

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
Meeting Minutes March 18, 2020**

1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:11 am.

Lt. Governor Stratton thanked everyone for their flexibility and for attending this virtual meeting.

2. Roll Call

Member Agencies Present:

Illinois Department of Agriculture, Jerry Costello & Robert Barren
Illinois Department of Aging, Jose Jimenez
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Sal Garza & Agnes Masnik
Illinois Community College Board, Lavon Nelson
Illinois Finance Authority, Charles Myart
Illinois Department of Human Services, Francisco Alvarado
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Rachel Torbert
Illinois Department of Transportation, Holly Bieneman
Illinois Farm Bureau, Brenda Matherly
Illinois Housing Development Authority, William Pluta & Melinda Koenig
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Christopher Merrett & Sandy Wittig
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Anne Silvis

Not Present: Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Public Health, Rural Partners, Southern Illinois University

Citizen Members Present:

Sonja Reece
Norm Walzer

Ex Officio / Nonvoting GRAC Members Present:

Molly Hammond, USDA-Rural Development
Norm Walzer, Northern Illinois University, Center for Governmental Studies

Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:

Juliana Stratton, Lt. Governor
Janelle Gurnsey, Community Outreach Coordinator (phone)
Levi Bain, Dunn Fellow | Office of Illinois Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton
Bobby Mannis, Policy Director for the Office of the Lt. Governor
Kirsten Davis-Franklin, Legislative Liaison
Victoria Vallalpando-Sanchez

Guests:

Shelly Tweedy

Quorum determined.

Lt. Governor Stratton asked that her staff introduce themselves. She stated that if anyone needs any assistance, to please feel free to contact her staff. She then inquired if there were any corrections or additions to the agenda for today's meeting. No changes were noted. The Lt. Governor requested a motion to accept the agenda. Sonja Reece made a motion to accept the agenda as is. Kristen Davis Franklin seconded the motion. Motion passed.

3. Approval of Meeting Minutes from November 7, 2019.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced that a draft of the minutes from the November 2019 meeting had been provided to council members prior to today's meeting and edits were made per feedback received.

Christine Davis noted that her name was misspelled. The spelling should be Christine. Noting this change, Sal Garza made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Norm Walzer. Motion passed. Minutes were approved.

4. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks

Lt. Governor Stratton again thanked everyone for attending today's meeting. She also thanked everyone for being so patient when technology doesn't work as planned. She extended warm wishes to everyone and hoped that everyone was well and able to continue to live their lives as normally as possible considering the circumstances surrounding the global pandemic.

She stated she was proud to be part of Governor Pritzker's team and witness his courageous leadership during this time. She also wanted to extend her thanks to General Alicia Tate-Nadeau, Director of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency and Doctor Ngozie Ezike, Director of the Illinois Department of Public Health who are leading Illinois' response to COVID-19. She noted that the Illinois Department of Public Health has a statewide COVID-19 hotline and website to answer any questions from the public and for the public to report a suspected case: call 1-800-889-3931 or visit IDPH.illinois.gov to access these resources.

Lt. Governor Stratton stated we are in challenging times and that Governor Pritzker and the entire administration is working around the clock to respond to these challenges. She noted that we cannot let these challenges stop us from continuing to meet the needs of Illinoisans in other regards. She looks forward to discussing the pressing issues faced in rural Illinois as identified through the GRAC's draft strategic report.

Lt. Governor Stratton stated she is proud of the work that the GRAC council has accomplished over the last year. She noted that supporting our rural communities is one of the absolute necessary challenges in rural Illinois. This includes supporting agriculture, keeping communities supported with universal broadband access, keeping residents safe through access to healthcare services and making sure that every single Illinoisans is counted in the upcoming 2020 census.

Jerry Costello, Illinois Department of Agriculture

At this time, Lt. Governor Stratton introduced the new Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Jerry Costello. She welcomed him to his new role. She requested that Mr. Costello make a few remarks.

Mr. Costello thanked the Lt. Governor. He stated he was honored to be appointed as the Director of Agriculture. He also looks forward to being a part of the GRAC. He noted that he has great confidence in Governor Pritzker and Lt. Governor Stratton for the leadership they have been showing during the COVID-19 challenging times. He looks to improve the quality of rural life and improve and concentrate on agriculture in the State of Illinois. Please do not hesitate to reach out to him.

The Lt. Governor thanked Jerry for his remarks.

