

GEORGIA MOUNTAINS REGIONAL COMMISSION
COUNCIL MEETING

February 29, 2024

MINUTES

The GMRC Council held its regular monthly meeting on Thursday, February 29, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. at Hidden Acres Event Venue located at 6467 Old Gillsville Road, Gillsville, GA 30543. The meeting was hosted by Banks County and the Town of Homer.

CALL TO ORDER

GMRC Vice-Chairman Courtney Umbehant called the meeting to order at 6:11 p.m.

WELCOME/INTRODUCTIONS

Banks County BOC Chairman Charles Turk welcomed everybody to Banks County and introduced Danny Maxwell, Banks County BOC Vice-Chairman; and Chris Ausburn, Banks County Commissioner. Chairman Turk introduced and thanked the Banks County staff that were present. Mr. Turk also thanked Jax Shack and Bedford's Cheesecakes for catering and Hidden Acres Event Venue for the use of their space.

Town of Homer Mayor Doug Cheek also welcomed all to Banks County and introduced Town of Homer Council members Cliff Hill, Sandra Garrison, and James Dumas.

INTRODUCTION OF SPECIAL GUESTS

Vice-Chairman Courtney Umbehant recognized special guests; Cheryl Smith, Georgia Department of Agriculture; Kathy Papa, Department of Community Affairs; Mike Fisher, WGI; Luke Hetland, North Georgia Field Director for Lt. Governor Burt Jones; Bobbi Larson, University of North Georgia; and Dr. Michael Shannon, University of North Georgia.

INVOCATION/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE/DINNER

GMRC Council Chaplain Deborah Mack gave the devotion, invocation, and followed with the Pledge of Allegiance. Dinner was catered by Jax Shack and Bedford's Cheesecakes.

PROGRAM

Dr. Michael Shannon, President of the University of North Georgia, provided an update on the university's programs.

A copy of the presentation can be found at <https://www.gmrc.ga.gov/gmrccouncil>.

CONSIDERATION OF MINUTES AND ATTENDANCE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Vice-Chairman Umbehant asked for any comments or a motion regarding the minutes and attendance report for the January 25, 2024 Council meeting. Doug Wayne made a motion to approve the minutes as written and John Walden seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

REPORTS

Chairman's Report

Vice-Chairman Courney Umbehant was happy to report that HB 1253, legislation affecting the organizational structure of Regional Commissions across the state did not pass through on Crossover Day and is now dead.

Mr. Umbehant went on to report that he will be attending the DDAA/NADO Conference in Washington, D.C. with GMRC staff, Chairman Ken Schubring, and Secretary Bruce Palmer. Executive Director Feldman is the President of the DDAA Board. Planning Director Adam Hazell and Information Services Director Faith Bryan will be presenting at the conference.

Executive Director's Report

Executive Director Feldman welcomed and introduced the newest GMRC Council members. Kim Waters of Hall County had recently been sworn in as Governor Kemp's appointee. Additionally, Ron Matheson, Councilman for the City of Toccoa is replacing David Austin as the city's representative in Stephens County. Mrs. Feldman and Ms. Kessler have already conducted orientation with both new members and are excited about their leadership on the GMRC Council.

GMRC is pleased to welcome its newest employee, Ms. Maggie Smith, who is serving as the new Project Manager for Economic Development. Ms. Smith began her employment with GMRC on Monday, February 5th.

Executive Director Feldman was recently selected by the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) to serve as a Mentor for new Executive Directors of planning organizations similar to GMRC across the United States. Mrs. Feldman has been provided two mentees, one of whom is in west central Missouri and the other is in southern Colorado. They have scheduled Zoom meetings to introduce themselves and will be meeting virtually over the next several months.

Heather Feldman; Alicia Page, Finance Director; Nona Turk, Senior Financial Assistant; and Cheryl Smith, Financial Assistant recently attended the SERDI Finance Training in Greenville, SC. Topics included Uniform Guidance, fundamental accounting, navigating federal requirements, and human resources, to name a few. Regional Commission finances are unique, and this training provided the opportunity to learn from peers across the multi-state SERDI Region.

