

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
Meeting Minutes June 11, 2020**

1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:05AM.

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

2. Roll Call

Ex-Officio Member Present:

Office of the Illinois Lieutenant Governor, Juliana Stratton
Illinois Department of Agriculture, Robert Barren
Illinois Department of Aging, Jose Jimenez
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Sal Garza & Agnes Masnik
Illinois Department of Human Services, Erick Hanson
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Rachel Torbert
Illinois Community College Board, LaVonne Nelson
Illinois Department of Transportation, Mile Vanderhoof
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Anne Silvis
Illinois Housing Development Authority, William Pluta
Southern Illinois University, Laura Kessel
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Christopher Merrett & Sandy Wittig
Illinois Finance Authority, Charles Myart
Rural Partners, Molly Hammond

Not Present: Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois State Board of Education,
Illinois Department of Public Health, Illinois Farm Bureau

Resident Members Present:

Heather Hampton-Knodle
Sameer Vohra
Sonja Reece
Norm Walzer

Guests:

Doug Wilson, USDA-Rural Development
Karen Jenkins
Troy Horton
Shelly Tweedy
Senator Scott Bennett

Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:

Charles Watkins, Chief of Staff

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
Narciso Perez
Victoria Sanchez

Quorum determined.

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

Lt. Governor Stratton 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. Laura Kessel made a motion to accept the agenda as is. William Pluta seconded the motion. Motion passed.

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. Sal Garza made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Rachel Torbert. Motion passed. Minutes were approved.

4. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks

Lt. Governor Stratton stated when we last met COVID-19 was the main issue while now the whole world is shaken by the death of George Floyd. She noted that she has thought long and hard about the effects of COVID-19 and the recent death of George Floyd. As a justice practitioner and as the Lt. Governor, her work is grounded in principles of fairness and equity. She realizes the importance of this work as people worldwide reflect on the many unfair and inequitable systems of government. She noted there are systems in place in which select people are rewarded and others are marginalized for matters out of their control – whether that be about race, ethnicity, gender, ability, geographic placement, etc. Far too many of these systems fail to uplift.

She and Governor Pritzker have made it clear that police brutality is a terrible trend and the death of community members should not be condoned. She mentioned that the current protests have been powerful. Currently it's difficult to see nearly 6,000 deaths in Illinois reported by the Department of Public Health due to COVID-19. George Floyd's death in the midst of a global pandemic is especially difficult.

The Lt. Governor mentioned that she can't help but think about the inequities in rural Illinois and the many challenges of our rural residents. She realizes that COVID-19 has caused significant hardship on rural communities. She noted that justice, equity, and opportunity are values that guide her work.

She looks forward to this meeting and our conversations today because there is no question that she will learn about new challenges in rural communities and the solutions this council brings to those challenges.

At this time, the Lt. Governor asked if two or three members would like the opportunity to share a few comments.

Shelly Tweedy thanked the Lt. Governor and her staff for responding to the concerns of the community of Meredosia with the recent need for sand bagging to control flooding along the Illinois River, in the midst of COVID-19.

Sameer Vohra stated that with the pandemic and the tragic deaths there has been a unique nature of the protests. He mentioned even communities, such as Anna, that have reputations of not being friendly towards minorities have been involved. He mentioned challenges of racism are not isolated in health care and can be found throughout society. We must be intentional in policy and reforms to address issues of inequality.

The Lt. Governor stated that she welcomed the opportunity to plan conversations and be able to join in community meetings with GRAC members on these topics if that is a possibility.

5. New Business

a. Senator Scott Bennett – Focus on Illinois Farmers and Agriculture

Lt. Governor introduced Senator Scott Bennett, who among other responsibilities, is working with the Illinois Senate's Agriculture Committee. Senator Bennett thanked the Lt. Governor for her leadership. He stated even though the recent legislative session was short, progress has been made on key agricultural issues updates. He announced the following updates:

- i.** *Agricultural and the Plight of Pork Producers.* Senator Bennett explained that pork producers have experienced great hardship during the pandemic. He said he didn't realize that pork producers needed to follow such a specific timeframe on when to sell the hogs. When demand for meat declined because restaurants and other retail outlets reduced service, pork producers were not able to find alternative buyers for their products. He was glad to announce that funding in the CARES Act will help compensate producers for their losses.
- ii.** *Farmers in Crisis.* Senator Bennett then noted that farming is a stressful occupation at any time. Currently low commodity prices and COVID-19 have increased the stresses on the farming community to the point that we need to recognize "farmers in crisis." Currently plans are being implemented to establish a crisis hotline for farmers for mental health, financial health, and suicide prevention. His committee is using a model that is currently working in Minnesota provide a more robust safety net for Illinois farmers.

