



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

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Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments And Lower Connecticut River Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization

DRAFT MINUTES OF REGULAR MEETING

February 26, 2025 – 9:00 AM

RiverCOG Members;

Chester: Cindy Lignar *
Clinton: Michelle Benivegna *
Cromwell: Anthony Salvatore *
Deep River: Carol Doak-Jones *
Durham: Brendan Rea
East Haddam: Irene Haines
East Hampton: David Cox *
Essex: Carey Duques *
Haddam: Bob McGarry *
Killingworth: Eric Couture *
Lyme: David Lahm
Middlefield: Jim Irish*, Bob Yamartino*
Middletown: Ben Florsheim
Old Lyme: Martha Shoemaker
Old Saybrook: Carl Fortuna *
Portland: Michael Pelton *
Westbrook: John Hall *

MPO Members:

Middlesex Chamber of Commerce: Darlene Briggs*
Estuary & Middletown Area Transit Districts: Joe Comerford *
Grayson Wright, CT DOT

*Present

Others Present:

Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office
Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Laurie McElwee, Regional Mobility Manager
Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor
Nicole Velardi, DEMHS
Phil Goff, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB)
Kim O'Rourke, Cylinder Collective
David Keeling, Cylinder Collective
Allison Dvorak, Senior Resources Agency on Aging

RiverCOG

Staff Present:

Sam Gold, Kevin Armstrong, Janice Ehle-Meyer, Susie Beckman, Eliza LoPresti, Marcos Gonzalez, Robert Haramut, Margot Burns, Megan Jouflas, Elizabeth Rolison

1. Roll Call, Introductions

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Anthony Salvatore at 9:01 AM. The meeting was conducted via Zoom.

Mr. Gold took the roll call.

2. Public Speaking

Carol Conklin (Regional Election Advisor)

Carol Conklin provided an update on registrar activities, noting that registrars had been newly sworn in across the region and that all registrars were currently conducting their annual voter list maintenance. She highlighted upcoming legislative discussions regarding early voting implementation and associated budgetary considerations. She also congratulated East Hampton for receiving the Democracy Cup, having recorded a voter turnout rate of 82% in the most recent election.

Erin McBride (Senator Murphy's Office)

Erin McBride provided an update on federal budget proceedings, emphasizing the impact of the March 14, 2025, continuing resolution deadline on municipal funding allocations. Senator Murphy's office is keeping a close eye on the 2 bipartisan grants as well as USDA grants. The office is also receiving concerned calls regarding Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid funding which he is trying to protect. Ms. McBride also addressed concerns regarding the uncertain future of Congressional Directed Spending.

Ellen Graham (Senator Blumenthal's Office)

Ellen Graham echoed concerns over federal budget uncertainties and emphasized the importance of municipal leaders staying engaged in the ongoing discussions in Washington. She encouraged towns to communicate any grant-related funding delays so that their office could assist in expediting approvals where possible.

Julia McGrath (Representative Courtney's Office)

Ms. McGrath informed the group that the House of Representatives just passed a budget resolution, H.Con.Res.14, which is a set of parameters that Congress agrees on for future funding levels even beyond the next fiscal year. Rep. Courtney voted against H.Con.Res.14 as there are concerns about funding levels for Medicaid and SNAP.

Congress is working on a five-year tax package, with priorities including protecting Medicaid and SNAP funding, and restoring the full SALT deduction.

The USDA's Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program and the Specialty Crop Block Grant are now accepting applications through the Connecticut Department of Agriculture (DoAg). The Land Capital Market Access Program also has released guidance. She also provided insights on a legislative proposal to restore the full SALT deduction.

Two local prevention councils in the RiverCOG region are preparing to apply for year 6-10 funding from the Drug-Free Communities Program, but the notice of funding, initially expected on January 24th, has not yet been posted. Updates are being tracked for Lyme Youth Service Bureau and East Hampton.

Laurie McElwee (Regional Mobility Manager)

Ms. McElwee recently attended the CACT Legislative Breakfast, where Joe Comerford, Chairman of CACT, highlighted the successful programs in the region, often used by DOT as pilot programs. Ms. McElwee used the opportunity to network, meet new people, and distribute business cards. More individuals have been reaching out for assistance in helping people with disabilities, seniors, and veterans find alternative transportation. Ms. McElwee also partners with organizations like Senior Resources, Alison Dvorak (Executive Director at Senior Resources) has been a key partner in securing transportation grants.

