8. New Business

The Lt. Governor highlighted the annual Rural Community and Economic Development Conference. She thanked Norman Walzer, Chris Merrett, and Sandy Wittig for their incredible work on the event.

The Lt. Governor welcomed Shawn Walsh to the GRAC. Shawn is the Director of District and School Leadership at the Illinois State Board of Education. She requested Shawn briefly introduce himself.

Shawn Walsh thanked the Lt. Governor. He stated he had been in education for 25 years and looked forward to being a part of this Council.

The Lt. Governor announced the GRAC 2025 Goals;

1. Work with Illinois Mainstreet and MAPPING efforts in communities along Route 66 to prepare for the Centennial celebration of the historic road and the 250th anniversary of this great nation, both which will happen in 2026.
2. Continue to display the economic and social importance and benefits of public schools in rural communities.
3. Work with agencies and stakeholders to help amplify programs and resources to communities lacking access to healthcare.

The Lt. Governor stated she was excited to work on these three goals and looked forward to the great work of this Council.

The Lt. Governor explained that she would like to move to vote on the updated bylaws for the Council. A copy of the bylaws was sent out in advance. These bylaws would permit Council Members to attend virtually and permit quorum to still be established, allowing the Council to conduct new business with more flexibility. She explained that in person meetings would still be offered and that attendance was encouraged. She asked if there were any questions concerning the bylaws?

Heather Hampton Knodle noted it is often difficult to attend rescheduled meetings. She asked if the 2025 dates were available? The Lt. Governor explained that if the meeting is rescheduled it is normally due to her schedule and sometimes it is unavoidable. Her office will send an email with the dates.

David Ardrey explained that the virtual meetings should help if the meeting has to be rescheduled since you would be able to attend virtually.

Todd Stole asked if the note in the bylaws about "During audio/video conferences, a roll call would have to be recorded with each vote being noted. The Lt. Governor explained that this is a provision only if the virtual meeting is completely virtual for all attendees. She will further have her legal council confirm this and let everyone know.

Monica Bristow motioned to approve the bylaws. Laura Kessel seconded the motion. Motion was approved.

The Lt. Governor announced that today's presenter would be Dr. Gabrielle Lyon who serves as the Director of Illinois Humanities Council and Chair of the Illinois America 250 Commission.

Dr. Lyon thanked the Lt. Governor for having her speak. She provided an overview of the Illinois Humanities Council (IHC), explaining that the IHC promotes the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that spark conversation, foster reflection, build community, and strengthen civic engagement for everyone in Illinois. Her short presentation noted that their work falls into three categories: grants to community-based organizations, free public programs, and educational opportunities for adults and youth. Dr. Lyon also explained that the Illinois America 250 Commission is planning events to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 2026. More information can be found at

IL250.org. The IHC is also planning events for 2026 to celebrate the Centennial of Route 66, which crosses 301 miles in Illinois.

The Lt. Governor thanked Dr. Lyon and noted she was excited to hear about all of their projects and plans for the future. She asked if there were any questions from the Council.

Heather Hampton Knodle noted that she noticed that no one from the East of Hwy 51 is on the IHC advisory committee. She will reach out to Dr. Lyon and try to recommend someone. Brian Moody also stated he would send some ideas. Sonja Reece noted that she would touch base with her about the City of McLean, which is located along Route 66. Laura Kessel thanked Dr. Lyon for all of the working that her organization does. She wondered if there were videos or photos that highlighted the organization's work.

Dr. Lyon explained that they often posted photos. She often tries to include high schools if they wish to be involved in what the organization is doing.

David Ardrey thanked her for all the work the IHC has done with rural schools.

The Lt. Governor announced that the Illinois Criminal Justice has started capacity building and workshops for assistance in applying for grants. She would love to collaborate. She noted that many historical sites around Illinois are at risk due to lack of funding.

Amy Bashiti noted that capacity building was great but we also have the issue of communities receiving the grant and are unable to manage the use of the grant and then funds are returned. Christine Davis asked if there was an opportunity to share with those in healthcare. Perhaps show inspiration of what is happening in communities across Illinois.

