

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
Meeting Minutes March 2, 2023**

1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.

2. Roll Call

Member Agencies Present:

Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton
Illinois Department of Agriculture, Tyler Bohannon
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Monica Bristow
Illinois Department of Employment Security, Director Ray Marchiori
Illinois Department of Human Services, Francisco Alvarado
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Director Natalie Finnie
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis
Illinois Housing Development Authority, Amy Bashiti
Southern Illinois University, Laura Kessel
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Chris Merrett
Illinois Finance Authority, Lorrie Karcher

Not Present:

Illinois Department of Aging, Elizabeth Vogt
Illinois Department of Public Health, Don Jones
Illinois Department of Transportation, Holly Bieneman
Illinois Community College Board, Jennifer Foster
Illinois State Board of Education, Susie Morrison
University of Illinois Extension, Shelly Nickols Richardson
Rural Partners, Susan Bence

Citizen Members Present:

Heather Hampton-Knodle
Sonja Reece
Norm Walzer
David Ardrey

Guests:

Iroquois Economic Development Association, Angel Crawford
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Anne Silvis
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Sandy Wittig
City of Pinckneyville, Carrie Gilliam
Moran Economic Development, Emily Calderon
Illinois Department of Innovation and Technology, Mary Reynolds
USDA Rural Development, Betsy Dirksen Londrigan
DCEO Office of Regional Economic Development, Kala Lambert
Karen Jenkins
Daniel Huizinga

Eric Brandt
Josh Mercer
Rebecca Estrada

Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:

Dr. Susan Ogwal, Policy Director
Sarah Richman, Dunn Fellow
Janelle Gurnsey, Deputy Chief of Staff for External Affairs and Communications
Lian Nicholson, Special Assistant to the Lt. Governor
Charles Watkins, Chief of Staff
Nicholas Davis, Senior Manager for Strategic Engagements and Initiatives
Natashee Scott, General Counsel & Deputy Chief of Staff
Valerie Rand, Chief Operating Officer
Joanna Byrne, Digital Content Specialist
Taylor Brown, Communications Manager
Rob Barren, Senior Advisor to the Lt. Governor
Ariana Correa, JEO Program Manager
Eryn Jones, Legal/Legislative Project Manager
Ellison Radek, JEO Intern

Quorum determined.

Lt. Governor Stratton inquired if there were any corrections or additions to the agenda for today's meeting. Sonja Reece made a motion to accept the agenda. Dr. Norm Walzer seconded the motion. Motion passed.

3. Approval of Meeting Minutes from October 13, 2022.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced that a draft of the minutes from the December 2022 meeting had been provided to council members prior to today's meeting.

Sonja Reece made a motion to approve the minutes. Monica Bristow seconded the motion. Motion passed. Minutes were approved.

4. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks

The Lt. Governor welcomed everyone to the first quarterly meeting of the year. She thanked everyone for their incredible work that has been happening throughout Illinois to uplift rural communities. She thanked everyone for attending virtually and stated that she hoped the next meeting would be in person.

The Lt. Governor announced that she had just finished a tour with Governor Pritzker to promote preschool learning and ending childcare deserts. She mentioned that she had met with local leaders from Pinckneyville, Herrin, Centralia, and other towns in that region. One of the things that was mentioned was that they need grant writing and technical assistance guidance. Her office is working on this to meet that need.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that the 34th Annual Rural Community and Economic Development Conference was held last week in Springfield. She extended her gratitude to the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) and Rural Partners for hosting this event and for providing her the opportunity to speak virtually and highlight strategies to revitalize our rural communities. She mentioned that several members of her team attended the conference and engaged in conversations with council members and local leaders across Illinois.

She noted that at the conference, Dr. Norm Walzer led two interactive sessions called, “Setting GRAC Priorities and Strategies in Illinois”. The sessions were co-led by Dr. Susan Ogwal and Nick Davis, both members of her office. Mr. Davis discussed the #AgConnectsUSAll initiative. The purpose of these sessions was to listen and to learn from rural community members to implement their ideas into our GRAC agenda for 2023. Some topics raised by participants included: creating an online resource page specific to the needs of rural communities, affordable housing, career technical education, training for grant writing, and professional development of rural leadership and administrative staff. She mentioned that she was aware many of the GRAC members participated in these listening sessions and that these are all issues that the council has expressed interest in further exploring.

During the committee updates, Dr. Norm Walzer will speak about the takeaways from these listening sessions and the GRAC survey. Dr. Chris Merrett will also speak during members updates about the overall vision and progress of the conference.

The Lt. Governor extended her congratulations to Dr. Merrett, Dr. Walzer, and Sandy Wittig for organizing the Rural Community and Economic Development Conference and providing synergy between local community leaders, academics, and agency members who all share a passion for giving back and empowering our rural communities.

The Lt. Governor announced four new council members. She welcomed Natalie Finnie, Director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). The Lt. Governor provided a brief introduction to Director Finnie.