Patrick Larson, Economic Development Director; Laurin Yoder, Senior Project Manager; and Heather Feldman were selected and are participating in the 2nd national cohort of RLF – Communities of Practice (COP) operated by Grow America. This initiative entails a robust schedule of training over 10 weeks to provide RLF operators opportunities to better understand and address the need for flexible, accessible, recovery, and growth-oriented small business financing. This Community of Practice will help build RLF organizational capacity, increase qualified high-impact deployment rates of RLF funding, and build an effective and sustainable RLF program. Sessions include: RLF tactics, marketing, underwriting, portfolio management, and technology and innovation.

Senior Project Manager Laurin Yoder and OJT Program Coordinator Niki McPherson recently participated in the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce’s Business Expo on February 15th to promote the RLF program and services of Workforce Development.

Mrs. Feldman reported that work has begun on the 2025 budget and thanked Alicia Page for her work on getting a draft budget prepared. GMRC is continuing to see a decrease in funding from Technical College System of Georgia as it relates to Workforce Development. The Finance Committee has met to discuss the draft budget, which will be brought forward to the full Council next month.

GMRC has exhausted its five-year contract for auditing services with Rushton. A Request for Proposals was issued on February 6th for auditing services for the fiscal years ending 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28. Proposals are due back to the GMRC on March 22nd.

Executive Director Feldman reminded the Council that GMRC is continuing its work with the Center for Economic Development Research at Georgia Tech on the Georgia Artificial Intelligence in Manufacturing grant (GA-AIM). GA-AIM had its first focus group on February 28, 2024 focusing on topics such as the skepticism around AI, how it relates to workforce development, infrastructure, education, and government. Mrs. Feldman emphasized how important this information could be to local manufacturers and asked all attendees to please encourage their local businesses to attend the next focus group on March 20, 2024 at Lanier College and Career Academy in Oakwood, Georgia. Registration is free and lunch will be provided.

Mrs. Feldman was excited to announce that GMRC has an intern through the workforce development program to help redesign the GMRC’ s website. A new and improved website will be coming soon.

Executive Director Feldman reported that the GMRC’ s quarterly Region 2 City and County Managers meeting was held on Wednesday, February 21st at 10:00 a.m., and thanked Stephens County for hosting the meeting and Carter and Sloope Engineering for sponsoring lunch. The 30 attendees heard a special presentation on the Blue Ridge Connector (Inland Port) by Taylor Worley, GA Ports Authority; Tim Evans, Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce; and Zach Propes, Hall County Administrator.

Save the Date: The annual clerks meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, April 30th. This is a great opportunity for Region 2 clerks to network with each other and discuss topics of mutual interest and benefit. DCA staff will be in attendance to also host a mini training session on local government reporting. More information will be forthcoming, but if there are any questions or a need for additional information, please contact Gina Kessler at 770-538-2607 or gkessler@gmrc.ga.gov

Legislative Update – CROSSOVER DAY

February 29, 2024 was the Georgia Legislature Crossover Day. Executive Director Feldman reported that she was monitoring several bills that could potentially have implications to the RC.

HB 1253 – Does go away, but there is a section that talks about creating rural tax districts. Three rural counties can partner together if they have seen a decline in revenues, while this does not affect the Regional Commission directly, Mrs. Feldman will continue to monitor.

HB 269 - Relating to meetings open to the public, limitation on action to contest agency action, recording, notice of time and place, access to minutes, and telecommunications conferences, so as to authorize local workforce development boards, formed pursuant to the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, and their associated committees and local officials to conduct meetings via teleconference.

Status: HB 269 is pending in the Senate Rules Committee. The Senate will start putting House Bills on the Senate Rules Calendar for the Senate Floor after today – Crossover Day.

**There is a similar bill SB 26 which allows for the same as it relates to Development Authorities and Community Improvement Districts.

HB 982 - Relating to the State Workforce Development Board, so as to require the State Workforce Development Board to develop, approve, and annually publish a High-demand Career List identifying those careers most critical to the state's current and future workforce needs.

Status: Passed House, sent to Senate and referred to Higher Education Committee.

SB 499 - Relating to coordinated and comprehensive planning and service delivery by counties and municipalities, so as to revise provisions for establishing, negotiating, reviewing, revising, and filing local government service delivery strategies; to require the development of state-wide mapping standards; and to revise the dispute resolution process.

Status: Referred to State and Local Government Operations Committee.

OLD BUSINESS

Presentation of Strategic Plan

A draft of the updated Strategic Plan was emailed to all Council members on Monday, February 5, 2024, Executive Director Feldman presented a PowerPoint on the updates that had been made. Mrs. Feldman explained to the Council that over the last year, GMRC senior management has been working on updating the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is intended to provide a framework for the agency's continued success and refocus our efforts on crucial challenges and opportunities.