COVID-19

Lt. Governor Stratton then asked council members to provide perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic. She wanted to know what each member and their respective communities and agencies are thinking, saying, and doing when it comes to COVID-19. She also noted that if there are particular challenges, please share with her these challenges. Her team will make note of these challenges and will pass this information along to the liaisons in the Governor's office who can be of assistance.

Jose Jimenez from the Illinois Department on Aging thanked the Lt. Governor for her leadership. His agency concentrates on Illinois residents 60 years of age and older. He remarked that as we shelter in place, many senior citizens struggle because they live alone. These individuals often feel very isolated and depend on Meals on Wheels to survive. Volunteers are relied upon to deliver meals. During this time, some volunteers are staying at home. His agency is struggling to address the needs. He noted that in addition, meal sites are closed. This has increased the number of seniors who need home delivery. He is anxiously watching the Stimulus Bill for additional federal funding.

The Lt. Governor stated there is special collaboration between the US Department of Agriculture and other agencies to help address this need.

Jose stated he would like to be part of the COVID-19 conversation focused on "how will this last" and "what are the ultimate needs" for the residents of Illinois.

5. New Business

Strategic Report

Lt. Governor Stratton announced she would like to discuss the strategic report which was sent to council members and recurring guests on Monday morning for review. This report includes recommendations proposed by individual committees on this council. She noted that it is the GRAC's mission to help realize these recommendations.

She requested that her policy director, Bobby Mannis, provide a brief overview of the recommendations for each committee. She noted that then the floor would be open for committee members to discuss the recommendations and implementation strategies. Then, Bobby will briefly discuss the process this council will undertake from here to complete this report and work towards implementation.

The categories are: Education & Workforce Development; Health & Healthcare; Economic Development & Infrastructure.

Bobby Mannis announced that the council would discuss each recommendation. Members can make comments and suggestions as each recommendation is being discussed. He noted that recommendations are to make sure that the GRAC not only talks about what is important, but that the recommendations serve as guide going forward.

Education & Workforce Development

Bobby read the recommendations as listed below. He requested thoughts and/or comments on each recommendation as we move through the list.

Recommendation 1

- 1) Improve access to opportunities for technical and university education, emphasizing the importance of post-secondary education in the future of rural economies

LaVonne Nelson mentioned she thought that the recommendation may be too large. She thought "improve access to technical" would be a better choice. She also mentioned changing the recommendation to include "community college and education." She suggested "educational opportunities through community colleges and universities improving technical training and post-secondary education."

Sal Garza stated that perhaps we should say "technical institutions instead of technical colleges or vocational schools."

Lt. Governor Stratton asked if we needed to specifically identify each educational sector.

Anne Silvis stated that she thinks the nature of helping people through lots of avenues to prepare. We may be worrying about too specific information.

Lt. Governor stated that the goal was to pursue a broader objective. “We do need to be consistent throughout the document.”

Anne Silvis suggested “improve access to post-secondary education.”

A discussion followed. The recommendations will be reworded as:

Improve access to post-secondary education in the future of rural economies.

Recommendation 2

- 2) In partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), increase alignment of workforce development programs across Illinois with Illinois’ Unified State Plan.

Lavonne Nelson mentioned that there was a development of a unified state plan. The core partners were: IL DCEO- Title 1; ICCB – Adult Ed – Title 2; IDES – Title 3; and Human Services & Rehabilitation Services. These were required to be part of the state unified plan. She mentioned that plan is available online and she would forward the link to Bobby.

Discussion followed. The recommendation will be reworded as:

Increase alignment of workforce development programs across Illinois with Illinois’ Unified State Plan

Health & Healthcare

Recommendation 1

- 1) Improve access to healthcare by supporting telemedicine and broadband expansion in rural communities through partnerships with local, state, and non-government stakeholders

Jose Jimenez from the Illinois Department on Aging noted that we need to focus on underserved communities. We need to think about flexibility and the future delivery of healthcare. He restated his concerns about social isolation among Illinois senior citizens.

Lt. Governor Stratton mentioned we may need to discuss this in the next GRAC meeting. She asked that between now and the next meeting, GRAC members should think about “how do we recover from COVID-19.” What needs to be put into place to better prepare Illinois communities for the future? How can we create a sense of community for people who feel isolated? She noted that the GRAC needs to think about plans for the future.

Sonja Reece noted we need to factor in how to provide healthcare providers in rural communities. How to we deliver better service, despite scare resources?

Bobby Mannis agreed that longer term planning for crisis will need to be followed up on. For example, how can the GRAC respond to the new challenges of COVID-19 and then adapt to a new normal, over the longer term?