Director Finnie thanked the Lt. Governor. She stated she is happy to be a part of the council. She also mentioned that she is from Southern Illinois and feels she is well suited to serve in IDNR. She has a passion for improving life in rural communities.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that she had visited old Shawneetown with Director Finnie. At the time, she had not realized that there were places in Illinois that did not have access to water. She appreciated Director Finnie for taking her there to visit.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that she would like to introduce Susan Bence as a council member. Susan is the chair for Rural Partners and serves at the Community Liaison for the Gibson Area Hospital and Health Services.

The next new council member is Tyler Bohannon, Bureau Chief for Legislative Affairs at the Illinois Department of Agriculture. The Lt. Governor provided a brief introduction to Mr. Bohannon and welcomed him to the council.

Mr. Bohannon thanked the Lt. Governor for the warm introduction and the opportunity to join. He stated he is excited to work with the GRAC.

The Lt. Governor announced that Ray Marchiori is the last new member of the council. In January, Mr. Marchiori was designated as the Acting Director of the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES). The Lt. Governor shared a brief introduction and welcomed Director Marchiori to the council.

Dr. Marchiori thanked the Lt. Governor for the introduction. He is looking forward to the work of the IDES. He is honored to be a part of the GRAC and to have a personal connection to rural Illinois. He mentioned that he is a product of Putnam County. He looks forward to working on rural issues and helping the citizens of Illinois.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that she wanted to provide a brief status update on some requests from our last meeting. Several members requested that the council focus on housing issues. She stated she was excited to report the council member Amy Bashiti with the Illinois Housing Development Authority will be presenting at today's meeting.

She also announced that Dr. Norm Walzer has acquired full funding from the Illinois Farm Bureau, Rural Partners, and the University of Illinois to deliver the webinar series called, "Attracting Rural Residents." The Lt. Governor noted that over the past two months, the University of Illinois Extension has hosted three 1-hour long webinars. The program was a major success and each webinar had an average of 120 online attendees. Ben Winchester from the University of Minnesota Extension led these webinars. She congratulated Dr. Walzer and all involved on a successful series.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that through the community listening sessions as part of the #AgConnectsUsAll initiative, she has heard from rural communities across Illinois. These sessions have manifested in greater support for combating food deserts and building community grocery stores, like the one that will be opening soon in Cairo. She is also proud that her team collaborated with Deputy Governor Andy Manar's team to write the policy brief that became the Illinois Grocery Store Initiative. She noted that addressing food desert issues is a challenge for both rural and urban communities and this is a topic that the GRAC will continue to address. She mentioned that in the FY24 budget proposal, there is \$20 million proposed for this initiative.

The Lt. Governor reported that she and her team were able to meet with the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools. A discussion was held on ways in which the GRAC can prioritize education issues in the 2023 agenda. It is her hope that the Education and Workforce Development Committee will connect with the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools to address issues around rural education and the digital divide. She mentioned

that everyone witnessed the digital divide during the pandemic. She knows these issues must be addressed in rural communities.

5. New Business

The Lt. Governor requested that Amy Bashiti from the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) present on current trends in housing in rural communities across Illinois.

Ms. Bashiti manages the community revitalization services for the Illinois Housing Development Authority. She shared an overview of the agency. She presented several slides showing trends that are currently happening in Illinois regarding housing. She also shared demographics of household sizes and age for the last several years.

She noted that the risk of homelessness is expected to increase. She stated that in 2020, households of four earning less than \$26,200 per year fell into low income. Renters make up 27% of this category. She also noted that 71% spend more than half of their income on rent.

Ms. Bashiti provided an overview of the programs and resources that her agency has to offer citizens of Illinois. This includes financing programs, home repair and accessibility programs, foreclosure prevention programs along with several other assistance options for housing.

The Lt. Governor thanked Ms. Bashiti for the presentation and mentioned that the FY24 budget proposal does include \$50 million to be used in for preventing homelessness and home assistance. She then opened the floor for questions.

Angel Crawford asked how long the wait list is for communities requesting to be part of the revitalization program. She also inquired if there could be a data sheet emailed to everyone.

Ms. Bashiti answered currently that communities would likely have to wait until late spring to early summer. She agreed to send the data to the Lt. Governor's office and they will email the information to GRAC members.

David Ardrey, from the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools, stated that he thinks that the communities also need to think of schools when discussing housing. Schools are a key component of any community.

Ms. Bashiti stated that they normally do include school officials when meeting with communities.

Heather Hampton-Knodle asked where the 80% AMI (Area Median Income) concentration was in Illinois. She also wondered if the Illinois Housing Development Authority would be willing to speak to the CEO (Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunity) programs. She asked if the revitalization had to involve the mayor's office or it could be a group of investors.

Ms. Bashiti stated the 80% AMI is different throughout the state. She noted that her agency should be able to provide presentations to the CEO program. Ms. Bashiti stated that the revitalization program relies on local municipal staff, who would need to be supportive of the program. She mentioned that Mattoon has signed up for the Community Revitalization Program.

The Lt. Governor thanked everyone for the questions and comments.

6. Committee Updates

The Lt. Governor requested an update from Laura Kessel on the Telehealth Project.

Laura Kessel stated they were still working on the contracts between host sites and providers. She hopes to have the project running by the next meeting.

