

HOUSE No. 403

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

PRESENTED BY:

Natalie M. Blais

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court assembled:

The undersigned legislators and/or citizens respectfully petition for the adoption of the accompanying bill:

An Act relative to the rural policy advisory commission.

PETITION OF:

NAME:	DISTRICT/ADDRESS:	DATE ADDED:
<i>Natalie M. Blais</i>	<i>1st Franklin</i>	<i>1/11/2023</i>
<i>Mindy Domb</i>	<i>3rd Hampshire</i>	<i>1/13/2023</i>
<i>Margaret R. Scarsdale</i>	<i>1st Middlesex</i>	<i>2/8/2023</i>
<i>Patricia A. Duffy</i>	<i>5th Hampden</i>	<i>2/27/2023</i>

HOUSE No. 403

By Representative Blais of Deerfield, a petition (accompanied by bill, House, No. 403) of Natalie M. Blais and others for legislation to establish a special commission (including members of the General Court) to enhance the economic vitality of rural communities. Economic Development and Emerging Technologies.

[SIMILAR MATTER FILED IN PREVIOUS SESSION
SEE HOUSE, NO. 364 OF 2019-2020.]

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

**In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court
(2023-2024)**

An Act relative to the rural policy advisory commission.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Chapter 23A of the General Laws is hereby amended by striking out section
2 66, as appearing in the 2016 Official Edition, and inserting in place thereof the following
3 section:-

4 Section 66. Rural policy advisory commission; members; powers and duties; meetings;
5 annual report

6 (a) There shall be a rural policy advisory commission within, but not subject to the
7 supervision or control of, the executive office of housing and economic development. The
8 mission of the commission shall be to enhance the economic vitality of rural communities,

9 defined as municipalities with population densities of less than 500 persons per square mile, and
10 to advance the health and well-being of rural residents.

11 (b) The commission shall consist of the following 15 members: the speaker of the house
12 of representative, ex officio, or a designee; the president of the senate, ex officio, or a designee;
13 the secretary of housing and economic development, ex officio, or a designee; twelve persons to
14 be appointed by the governor, one of whom shall be from the Berkshire regional planning
15 commission, one of whom shall be from the Cape Cod commission, one of whom shall be from
16 the central Massachusetts regional planning district commission, one of whom shall be from the
17 Franklin Regional Council of Governments, one of whom shall be from the Martha's Vineyard
18 commission, one of whom shall be from the Montachusett regional planning commission, one of
19 whom shall be from the Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission, one of
20 whom shall be from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and one of whom shall be from
21 the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District. Commission members
22 shall be persons with demonstrated interests and experience in advancing the interests of rural
23 residents.

24 (c) Members of the commission shall be appointed to staggered three year terms, with the
25 terms of five members expiring each year. Members shall serve terms of three years and until
26 their successors are appointed. Vacancies in the membership of the commission shall be filled
27 for the balance of an unexpired term. Members may serve a maximum of three consecutive terms
28 or nine consecutive years. The commission shall elect from among its members a chair, vice
29 chair, a treasurer, and any other officers it considers necessary. The members of the commission
30 shall receive no compensation for their services but shall be reimbursed for any unusual and

31 customary expenses incurred in the performance of their duties. Members shall be considered
32 special state employees for the purposes of chapter 268A.

33 (d) The commission shall serve as a research body for issues critical to the welfare and
34 vitality of rural communities and shall: (i) study, review and report on the status of rural
35 communities and residents in the commonwealth; (ii) advise the general court and the executive
36 branch of the impact of existing and proposed state laws, policies and regulations on rural
37 communities; (iii) advance legislative and policy solutions that address rural needs; (iv) advocate
38 to ensure that rural communities receive a fair share of state investment; (v) promote
39 collaboration among rural communities to improve efficiency in delivery of services; and (vi)
40 develop and support new leadership in rural communities. The executive office shall provide the
41 commission with adequate office space and any research, analysis or other staff support that the
42 commission reasonably requires.

43 (e) The commission shall meet on a quarterly basis at the discretion of the chair. Meeting
44 locations shall rotate between the rural regions of Massachusetts. Meetings shall be open to the
45 public pursuant to sections 18 to 25, inclusive, or chapter 30A.

46 (f) The commission may accept and solicit funds, including any gifts, donations, grants,
47 or bequests or any federal funds for any of the purposes of this section. The funds shall be
48 deposited in a separate account with the state treasurer, shall be received by the state treasurer on
49 behalf of the commonwealth, and shall be expended by the commission under the law.

50 (g) The commission may request from all state agencies such information and assistance
51 as the commission may require.

52 (h) The commission shall annually, not later than June 2, report the results of its finding
53 and activities of the preceding year and its recommendations to the governor and to the clerks of
54 the senate and the house of representatives who shall forward the same to the joint committee on
55 economic development and emerging technologies.

56 SECTION 2. Said chapter 23A of the General Laws, as so appearing, is hereby further
57 amended by inserting after section 66 the following new section:-

58 Section 66A. Office of Rural Policy

59 (a) The rural policy advisory commission shall oversee a state agency known as the
60 Commonwealth Office of Rural Policy. The office shall be established within the executive
61 office for housing and economic development, but not under its control. The office shall be an
62 independent public entity not subject to the supervision and control of any other executive office,
63 department, commission, board, bureau, agency, or political subdivision of the commonwealth.
64 The mission of said office shall be to enhance the economic vitality of rural communities,
65 defined as municipalities with a population density of less than 500 persons per square mile, and
66 to advance the health and well-being of rural residents.

67 (b) The office shall serve as a research and policy clearinghouse for issues critical to the
68 welfare and vitality of rural communities, including but not limited to, economic development,
69 education, environment, health, housing, infrastructure, technology, and transportation. In
70 furtherance of that responsibility, the office shall work in coordination with and under the
71 direction of the rural policy advisory commission.

72 (c) The powers of the office shall include but not be limited to the following: (i) to use
73 such voluntary and uncompensated services of private individuals, agencies, and organizations as

74 may from time to time be offered and needed; (ii) to recommend policies and make
75 recommendations to agencies and officers of the state and local subdivisions of government to
76 effectuate and the purposes of this section; (iii) to select an executive director and to acquire
77 adequate staff to perform its duties, subject to appropriation; (iv) to establish and maintain such
78 offices as it may deem necessary, subject to appropriation; (v) to enact bylaws for its own
79 governance; and (vi) to hold regular, public meetings and to hold fact-finding hearings and other
80 public forums as deemed necessary.