A variety of methods were used to gather and analyze data and to engage staff, Council, and other stakeholders throughout the strategic planning process. Surveys were sent out last spring and summer to Council members and key stakeholders in each city and county. Additionally, GMRC staff completed an internal Employee Engagement Survey.

Goals for the 2024-2028 Strategic Plan include the following:

1. To achieve the highest standard of customer service on behalf of our local communities, government partners, and our regional stakeholders.
2. Optimize organizational efficiency and cultivate an engaged workforce.
3. To make the GMRC brand recognized for dependability, innovation, and a high standard of programs, products, and services.
4. Cultivate and strengthen relationships with our state and federal partners.

Vice-Chairman Umbehant asked for a motion to adopt the 2024-2028 Strategic Plan as presented. Bill Chafin made a motion to adopt the plan and JoAnne Taylor seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.


NEW BUSINESS

None

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.



Ken Schubring, Chairman



Bruce Palmer, Secretary

GMRC COUNCIL
ATTENDANCE SHEET
2023-2024

COUNTY	COUNCIL MEMBER	July 23	Aug 23	Sept 23	Oct 23	Nov 23	Dec 23	Jan 24	Feb 24	March 24	April 24	May 24	June 24
BANKS	Chris Ausburn	P	(R)	A	(R)	P	P	P	P				
	Sandra Garrison	(P)	P	A	A	P	P	P	P				
	Vicki Boling Jones	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	A				
DAWSON	Billy Thurmond	P	A	P	P	P	A	A	P				
	John Walden	(P)	P	P	A	A	P	N-A	P				
	Kevin Herrit	A	P	P	P	P	P	A	P				
FRANKLIN	Robert Franklin	P	A	A	A	A	P	P	P				
	Courtney Umbehant**	P	P	P	P	(P)	P	P	P				
	Leslie McFarlin	P	P	P	A	P	P	P	P				
HABERSHAM	Bruce Palmer***	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	A				
	Ray McAllister	P	P	A	A	V	V	N-P	P				
	Ken Schubring*	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	A				
HALL	Richard Higgins	A	A	A	A	R	A	E	A				
	Sam Couvillon	P	P	P	P	P	A	N-A	P				
	Deborah Mack	P	P	P	P	A	P	P	P				
HART	Jeff Brown	A	P	A	A	P	A	A	A				
	Dan Leard	P	P	A	A	P	A	P	A				
	Bill Chafin	P	P	P	P	P	P	A	P				
LUMPKIN	Chris Dockery	(R)	(R)	A	P	R	R	P	A				
	JoAnne Taylor	P	A	A	P	P	A	E	P				
	Amy Booker	N	A	P	A	A	P	P	A				

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RABUN	Kent Woerner	(R)	A	A	(R)	(R)	A	A	(R)				
	Althea Bleckley	P	P	P	A	A	P	A	A				
	Douglas Wayne	P	P	A	P	P	P	A	P				
STEPHENS	Tara Simmons	P	A	P	P	A	P	P	E				
	Ron Matheson	P	P	(R)	A	A	A	V	P				
TOWNS	James Addison	P	E	P	P	P	P	P	A				
	Cliff Bradshaw	P	P	P	(P)	(P)	P	P	(P)				
	Andrea Gibby	P	(R)	(R)	A	A	A	N-E	(R)				
	Denise McKay	R	P	P	P	P	A	(R)	P				
UNION	Lamar Paris	P	P	A	P	A	P	P	P				
	Jim Conley	P	P	(P)	P	P	P	E	P				
	Mitch Griggs	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P				
WHITE	Travis Turner	(P)	(P)	P	(P)	A	P	(P)	A				
	Nan Bowen	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P				
GOV APPT.	Susan Cremering	A	P	P	P	A	P	A	P				
	Kim Waters	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	N-P				
	Angela Whidby	P	A	P	P	A	P	P	P				
LT. GOV APPT.	VACANT	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V				
	VACANT	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V				
	VACANT	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V				

P = PRESENT A = ABSENT (R) = REPRESENTED (P) PROXY VOTE V = VACANCY E = EXCUSED N = NEW MEMBER X = NO MEETING

* Chairman
** Vice Chairman
*** Secretary