The Lt. Governor thanked Ms. Kessel for her update.

The Lt. Governor requested an update from Dr. Norm Walzer for the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee.

Dr. Walzer stated that the webinars went well. He noted that Ben Winchester provided excellent information. He thinks the next logical step would be to identify communities that are doing exciting things that are involved in IHDA housing programs. He mentioned that Amy Bashiti could assist with this. He is providing an action survey to follow up after the webinars with those who attended to gauge the impact of the webinars.

Dr. Walzer noted the sessions at the IIRA Conference included: economic development, health care, and dealing with dilapidated buildings. During the sessions, participants mentioned that the Rural Resource Development Guide hosted by the IIRA should be updated with regular updates in the future. The committee is also working on a list of communities to host meetings and then select projects to work on.

The Lt. Governor thanked Dr. Walzer for his report. She thinks the resource guide is a great way to assist communities.

Dr. Merrett mentioned that the Rural Resource Development Guide is currently on the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs website under data and tools links. He mentioned that the challenge is keeping it updated.

The Lt. Governor wanted to remind that all GRAC members are required to serve on at least one committee throughout the duration of their membership. The three GRAC committees are the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee, the Education and Workforce Development Committee, and the Health and Healthcare Committee. She announced that following today's meeting the Dunn Fellow in her office, Sarah Richman, would be sending a committee selection form. She mentioned that if you already serve on a committee or are joining a committee for the first time, you should fill out the form by Wednesday, March 15,

and return to Ms. Richman. She emphasized that the committees are open to anyone who is interested in this work, even if they are not a formal member of our council. She encouraged all who are interested to join.

Member Updates and Reports

The Lt. Governor requested that Dr. Chris Merrett from the IIRA provide an update on the MAPPING project and recent progress in Mattoon and share the highlights of the Rural Economic and Community Development Conference.

Dr. Merrett thanked the GRAC and the Lt. Governor for having the last meeting in Mattoon. He offered a special thanks to Amy Bashiti and the IHDA for their work. He noted that it was a boost to the community to have the Lt. Governor and the GRAC in Mattoon and he is grateful for everyone who participated.

He noted that the main positive outcome from the meeting was the Mattoon was being fast-tracked to IHDA's Community Revitalization Program. Mattoon signed an agreement to begin a yearlong process of surveying residents.

He stated that the meeting and the presence of the Lt. Governor provided a visibility to Mattoon's community and economic development efforts since it drew in the media to provide coverage and boosted the conversation about Mattoon. He noted that Alex Benishek, the Mattoon economic developer, thought this was very helpful.

He noted that the meeting revealed the synergistic connections between state and federal programs during the discussions and the offering of complementary programs. He felt that the "community engaged" GRAC meeting had the intended impact. He will send a report to the Lt. Governor's office to highlight the outcomes. In addition, he will include this information in the Annual Report.

Dr. Merrett mentioned that currently MAPPING programs are scheduled for Charleston, Paxton and Oakwood. He stated that other communities for the "community engaged" GRAC meetings could be Nauvoo and McLean.

Dr. Merrett announced that the conference had 291 attendees. Participants included: GRAC members, USDA, Illinois Extension, DCEO, IHDA, Rural Partners, IDOT, IFB, the Office of the Lt. Governor, and citizen members. He thanked the GRAC, RP and the Lt. Governor's office for their help in promoting the conference. He thanked Dr. Norm Walzer for his leadership. He thanked Sandy Wittig for her work.

Dr. Merrett asked Sandy Wittig to speak about the conference.

Sandy Wittig stated that she was thankful for all of the assistance from the various agencies and the Lt. Governor's office in promoting the conference. She thanked Dr. Norm Walzer for his help. She noted that without the sponsorships the conference would not be possible and thanked those who had sponsored the conference.

The Lt. Governor thanked Dr. Merrett for his comments. She mentioned to the new members on the GRAC, that the GRAC members took a vote to support a strategic partnership and providing a GRAC engagement with rural communities. She believes that you have to allow communities to have conversations and for those communities to advise what type of assistance is needed.

She mentioned that if members would provide updates in the zoom chat, that Sarah Richman would send those out to everyone by email.

Betsy Dirksen Londrigan announced that during the December 21, 2022, “Funding Resources in Illinois” they received applications from six county regions.

Sonja Reece reminded all that consolidated elections were about a month away. She is hoping to find a way to connect and welcome the newly elected officials.

The Lt. Governor thanked Ms. Reece for the suggestion and things that is a great idea. She is hoping to have her office compile a list of the new elected officials so that information can be sent to each of them.

The Lt. Governor asked if there were any public comments. No comments were made.

The Lt. Governor announced the next quarterly meeting will be on June 6, 2023. The meeting will be in person and she will announce a location soon. She announced that the Illinois Council on Women and Girls will host a webinar on March 15th entitled, “Cultural Competency in Gender-Based Violence Services.”

She thanked everyone for their continued contributions to the GRAC and rural Illinois. She then requested a motion to adjourn.

Sonja Reece made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Heather Hampton-Knodle seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

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