

HOUSATONIC IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Tuesday, January 27, 2026

Time: 6:30 pm - 8:41 pm

Ramsdell Library

1087 Main Street, Housatonic, MA

1. ***Open Meeting:*** The meeting was opened at 6:30pm with a community potluck. No one was recording the meeting.
2. ***Call to Order:*** Sara Parker called the meeting to order at 6:51pm.

Members Present: Sara Parker, Eric Gabriel, Louise Goldsmith, Beverly Nourse, Betsy Turnbough, Ben Elliot

Members Absent: Amanda Giracca

30 people attended in person, 6 people online.

Melanie McCarthy assisted with note-taking.

3. ***Welcome and Opening Remarks:*** Sara Parker thanked attendees for coming and offered remarks on the importance of gathering in community, acknowledging collective grief and frustration while emphasizing shared values, dignity, and collaborative problem-solving.
4. ***Materials from the Historical Commission:*** Marilyn Bisiewicz provided *Great Barrington Here and Gone* books for the Committee. Additional copies are available at the Historical Society for purchase and the Ramsdell Library for check-out.
5. ***Developing Shared Agreements:*** The Committee engaged in an extended discussion of drafted Shared Agreements intended to guide how members work together over the coming year. This discussion was framed as stewardship of the work rather than culture-setting for its own sake, emphasizing sustainability, mutual care, and shared responsibility.

Members reflected on what helps them stay present and engaged, what drains their energy, and what supports collaboration. Louise Goldsmith emphasized clear communication as a way to help the group find its way back when conversations feel difficult. Betsy Turnbough highlighted active listening, connection, patience, and a sense of humor as important to effective collaboration. Ben Elliot shared that knowing expectations and concrete next steps helps reduce burnout. Eric Gabriel noted the importance of recognizing when he is overcommitted and taking steps to arrive at meetings grounded and focused.

The group discussed how to respond when someone feels overwhelmed and cannot follow through, how to handle disagreement without personalizing it, and how to respect time and capacity both during and outside meetings. Members agreed that the group should prioritize dignity, trust, and care for neighbors even when opinions differ. The

Shared Agreements were acknowledged as a starting point and a living document to be revisited later in the year. They are as follows:

Agreement #1: Shared commitment to treating neighbors with dignity, even when opinions differ. Encourage diversity of thought and experience

Agreement #2: Focus on the task at hand, show up to the meetings centered and grounded

Agreement #3: Be honest about your capacity. Ask for and offer help

Agreement #4: Remember we're all rowing on the same boat—trust and care are implicit in that. We are stronger together than we are apart

6. ***Committee Updates***

- a. Ramsdell Building Committee Update—Ruby Chang: Ruby Chang reported that the planning and design phase funded by the MBLC grant is complete and currently under commissioner review, with an update expected by the end of January. The next submission phase is due at the end of March. The project is in a brief lull between design and construction documents. Community input influenced lighting, entrances, clean energy features, and walkability.
- b. Housatonic Tree Planting Update—Louise Goldsmith: Louise Goldsmith reported on ongoing efforts to restore Housatonic's tree canopy. Trees have been pre-ordered using funds raised through sponsorships. A community tree planting is tentatively planned for the weekend after Earth Day, weather permitting. Tree sponsorships remain available for purchase through Housatonic the Beautiful Fund at <https://www.housatonicthebeautiful.org/sponsored-programs>. \$100 to sponsor a tree, \$165 to sponsor a tree and get a commemorative pet plaque.
- c. Housatonic Filter Initiative—Donna Jacobs: Donna Jacobs provided an update on the Housatonic Filter Initiative and requested volunteers to support the effort. A brief video from a CTSB panel was shown.

7. ***HiC 2026 Goals and Work Plan:*** The Committee reviewed the six adopted goals for 2026 and discussed how the January meeting marked the transition from planning to implementation. Project plans were confirmed, and members reviewed January action items associated with each goal.

