

ABOUT MRPC

MRPC is a voluntary council of local governments serving the Meramec area of Missouri since 1969. The area includes the eight counties of Crawford, Dent, Gasconade, Maries, Osage, Phelps, Pulaski and Washington and their respective cities.

The mission of MRPC is to enhance the quality of life for residents of the Meramec Region. In pursuit of this mission, MRPC will bring about results in these areas:

- Cleaner, healthier and safer communities,
- Greater socio-economic and cultural wealth through community and economic development, and
- A stronger, unified voice in the legislative process.

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This report was distributed by MRPC to the Meramec Region's federal delegation.

Members of the Meramec Region's Congressional Delegation:

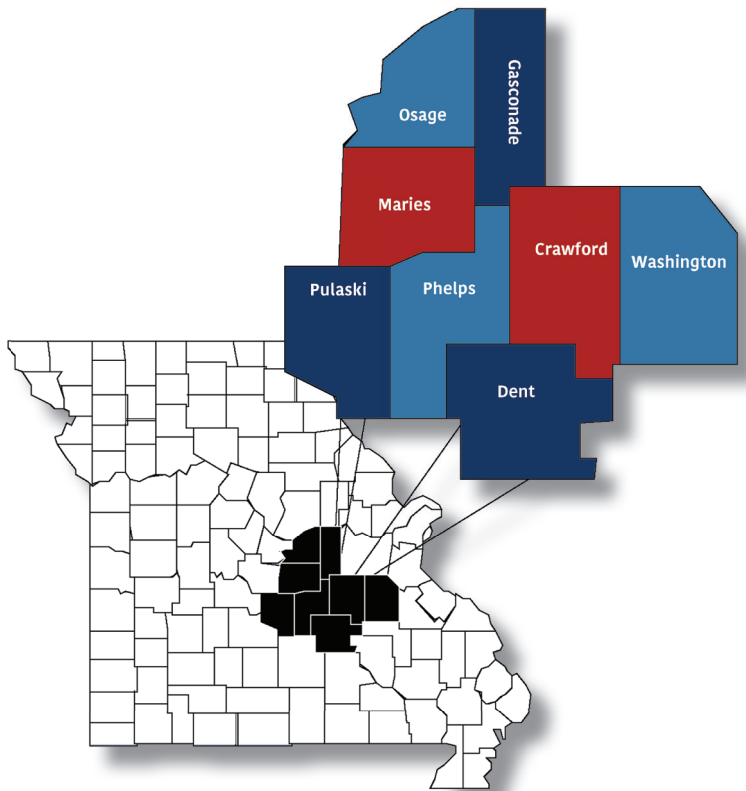
The Honorable Sens. Roy Blunt and Josh Hawley
Reps. Blaine Luetkemeyer, Vicky Hartzler and Jason Smith

The Meramec Regional Planning Commission, representing eight counties and their respective cities, is pleased to present its 2021 Federal Priorities agenda to you. We regret that we could not travel to Washington, D.C., this year, to deliver and discuss due to the pandemic. In addition to our specific priorities, our board encourages fiscal responsibility and asks that Congress achieve a balanced budget. We encourage efforts that create jobs and offer grant funding for rural areas, like ours. We look forward to working with you, and we thank you in advance for your consideration of our 2021 Federal Priorities.

Sincerely,

Larry Miskel
MRPC Chairman

Bonnie J. Prigge
Executive Director



Federal Priorities in the Missouri Meramec Region

2021 Congressional Issues

Prepared by:
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COVID-19 RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Pass another COVID-19 relief/recovery program that includes (1) funding for small business owners who have been impacted; (2) direct assistance to families who have lost jobs due to COVID-19 — perhaps in the form of extended unemployment benefits; (3) funds for public infrastructure that would create jobs for those who have lost their jobs; (4) direct assistance to families who have incurred large health care bills due to COVID-19 hospitalizations and (5) funds for local governments who have experienced sales tax/use tax decreases.
- Extend the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) that provides paid leave to certain employees who are diagnosed or exposed to COVID-19 and those who must care for children due to daycare and school closures and quarantine orders. Include provisions that provide FFCRA tax credits to local governments, political subdivisions and instrumentalities of these governments.
- Extend CARES Act Small Business Relief and provide funding for certified development companies and other agencies who must handle the paperwork and deferments at the local level.

HEALTH CARE & SOCIAL SERVICES:

- Continue to protect Medicare and Social Security. These are not entitlement programs — working Americans have paid and continue to pay into these programs and entrusted the federal government to administer them properly to ensure that they have a retirement plan and health benefits once retired..
- Support full administrative funding for public housing agencies. Housing assistance programs provide safe, modest, affordable housing for veterans, the disabled and the elderly. These programs help maintain the quality of housing in communities by establishing and enforcing housing quality standards, which benefit not only the families served, but the communities as well. The Housing Choice Voucher administrative fee has been reduced for over a decade and is currently at 80 percent of the original funding. This funding reduction has been initiated with no reduction in the administrative burden. Underfunding of administration is resulting in public housing agencies struggling to effectively meet the needs of their respective communities and efficiently meet the regulatory requirements of the programs they coordinate. In order to continue to provide these much-needed services, full administrative funding must be restored.
- Equalize Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement rates for rural and urban hospitals.