No changes were made to this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

Bobby Mannis provided a brief background of the opioid steering committee and the recommendation.

- 2) Decrease opioid-related fatalities by supporting local programmatic efforts in conjunction with the Opioid Crisis Response Advisory Council

No changes were made to this recommendation.

Economic Development & Infrastructure

William Pluta from the Illinois Housing Development Authority recommended that for the next two years, the GRAC could work with workforce and housing to explore options to address housing with DCEO.

Bobby Mannis asked how the council might be of assistance?

William stated we should include exploring workforce housing. More specifically, we need to focus on affordable housing if we want a productive workforce.

Lt. Governor Stratton thinks this will fit in recommendation three.

Recommendation 1

- 1) Expand affordable access to broadband for rural residents

No discussion or changes to this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

- 2) Identify and support opportunities to increase coordination of transportation services in rural areas, thus providing better accessibility to healthcare, educational, and recreational services, as well as employment opportunities

Norm Walzer stated in this increasing time of isolation, “how do we use public transit efficiently?” He requested that Chris Merrett state his thoughts about this. Norm’s concern is that people do not miss rides or opportunities. We want to maximize coordination.

Chris Merrett stated Norm had included his thoughts.

No changes were made to this recommendation.

Recommendation 3

3) Help stimulate local investments in rural communities

William Pluta suggest including the wording “workforce housing.”

Lt. Governor Stratton stated that there are 8-10 things that could be included, but she feels making the statement broad is better than including specific items not to leave out anything. She noted that the plan be broad in scope and not list exceptions or specifics.

Norm Walzer explained this was sure to stimulate economic development in rural communities.

William Pluta he will continue to focus on workforce housing, but he feels it is fine to make the recommendation broader.

Norm Walzer mentioned that perhaps we could include “to accomplish better quality of life” in this recommendation. Norm agreed to work on this recommendation and send to the committee.

Anne Silvis thought we should clarify “local.”

Norm Walzer stated the idea was investment in local communities by either local or state programs.

Bobby Mannis requested that Norm Walzer clarify “local” in the rewording of the recommendation and to resend the recommendation with new wording.

Recommendation 4

4) Identify and support evidence-based practices for retaining businesses in danger of closing due to owner retirements

Norm Walzer asked what can we do to cause others to take over businesses besides including succession planning and cooperatives. He suggested we look at what’s been successful elsewhere and bring those programs to Illinois.

Chris Merrett stated that another looming issue is demographics. We can't find new entrepreneurs when the local population declining. We might think about ways to stabilize rural populations.

Bobby Mannis stated that it may be necessary to add contextualizing statements and clarifications of population changing, with a specific focus on the problem of rural population decline and rural youth outmigration.

Sal Garza said that succession plans are normally driven by those in the immediate area. He is working on a model to use technology to market businesses and to bring business owners and agencies together to market assets regionally and out of state.

Chris Merrett stated the issue is broader than just working at local and state level. We need to include the federal level as well to consider immigration. Rural America depends on immigration for future entrepreneurs. This could include areas beyond the regional Midwest.

Lt. Governor Stratton explained that the proposed Summit to bring the various councils under her purview was unable to be held due to COVID-19. One of the goals of the Summit was to address what we are doing in other organizations, such as Main Street. She noted that creating support for rural communities and explaining why rural communities are great places to live, work, and play are important. We need to recognize the realities and also the possibilities.

The Lt. Governor thanked everyone for the robust discussion. Moving forward, her team will work to turn these recommendations into a final strategic report. The Illinois Council on Women and Girls' report was shared with the GRAC members to provide an idea of what to expect the GRAC's report to look like.

Lt. Governor Stratton stated that she also wanted to note that her office was willing to provide letters of support for initiatives for council members or organizations they represent. Please continue to share with her office any information about initiatives and other matters where her office can help. Please feel comfortable reaching out at anytime to her office.

6. Member Updates and Reports

Sal Garza stated that even in these challenging times there is good news. He will be speaking to a business who wants to relocate to Illinois after this meeting. He stated that it's difficult to see the light with clouds overhanging, but good news is in the future. He thanked the Lt. Governor and said he was glad to be a part of the GRAC.

The Lt. Governor thanked Sal.

7. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

8. Adjournment

The Lt. Governor announced the next meeting would be held June 11, 2020, from 10:00 am to 11:30 am.

Sonja Reece made a motion to adjourn. Motion passed. The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 am.

Respectfully Submitted:

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