Specific discussion focused on ensuring timelines were realistic, clarifying who was responsible for early deliverables, and identifying where collaboration between the Committee and community members would be most effective. Members confirmed alignment with the overall framework and agreed to revisit progress regularly throughout the year to maintain accountability and adjust as needed.

The agreed-to action items for January are as follows:

- a. Goal 1: Support Ramsdell Renovation Efforts
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Host two public events with community library stakeholders before May 2026. Beverly Nourse is responsible for this sub-goal. Bev agreed to determine event timing and locations by the February HiC meeting.
 - ii. Sub-goal 2: Create and distribute at least one educational resource by May 2026. Beverly Nourse and Betsy Turnbough are responsible for this sub-goal. Bev and Betsy agreed to outline key questions or concerns from the community in preparation for the February HiC meeting.

- b. Goal 2: Create More Opportunities for Community Connection
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Host or co-host three community events. Sara Parker, Betsy Turnbough, and Eric Gabriel are responsible for this sub-goal. Sara, Betsy, and Eric agreed to lock in dates for Halloween, Winter Lights, Party in the Park, Earth Day, and/or ancillary events (Berkshire Busk in Housatonic) by the February HiC meeting.
 - ii. Sub-goal 2: Pilot at least one new community gathering format by October 2026. Sara Parker is responsible for this sub-goal. There is no action item for January.
 - iii. Sub-goal 3: Engage at least 10 local volunteer or partner groups. Ben Elliott is responsible for this sub-goal. Ben agreed to map existing stakeholder groups by category for the February HiC meeting.

- c. Goal 3: Advance Local Trail and Canopy Restoration
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Develop an actionable plan for connecting the Flag Rock Trail to the village core by December 2026. Amanda Giracca and Eric Gabriel are responsible for this sub-goal. Eric agreed to identify access point, right-of-way, or easement issues by March HiC meeting—he will know more by February if the March deadline is realistic.
 - ii. Sub-goal 2: Plant at least 20 new trees. Louise Goldsmith is responsible for this sub-goal. There is no action item for January.
 - iii. Sub-goal 3: Launch a community tree sponsorship program. Louise Goldsmith is responsible for this sub-goal. There is no action item for January.

- d. Goal 4: Advocate for and Advance Public Outdoor Spaces and Improvement Efforts
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Host at least one public forum or listening session to gather community priorities. Amanda Giracca, Beverly Nourse, and Eric Gabriel are responsible for this sub-goal. There is no action item for January.
 - ii. Sub-goal 2: Collaborate with HTBF and DPW for at least three “quick-win” beautification projects by Oct 2026. Sara Parker is responsible for this sub-goal. Sara agreed to meet with HTBF and DPW to identify “quick-win” projects by the February HiC meeting.
 - iii. Sub-goal 3: Develop inventory and visual map of potential public improvement sites by September 2026. Ben Elliott is responsible for this

sub-goal. Ben agreed to compile an initial list of public improvement sites by the February HiC meeting.

- e. Goal 5: Strengthen Housatonic’s Shared Story and Visual Identity
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Begin design conversations with local artists for a public mural on the train trestle by August 2026. Louise Goldsmith is responsible for this sub-goal. Louise agreed to identify and contact mural artists or artist collectives by the March HiC meeting. Anna Taiga offered to collaborate with Louise to support this sub-goal.
 - ii. Sub-goal 2: Create a village logo and one-page story by December 2026. Ben Elliott is responsible for this sub-goal. There is no action item for January. Community members offered that this could be a good way to get middle and high school kids involved.
 - f. Goal 6: Improve Communication Between HiC and the Community
 - i. Sub-goal 1: Establish at least one shared communication channel by June 2026. Amanda Giracca and Betsy Turnbough are responsible for this sub-goal. Betsy agreed to survey the community to assess preferred channel(s) by the February HiC meeting.
 - g. Anna Taiga pointed out that water is a large issue for Housatonic. She offered to support working this initiative into community events, tabling at events, or providing support for families to be able to attend meetings like this. Julie Kunz highlighted that enrichment activities at the park are needed, as well as volunteer coordination for childcare at meetings. Ben Elliott is on the Childcare Committee—he offered to look into childcare opportunities in the Town Budget Process. Jovanina Pagano shared that it could be a community monetary contribution as well, suggesting that \$50 per month could be split between all of the meeting attendees to be less than \$3 per person.
8. ***Youth and Young Family Engagement Discussion:*** The Committee held a detailed discussion of how to better engage young people and young families in HiC and community life. The conversation was framed around accessibility and inclusion, including barriers such as childcare, meeting timing, language differences, and cultural dynamics.