This model employs trained psychiatrists to take the calls on the hotline. There will also be farm advocates who have been through similar situations available. There is currently \$250,000 in the state budget for the hotline with hopes that it goes live this summer.

The Family Farm Resource Initiative (FFRI) is currently being established with SIU School of Medicine and the Illinois Extension. Senator Bennett mentioned that farmers are often reluctant to seek help partially because of lack of services available in rural areas.

He requested the GRAC's help in spreading the info when the hotline becomes available.

The Lt. Governor stated that her office is happy to offer full support for the initiative.

Laura Kessel, representing SIU School of Medicine, mentioned that she sent information to Levi Bain in the Office of the Lt. Governor describing the upcoming webinars and surveys related to the FFRI initiative.

Senator Bennett thanked everyone for their support in helping communicate the information about this outreach to Illinois farmers. Heather Hampton-Knodle thanked the Senator for his leadership on this initiative. She asked whom would be the point of contact for information.

Senator Bennett stated that his committee is still working on a plan for broadcasting news about these topics. He does not have a definite answer at this time, but the committee is working on creative ways to do distribute the information. The goal is to market this initiative broadly and repeatedly so people can access the help if needed. Please feel free to email Senator Bennett at senatorscottbennett@gmail.com with any ideas or questions.

The Lt. Governor thanked Senator Bennett for sharing this information at the GRAC. She noted that her office stands ready to help and support this work. She also stated her office will make sure to help communicate the initiative. She asked that information be sent to Laura Kessel. Laura will collect the info and then send it out to all GRAC members.

b. Strategic Report / Annual Report Update

Lt. Governor Stratton announced she would like to discuss the 2020 Annual Report. She offered special thanks to Dr. Christopher Merrett and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) for all of the work that has gone into this report, especially to ensure this report is COVID-19 responsive. She also thanked Bobby and Levi for working closely with Dr. Merrett so that the report reflects the work the entire GRAC.

Chris Merrett provided a brief overview and update of the report. He stated that the report is in draft form. Chris discussed key issues in the report, such as ongoing challenges of rural depopulation, business succession planning, challenges of rural healthcare

accessibility, and the persistent rural-urban educational attainment gap in Illinois. He mentioned that the report includes data that is closely aligned with the issues being discussed in the GRAC subcommittees.

The Lt. Governor thanked Chris for all of his work on this very comprehensive report. She then requested updates from each of the three GRAC subcommittees.

c. GRAC Committee Reports

i. Economic Development & Infrastructure

Norm Walzer stated that the committee has not been very active as a committee, but each member has been active in their agency. He stated they are working on a best practice for rural communities that could be included in publications such as the Rural Research Reports produced by the IIRA. He would like to replicate programs from other states.

He noted that there challenges in gathering data to implement programs. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, rural small businesses are struggling. It would be good to get detailed information on how best to help these businesses. However, because businesses are relatively small, it is hard to systemically collect good information. Dr. Walzer offered that this could possibly be accomplished through surveys.

Norm mentioned that business succession is a big challenge in rural areas. Many business owners are nearing retirement and want to sell their businesses. One way to facilitate these transitions is to design a website that would connect business owners wanting to sell their business to retire with those people wanting to purchase businesses. Dr. Walzer also noted that in rural areas where finding an individual to purchase a business, a non-profit or other community-based enterprise could buy the business to help the store owner retire, while keeping the business operating in the community.

Norm did mention that there are concerns about small businesses having access to funds on a state and federal level.

The Lt. Governor thanked Norm for working on these various issues. Her office will put together a list of resources that are available for small businesses to be sent out to all GRAC members. She suggested the opportunity to have a call with DCEO and the Treasurer's Office to allow small businesses who wanted to participate to hear about available help.

Charles Watkins mentioned that he is working on this currently.