ENVIRONMENT:

- Continue to support and protect our national parks, monuments, wildlife reserves and public lands — which are held in trust for the American people — for the enjoyment and economic benefit of future generations. There must be a balance maintained in the appropriate use and maintenance of these lands (through grazing and timber harvest) that benefits local communities as well as the general public without inflicting environmental damage.
- In an effort to reduce food waste and provide food for food banks and other charitable food donation programs, provide tax reduction incentive for food-service companies and farms to donate surplus food that would otherwise be discarded. Because donated food inventory must be properly saved, packaged, labeled and stored, the tax reduction incentive would allow food service companies to incur and offset these costs, helping provide a vital service to community food pantries and other tax-exempt organizations.

ENERGY:

- Pass the RURAL Act. The legislation ensures that electric cooperatives will not lose their not-for-profit status if they accept local, state or federal grant funds to expand broadband, help restore power after a natural disaster, invest in local economic development or create energy efficiency or renewable energy.
- Continue to work toward energy independence. Encourage research of other crops to develop new sources of energy rather than using food products like corn and soybeans. Explore environmentally friendly ways of drilling for oil and use them. Pursue oil shale while exploring solar, wind and biomass conversion energy, hydro-electric, co-generation energy and expand nuclear energy production.

EDUCATION:

- Support technical training initiatives, such as the MO Wins and MO Health Wins programs, for our labor force. This could be in the form of more incentives for schools to provide access to more intensive technical classes or assistance for people to attend a two-year program, including satellite classes.
- Encourage greater emphasis on reading, writing, math and science competency. Also encourage the emphasis of reading and writing as they relate to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

TRANSPORTATION:

- Encourage federal funding for improvements to Highways 63 and 50, which are the region’s top two transportation priorities and are identified as freight routes in the Missouri State Freight Plan, in the Meramec Region.
- Provide enhanced and sustainable funding for the nation’s highway, aviation and transit needs through a long-term transportation reauthorization funding legislation and find a means to fund the Federal Highway Trust Fund.
- Work with Federal Highway Administration to include low water crossings as eligible for funding or change the definition of a “bridge” to include low water crossings.

HOMELAND SECURITY & EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS:

- Ensure rural regions receive adequate resources and equitable access to homeland security and emergency preparedness programs, including first responders, pre-disaster mitigation and all hazard mitigation resources. In addition, fully fund FEMA’s flood map modernization and pre-disaster programs.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ISSUES:

- Eliminate unfunded federal mandates, such as federal expectations and wastewater/stormwater regulations, to states or provide funding options/opportunities to states and/or local governments to fully fund them.
- Continue mandatory funding for Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program and Secure Rural Schools Act and make the use of these funds more flexible. These payments made to local governments to cover the loss of tax income on federal lands. Several of our member counties have large amounts of Federal lands including National Forest and National Park Service lands.
- Preserve the current tax exemption for municipal bonds. Tax-exempt financing, used by both state and local governments to raise funds to finance public capital improvements, is critical to sustain economic growth. Currently the senate finance committee is considering eliminating the tax exemption for municipal bonds as part of tax reform.

ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

- Support efforts to provide high-speed internet to all residents. This issue needs to be addressed in the same way that electric cooperatives provide electricity to all rural residents. The issue is the final mile of distributing fiber optic cable. Phone companies are not required to distribute, so they only put the infrastructure in place if the population is large enough to make it profitable. This leaves out large portions of rural America. There is no incentive to build out high-speed internet infrastructure in these areas. Businesses, industry and entrepreneurs will not locate in rural areas if they cannot get high-speed internet services. Modern agriculture practices cannot be implemented without high-speed internet. Residents cannot access on-line educational opportunities. Rural America will continue to fall behind economically if broadband is not made available to everyone. The COVID pandemic has further shown how the lack of broadband is crippling rural areas in remote/virtual education, telemedicine and business.
- Advocate for and fully fund the existing portfolio of federal community and economic development programs, most notably the Economic Development Administration’s (EDA’s) infrastructure, economic adjustment assistance and district planning grant programs and HUD’s Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. Delta Regional Authority (DRA) and Small Business Administration (SBA) business lending programs. Rural areas depend heavily on these programs for infrastructure improvements. Specifically:
 - Reauthorize and fully fund EDA, and include (1) A provision that planning grants will be increased if appropriations are increased and (2) A provision that would lower the local government cost share on grants,
 - Fully fund USDA rural development grant programs for infrastructure improvements, businesses development, community facilities, housing and broadband services.
- Make adjustments to Davis/Bacon Act that will allow small, rural communities to waive prevailing wage requirements for all projects costing less than \$250,000.
- Continue to support Fort Leonard Wood using the results of the FLW Joint Land Use Study and Missouri’s Military Infrastructure Report. This base is an economic engine that puts over \$2 billion annually into the Missouri economy.