Bettlin Young-Taft’s son Langston noted that young people are more likely to attend when they feel they have a clear stake in the conversation and can see tangible outcomes from their involvement. Suggestions included outreach through schools and youth organizations, working directly with student government and advisory boards, inviting youth groups to use meetings as an introduction to local government, and creating opportunities for youth-led presentations or showcases.

The group also discussed the importance of addressing social and cultural barriers, including concerns about microaggressions or the expectations that individuals educate others in the room. Ideas included offering volunteer childcare, varying meeting formats

and locations, hosting youth-centered events outside of formal meetings, and identifying and supporting youth leaders who could help bring peers into the process. Jovanina Pagano offered that reframing meetings as shared community spaces rather than adult-only forums would be essential to meaningful engagement.

Sara Parker agreed to follow up with Melanie McCarthy and Berkshire Environmental Action Team to learn more about the live translation headsets offered through Language Justice Solutions. Sara also noted that the Committee would reach out to Kelsey Romano and Chris Dinelo at MMHS's Student Adult Advisory Board to begin discussions following this conversation.

9. ***Committee Administration***

- a. Beautification Pilot Funding Request: The Committee discussed a request from Town Manager, Liz Hartsgrove, regarding a line item on the potential Town Budget for a beautification/celebration pilot. The Committee moved to request the full available amount of \$7,500 for the budget, all Committee members agreed.
- b. Tree City USA Plaques: The Committee agreed to request four Tree City USA plaques from the Tree Committee and the Arbor Day Foundation to be placed at the following locations: One by Taft Farms entering Housatonic, one at the other end of Division Street, one on each side of 183 (North and South).
- c. Committee Email: Sara Parker noted the official email address of the committee: hc@townofgbma.gov. Sara will check the inbox weekly. Betsy Turnbough and Amanda Giracca also have login access.
- d. Approval of Minutes: Eric Gabriel moved to approve the minutes from the November 18, 2025 meeting. Ben Elliott seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

10. ***Meeting Dates and Minutes Assignments***

- a. Upcoming meeting dates were discussed and confirmed:
 - i. February 24, 2026: Tentative date to be confirmed with committee members, as Ben Elliott, Louise Goldsmith, and Eric Gabriel are unable to make that date. Betsy Turnbough agreed to take minutes.
 - ii. March 24, 2026: All agreed to this meeting date. Ben Elliott agreed to take minutes.

11. ***All Things Housatonic:*** The Committee discussed a wide range of community initiatives and updates:

- a. Berkshire Busk! in Housatonic: The Committee discussed supporting Berkshire Busk! in Housatonic, tentatively planned for July 18 on Depot and Main Streets. While financial support from the Committee is not available, Eric Gabriel made a motion to support the organization by assisting with the Arts Build Community grant application at the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation. Louise Goldsmith seconded. Sara Parker offered to co-write the grant, and Betsy

Turnbough offered additional support. The motion passed unanimously. Members discussed logistical concerns, including advance notice to residents and coordination with local businesses.