3. Gas Cylinder Recycling - Guest Speaker, Kim O'Rourke, State Program Coordinator, Cylinder Collective

Kim O'Rourke and David Keeling presented on Connecticut's new Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) program for recycling small gas cylinders. The program, launching in October 2025, aims to provide a cost-free disposal method for residents while reducing environmental impact. Municipal transfer stations, household hazardous waste events, and retail locations may serve as collection points.

Ms. O'Rourke and Mr. Keeling noted the following:

- The program will cover propane, helium, isobutane, and butane cylinders ranging from 4 ounces to just under 20 pounds but will exclude industrial cylinders and medical oxygen tanks.
- The Cylinder Collective will provide 50 collection containers and develop educational materials for municipalities at no cost.
- Two pilot programs at Hammonasset and Rocky Neck State Parks, which collected over 1,200 cylinders in 2024, will be expanded to additional locations.
- Attendees were encouraged to provide feedback on implementation strategies to optimize convenience for residents.

4. LCRVMPO Business

a. Approval of Minutes of the January 22, 2025, LCRVCOG and LCRVMPO Meeting (motion)

Ms. Jones moved to approve the minutes of the January 22, 2025, regular meeting (with correction to wording under the GIS Digital Parcel Project); seconded by Mr. Cox. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

b. 25 TIP Amendment 06

Mr. Haramut provided an overview of multiple transportation projects:

Clinton: A \$1.5 million sidewalk extension along Route 1 between West Main and John Street.

- i. Clinton, RT 1, 0027-0141, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk extension, FD, 2025, \$125,000, 80/0/20, New project
- ii. Clinton, RT 1, 0027-0141, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk extension, ROW, 2025, \$100,000, 80/0/20, New project
- iii. Clinton, RT 1, 0027-0141, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk extension, CON, 2027, \$1,500,000, 80/0/20, New project

A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve items b. i-iii; second by Mr. Fortuna. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

Westbrook: A \$1.2 million sidewalk installation and drainage improvement project along Route 1 from Goodspeed Drive to Old Forge Road.

- iv. Westbrook, RT 1, 0154-0130, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk improvements, FD, 2026, \$200,000, 80/0/20. New project
- v. Westbrook, RT 1, 0154-0130, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk improvements, ROW, 2026, \$100,000, 80/0/20. New project
- vi. Westbrook, RT 1, 0154-0130, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk improvements, CON, 2027, \$0, 80/0/20. AC Entry, New project
- vii. Westbrook, RT 1, 0154-0130, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk improvements, CON, 2027, \$230,000, 80/0/20. AC Conv, New project
- viii. Westbrook, RT 1, 0154-0130, TAPNH, X6, Sidewalk improvements, CON, 2028, \$1,250,000, 80/0/20, AC Conv, New project

A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve items b. iv-vii.; second by Mr. Hall. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

Middletown: A \$57.5 million project for signal removal on Route 9, including ramp modifications at Route 99 and Silver Street

- ix. Middletown, RT 9, 0082-0318, NHPP, CC, Removal of traffic signals on RT 9, ROW, 2025, \$680,000, 80/20/0, New phase
- x. Middletown, RT 9, 0082-0318, NHPP, CC, Removal of traffic signals on RT 9, CON, 2026, \$1,250,000, 80/20/0, AC Conv, Decrease estimate from Fed \$13M
- xi. Middletown, RT 9, 0082-0318, NHPP, CC, Removal of traffic signals on RT 9, CON, 2027, \$25,500,000, 80/20/0, AC Conv, Increase estimate from Fed \$5M
- xii. Middletown, RT 9, 0082-0318, NHPP, CC, Removal of traffic signals on RT 9, CON, 2028, \$33,750,000, 80/20/0, AC Conv, Increase estimate from Fed \$14M
- xiii. Middletown, RT 9, 0082-0318, NHPP, CC, Removal of traffic signals on RT 9, CON, FYI, \$57,500,000, 80/20/0, AC Conv, Add FYI entry

A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve items b. iv-viii.; second by Mr. McGarry. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

Statewide: A \$6.7 million project for signage replacement and upgrades on I-95 and I-395.

xiv. Statewide, I95/I395, 0170-3640, NHPP, X6, Service Plaza mainline sign and sign support replacement, CON, 2025, \$6,700,000, 80/20/0. AC Conv, Increase estimate from Fed \$3.75M

A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve item b. xiv.; second by Mr. Pelton. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