Agnes Masnik mentioned that she is happy to assist with a targeted call. Lt. Governor Stratton asked her team reach out to Agnes and work out the details.

ii. **Health & Healthcare**

Laura Kessel stated her committee has not met, but they have been actively working on telehealth. She provided a brief update noting that some of the executive orders need to be made permanent in order for telehealth to succeed in the future. Laura announced that during the month of May, SIU had over 12,000 telehealth visits.

One problem area for telehealth is the lack of broadband in rural areas.

Sal Garza stressed the importance of telehealth. As senior citizens continue to age in place, broadband is needed. He also mentioned that the DCEO Office of Broadband, directed by Matt Schmit, will be awarding the first round of broadband grants in the near future.

The Lt. Governor thanked Laura for her report and for the committees' work. She noted that because we as a state were already working on telehealth, it has allowed us to move forward when the pandemic happened. It is another reason that she believes the GRAC needs to be proactive.

iii. **Education and Workforce Development**

Bobby Mannis provided an overview of the committee's work. One issue the committee is discussing is secondary education. He announced there will be a 3-part webinar series offered in July.

Bobby is working on obtaining national experts as speakers so that the webinars will appeal to both students and those working in secondary education.

The Lt. Governor thanked Bobby for his committee's report.

Lt. Governor Stratton explained that she had previously sent members of the GRAC info on the Hunt Fellowship webinar that she has participated in.

LaVonne Nelson mentioned she had participated in the webinar, but she does not have any information on the webinars that Bobby mentioned.

The Lt. Governor will plan to include LaVonne when planning the educational webinar. Her team will connect with LaVonne to discuss further.

Lt. Governor Stratton thanked everyone for their presentations. She asked is anyone wished to add anything to the draft of the annual report.

LaVonne mentioned that she emailed a change to Levi and Bobby that parallel text should be used. Bobby said that he had received her email.

Heather Hampton-Knodle requested that Chris explain the graph on page 13 of the annual report. Chris explained that it was workforce index, showing whether the workforce was growing, remaining the same, or shrinking over time. A value greater than 1 means the workforce is growing whereas a value less than 1 means the workforce is shrinking.

Heather inquired if there are graphs to identify workforce skill sets by sector or geographic region. Chris mentioned that this has been discussed. Heather noted that she sees a pattern with the poverty rate. She thinks that we should look at the level of federal and state programs in relation to poverty.

Lt. Governor Stratton said not everything can be included in this report. However, all of these issues are important. We might need to develop a specific ad hoc committee to discuss some of these issues.

LaVonne noted that we also need to look at racial disparities in rural Illinois.

The Lt. Governor agreed that this is extremely important and this will be addressed in upcoming meetings. She requested that any additional thought be emailed to Levi or Bobby.

Sonja Reece made a motion to proceed with this draft of the annual report. Norm Walzer seconded the motion.

The Lt. Governor announced that the final edits will be made based on today's meeting.

The motion passed.

6. Member Updates and Reports

Chris Merrett announced that the IIRA is currently updating the Rural Development Resource Guide (RDRG). Chris provided a brief overview of this guide, which includes state and federal agencies, as well as non-profits, which provide financial support such as grants and loans, as well as data and technical assistance to help rural communities and businesses.

Sandy Wittig explained that a document with an inventory of programs offered by each member agency of the GRAC will be sent to each agency as a starting point to update the RDRG. Agencies will be asked to review the programs listed for their respective agencies. We are asking that agencies respond if there are errors, omissions, or other suggestions to improve the RDRG.

A blank template will also be included for any programs not already listed. Once an agency has reviewed their programs, they are asked to email the updated document to Sandy.

The end result of updating the RDRG will be a searchable online database of all community development, economic development, and agricultural programs that can help rural communities, businesses, and farmers in the state. It will help the GRAC serve as a clearinghouse of rural development programs and ideas for the residents of Illinois.

The Lt. Governor thanked Sandy and Chris for this information and for their work on this project.

Janell Gurnsey mentioned she is currently working on a social media campaign entitled, "Cultivating Our Communities." This identifies farmers, specialty growers, and small businesses who either produce or sell these products or goods. Please send her any updates you may have.

The Lt. Governor thanked Janell for her comments. She then asked if there were any public comments. There were no public comments at this time.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced the next meeting is scheduled for September 10th from 10:00Am-11:30AM. She then requested a motion to adjourn.

Sonja Reece made a motion to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 11:33am.

Respectfully Submitted:

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