The Lt. Governor thanked everyone for their questions and comments. She is thinking of how her office can help promote the Illinois America 250.

9. Discussion Points

The Lt. Governor requested that the committee provide updates.

Norman Walzer from the **Economic Development & Infrastructure Committee** noted that the rural conference went well. He would like to see about doing a workshop building off of conference ideas. He mentioned that Chris Merrett and he will have a new book next month. He requested Council members send ideas for next year's sessions.

Chris Merrett thanked Norm for his valuable help with the conference. He noted that the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs had also hosted a Rural Transit Conference with Illinois Department of Transportation in March. The focus of this conference is that mobility is a human right. Many rural communities lack a fixed-route bus service, and they are not served by Lyft, Uber, or a traditional taxi service. In these situations, a demand-response transit service is an important part of the mobility infrastructure.

Chris noted that the Illinois Grocery Initiative along with DCEO and the Lt. Governor's Office provided funds for to start new stores or provide new equipment to several existing grocery stores, including Carlinville (\$2,393,174) and River Side Foods (\$130,572) (source: <https://dceo.illinois.gov/illinois-grocery-initiative.html>).

Chris requested that Sandy Wittig provide a brief update on the Midwest Community Development Institute. Sandy provided a brief overview that this was a four-day intensive training in community and economic development. She explained the core classes were taught during the training. She noted that several GRAC members have already completed the training or still present during the training.

Chris noted that Paul Larson who spoke at the spring 2025 rural development conference was in attendance today.

Amy Bashiti explained that her organization is working on regional planning with the help of DCEO and other agencies.

The Lt. Governor thanked Norm, Chris, Sandy, and Amy for their report.

Christopher Merrett provided updates on items working with the **Education and Workforce Development Committee**. He noted that that the committee was working on the economic impact of rural school districts to explain the importance of schools to communities. He shared they also are working to promote technology and vocational training in schools. He announced that Galesburg is doing a great job with their Galesburg Area Vocational Center (GAVC) and he will be touring this site today.

The Lt. Governor thanked Chris for the report.

Laura Kessel shared the work of the **Health and Healthcare Committee**. Laura explained that SIU hosts a conference each year on aging and dementia. One day is for care givers. She thanked Liz Vogt, Diane Campbell for their help. She noted that 14 sites across the state provided the training with 90 in attendance.

The Lt. Governor thanked Laura. She is very interested in this work.

10. Member Updates

The Lt. Governor highlighted an article about Illinois State Parks which drew the highest number of visitors in a decade. She noted that 41,000 visitors had visited state parks. She thanked the DNR for their great job.

Heather Hampton Knodle noted that Illinois Ag Women would be discussing a trade innovation corridor. She also provided personal experience of how the tariffs were affected family farms. She thanked the Lt. Governor for being supportive for farmers.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that she was part of a trade delegation to Mexico City about building trade.

11. Public Comments

Paul Larson provided a brief overview of his organization, Illinois Birth to Five.

David Ardrey announced that a number of the digital equity awards have been rescinded by the federal government.

Kala Lambert noted that where ongoing tariff negotiations have caused a reduction in hours and employees, these organizations and/or communities could reach out to DCEO for the Layoff Aversion Program.

Alex Benishek mentioned that he was from Mattoon. He noted that the cuts to the National Service Programs (Peace Corps Fellows/AmeriCorps Program) will affect many rural non-profits who rely on these grants. He thanked the Lt. Governor for her continued support.

Closing

The Lt. Governor reminded everyone the next Council meeting will take place on August 19 at 10 AM. The meeting is planned to be held in Springfield and Chicago, but her office is looking to hold more meetings in the communities. There is a possibility the location will change.

A motion to adjourn was made by Laura Kessel. Sonja Reece seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 11:29 am.

Respectfully Submitted:

Sandy Wittig and Chris Merrett
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
Western Illinois University