Middletown:

xv. Middletown/Old Saybrook, Estuary TD, 0478-2024CN, 5307P, X6, Facility improvements FY24, CON, 2025, \$250,000, 80/20/0, New project

xvi. Middletown/Old Saybrook, Estuary TD, 0478-2024EQ, 5307P, X6, Admin capital/misc. support FY24, EQ, 2025, \$935,000, 80/20/0, New project

xvii. Middletown/Old Saybrook, Estuary TD, 0478-2024PA, 5307P, X6, Replace small buses FY24, ACQ, 2025, \$400,000, 80/20/0, New project

A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve items b. xv-xvii.; second by Mr. Pelton. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

c. VHB Presentation, Phil Goff, CCLT Study endorsement

Phil Goff from Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB) presented findings from the Connecticut Central Loop Trail (CCLT) study, which aims to improve regional connectivity for cyclists and pedestrians. The study identifies over 12 miles of potential new trail development, as well as safety and accessibility enhancements at 15 high-risk intersections. Mr. Goff detailed recommendations for improved signage, dedicated bike lanes, and safer pedestrian crossings. The study also includes estimated costs and funding sources, with potential grant opportunities through the Connecticut Department of Transportation and federal infrastructure programs.

https://www.rivercog.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20250127_DRAFT_Central-CT-Loop-Final-Report-sm.pdf and https://www.rivercog.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/20250129_DRAFT_Central-CT-Loop-APPEN DICES.pdf

A motion to approve a resolution to endorse the 2025 Central Connecticut Loop Trail study was made by Mr. Hall; second by Mr. McGarry. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

d. Other Transportation (FTA Section 5310, CTDOT 536 Reporting, MPO Certification Review)

Mr. Haramut provided reports on:

- FTA Section 5310 funding allocations for transit projects supporting elderly and disabled residents. Applications are due on April 1, 2025.
- CTDOT 536: D.O.T. may be reaching out to towns soon for information regarding highway expenditures.

- The upcoming MPO certification review process, to occur on March 6, 2025, in the RiverCOG office, will assess regional planning efforts and compliance with federal regulations.

e. Estuary Transit District Update

Mr. Comerford provided an in-depth update on ETD services, noting a steady increase in ridership, particularly in demand-responsive services. He discussed ongoing fleet modernization efforts, which include the procurement of five electric buses to enhance sustainability. A micro transit pilot program will launch in April 2025 to provide on-demand service in Old Saybrook, Westbrook, and Clinton, aiming to improve mobility for seniors and disabled individual. He reported that Ridership numbers have increased by 18% compared to 2024, reflecting growing demand for public transit options in the region.

Challenges such as driver shortages, increased fuel costs, and service expansion needs were highlighted. Comerford emphasized the importance of continued state and federal funding support to sustain and expand transit services. Legislative discussions on potential transit funding reforms and new grant opportunities were also mentioned. ETD is working closely with municipal partners to ensure transit services meet evolving community needs, particularly in underserved areas.

5. LCRVCOG Business

a. Regional Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Update Consultant Selection (motion)

Ms. Burns provided an overview of the selection process, explaining that an RFP had been issued and that several qualified firms had submitted bids. A review committee carefully evaluated each submission based on the consultant's experience, methodology, cost, and ability to engage stakeholders. Funding for this initiative will be sourced from FEMA grants, supplemented by state matching funds.

Dewberry Engineers, Inc. was chosen due to their expertise in climate resilience, GIS mapping, and their comprehensive approach to community engagement.

The total cost of the contract is estimated at \$250,000, with \$187,500 (75%) covered by FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds and \$62,500 (25%) covered by state and municipal contributions.

The plan update will include detailed flood risk analysis, climate change adaptation strategies, and emergency response coordination frameworks. The consultant is expected to begin work in April 2025, with a draft plan ready for public review by December 2025 and final adoption targeted for early 2026.

A motion was made by Mr. Couture to approve RiverCOG entering into an agreement with Dewberry Engineers (consultant) for the Regional Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan 2026 Update, dependent on receipt of funding from FEMA, and to approve RiverCOG entering into an agreement with DEMHS for the Natural Hazard Mitigation Planning grant; second by Ms. Doak-Jones. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

b. Department of Housing Technical Assistance Grant – Added Agenda Item

Ms. Joufflas shared with the group that RiverCOG has recently secured a TA grant in the amount of \$87,000 from the Connecticut Department of Housing. The funding will be used to provide educational training modules for municipal commissions, a virtual resource library that all can use, as well as public engagement and outreach assistance from us to municipalities directly by request.