- b. August Long Table Event: The Committee discussed the possibility of hosting an August Long Table event. Members noted potential logistical challenges, including food coordination potentially solved by bringing in food trucks and outdoor setup. No decision was made, and the conversation will continue at a future meeting.
- c. Housatonic Walking Tour: The Committee discussed a proposed walking tour of Housatonic. The tour would include defined stops with text, photographs, and audio narration accessible via a mobile app. Wylie Goodman, Olivia Good, AJ, Jennifer Tabakin offered to assist with research, narration, and outreach. Marilyn Bisiewicz previously agreed to support, as well.
- d. Housatonic the Beautiful Fund (HTBF) Updates: Eric Gabriel shared updates regarding Party in the Park (June 13) and Earth Day (April 25). Earth Day plans include starting near the Ramsdell Library, morning coffee, cleanup efforts, and potentially an ad hoc gathering afterwards. Louise Goldsmith and Chris Wiltshire were tasked with identifying a site for an Earth Day tree planting. A motion was made to approve moving forward with Party in the Park and associated town permission applications. The motion passed unanimously.
- e. EPA and GE updates: Olivia Lopez of the EPA and Bill Callen of GE introduced themselves, related to the Rest of River Cleanup and future conversations with community members in Housatonic. Both emphasized their availability to the community and commitment to timely responses. Olivia's email is Lopez.Olivia@epa.gov and Bill's email is Bill.Callen@behancom.com. More Rest of River information can be found here: www.housatonicriverproject.com, 888-596-3655, info@housatonicriverproject.com
- f. Fiber Infrastructure Update: Ben Elliott provided an update on fiber infrastructure improvements, noting that the library, fire station, and Housy Dome are now connected. Public Wi-Fi hotspots are planned for installation in the spring, which will support events like Party in the Park and provide expanded free public internet access.
- g. Future Agendas: The Committee agreed to begin talking about the various Housatonic-specific applications for the Community Preservation Act grants to be voted on at Town Meeting in May, so that community members are aware of the funding opportunities. The Committee also agreed to put a line item on the February HiC agenda to discuss seasonal community designation and residential tax exemption.

12. **Citizen Speak:** Wylie Goodman spoke about concerns related to rail traffic through Housatonic, noting diesel trains passing through uncovered in previous areas she's lived, and referencing advocacy efforts and related regional organizations like CURE.

Bill Meier and Maureen Meier spoke about housing affordability and the proposed residential tax exemption classification being discussed at the Selectboard level. Bill expressed concern about the impact of large town initiatives on residents' tax burdens and stated his belief that the residential tax exemption could help Great Barrington and Housatonic residents remain in town.

Maureen spoke to the complexity of the proposal and emphasized the need for a clear public education campaign, noting that many residents will need accessible explanations of how tax classification and assessments would affect homeowners, renters, and landlords. She encouraged residents to attend Selectboard meetings and participate during public comments.

Louise Goldsmith asked how community members could best support the initiative. Maureen suggested continued public engagement and speaking out during upcoming meetings.

Eric Gabriel shared that the Selectboard and Town Assessor reviewed a detailed report last night on the potential impacts of the residential tax exemption. He noted that understanding the mathematics and downstream effects, including possible impacts on rent, takes time, and that similar approaches in other Massachusetts communities have shown positive results.

Ben Elliott clarified that the tax rate decision is within the Selectboard's authority, while certain related bylaws affecting rentals would require Town Meeting approval. He encouraged residents to submit feedback, questions, and concerns in advance of the March meeting, when public input will be reviewed.

Donna Jacobs encouraged Committee members and attendees to serve as ambassadors for local initiatives, including the Housatonic Filter Initiative, and offered to share additional information with interested residents.

Julie Kunz noted that state agencies such as the MA Department of Public Utilities need to see that funds and programs are being used effectively and transparently.

Eric shared that Town Manager Liz Hartsgrove did a large mail campaign. As of two weeks ago, 50% of the remaining funds have been disseminated.

13. **Media Time:** Amelia Ellis from the Berkshire Edge introduced herself and noted interest in continued coverage.

14. *Adjournment*: Eric Gabriel moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:41 pm. Ben Elliott seconded. The motion was approved unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:41 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Sara Parker, Chair