A motion to authorize RiverCOG’s Executive Director to enter into the contract with the Department of Housing for technical assistance funding in the amount of \$87,000, and to move forward with the proposed implementation plan was made by Mr. Fortuna; second by Mr. Cox. All in favor. The motion was unanimously approved.

c. Legislative Update - Bill Tracker Spreadsheet

Mr. Gold provided an update on legislative activities, highlighting two bills under consideration by the Revenue, Finance, and Bonding Committee.

The first bill proposed a progressive state property tax targeting residential properties valued over a million dollars. Mr. Gold opposed the bill, stating that it would disproportionately impact apartment complexes, increasing landlords' tax burdens and raising rents. He also expressed concern that state property taxes could diminish municipal revenue and emphasized the risk of the state taking precedence in tax liens. As an alternative, Mr. Gold suggested enabling towns to implement progressive property taxes or applying differential tax rates for second homes and short-term rentals.

The second bill proposed a \$50,000 homestead exemption for owner-occupied single-family homes. Mr. Gold questioned the exclusion of condos, co-ops, and owner-occupied multi-family residences. He cautioned that the exemption would have minimal impact in wealthier towns like New Canaan but significantly shift the tax burden onto commercial and industrial properties in lower-income cities like Waterbury. On average, the bill would raise mill rates by 11% statewide. He also highlighted that small landlords providing affordable housing would be excluded.

Mr. Gold noted that the Housing Committee would meet the following day to discuss several bills, including a revived proposal mandating a minimum housing density of 15 units per acre near train stations. He opposed the bill, arguing it would undermine municipal transit-oriented development plans in towns like Clinton, Westbrook, and Old Saybrook.

Proposed state legislation, and RiverCOG’s submitted testimonies can be view on RiverCOG’s Bill Tracker. [View Bill Tracker Here](#)

d. Eversource Energize Community Partnership

Ms. Ehle-Meyer outlined a regional initiative in collaboration with Sustainable CT and People’s Action for Clean Energy (PACE). The program supports residential energy audits and heat pump installations. Municipal applications are due by March 14, 2025.

e. Land Trust Update

Ms. Burns provided a brief update to the group:

- The strategic conservation plan is in its final phase, with the last technical committee meeting scheduled for March 18, 2025.
- The Melvin J. Woody Regional Conservation Award recipient will be announced at the March meeting.
- Ms. Burns also noted that The National Park Service had engaged in discussion on community outreach for conservation efforts at the February meeting.

f. Document Digitization Update – Deep River Town Clerk

Mr. Armstrong informed the group that Deep River has successfully digitized nearly 12,000 pages of land records, reducing the need for physical storage, and making records searchable online. Mr. Armstrong intends to create a public portal to post on their website in early March to offer the same information to the public online for self-service.

6. Chairman’s and Executive Director’s Reports

Mr. Gold provided a financial report detailing the organization's budget status. Seven months into FY’26, RiverCOG is within budget of \$3,271,577. RiverCOG has reached 70% of its budget with 58% of the year completed. This is due to things being lopsided earlier in the fiscal year, some of the miscellaneous expenses being over and due to some donations.

Mr. Gold also reported that:

- As of January 31, 2025, there was 1,900,000.00 in the RiverCOG STIFF Account
- As of January 31, 2025, there was \$50,963.00 in the RiverCOG Liberty Checking Account

7. Other Business

Shared Grant Writer Services

The members discussed the possibility of hiring a shared grant writer to support municipalities in pursuing competitive funding opportunities. Mr. Gold highlighted the benefits of pooling resources to access professional expertise, increasing the likelihood of successful grant applications. Several members expressed support for the concept, noting the challenges smaller towns face in preparing comprehensive applications. Further discussions will follow to explore funding options and logistics.

Next COG meeting Wednesday, March 26, 2024 – In person

The next COG meeting is scheduled for March 26, 2025, and will be held in person at the RiverCOG office. (This will also be a hybrid Zoom meeting.) Mr. Gold informed the group that the June COG MPO meeting will also be in person and encouraged members to reach out to him or Ms. Rolison if they have any suggestions for a venue.

8. Adjournment

Mr. Cox moved to adjourn the meeting at 10:53a.m.; seconded by Mr. McGarry. The vote was unanimously approved. Motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison

DRAFT