



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

March 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:

Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor
Katie Malgioglio, UCONN Technical Assistance to Brownfields (TAB)
Anna Savastano, Eversource Community Relations
Keith Hannon, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District
Greg Bugbee, Office of Aquatic Invasive Species (OAIS) & Invasive Aquatic Plant Program (IAPP)

Staff Present:

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

RiverCOG

1. Roll Call, Introductions

MOTION: Mr. Fortuna made a motion to add a new agenda item under LCRVCOG & MPO Business and shift the remaining items down to read: 5a. Regional Election Advisor; 5a i. Regional Election Advisor Report; 5a. ii. Regional Election Advisor Contract; second by Mr. Cox.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Anthony Salvatore at 9:00 AM. The meeting was conducted in person and via Zoom.

Mr. Gold took the roll call.

2. Public Speaking

Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office

Ms. McBride provided an update on ongoing monitoring efforts related to federal programs such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, housing, HUD, the Department of Education, and SNAP. She highlighted the importance of tracking executive orders and their impact on existing grants. She encouraged members to reach out if their grants are affected and noted that Congressman Courtney's office is also closely monitoring these developments. Additionally, she mentioned that the government passed a continuing resolution (CR) March 14th. Senator Murphy opposed this CR as it did not include community development projects (CDs) and implemented over \$13 billion in cuts to Social Security, housing, and healthcare.

Julia McGrath, Representative Courtney's Office

Ms. McGrath confirmed the passage of the continuing resolution, which funds the government through September 30. However, she expressed uncertainty about its impact on block grant dispersals, as this is the first time the government has operated on a CR for an entire fiscal year. She assured members that updates would be shared as more information becomes available and she has provided the group with a section-by-section summary. Ms. McGrath also noted that overall, this is an extension of the fiscal year 2024 budget, with a few exceptions - a small increase in defense spending and a decrease in non-defense, discretionary spending. Ms. McGrath invited members to reach out to her should they have any questions. If any one is having issues with accessing funding that is an open award, please follow the link to fill to a Microsoft form for a request for information.

Connecticut Food Share's funding issues are affecting food pantries across the state. The lack of USDA funding has resulted in shortages in inventory for food assistance programs, impacting both food pantries and local farmers who previously benefitted from government contracts. Ms. McGrath encouraged members to let her know if there are food pantries in their area impacted by this. Representative Courtney's office cannot do anything about this immediately, but they are trying to see what they can do to assist.

Discussion/Questions:

Mr. Fortuna inquired about the implications of operating on a full-year CR, noting that the federal government has often run on CRs. Ms. McGrath clarified that while CRs are common, this specific situation means that fiscal year 2025 will not officially exist in the history books, leading to uncertainty about block grant funding. Mr. Fortuna also highlighted that the budget being used is largely from the previous administration.

Questions were raised about whether appropriations for 2024 would carry over into 2025. Ms. McGrath explained that the language in the CR is vague, meaning that many funding decisions will be made by the executive branch. There is currently no clear guidance on fiscal year 2026 appropriations or how future funding requests will be handled.

Ms. McBride confirmed that her office is also waiting for guidance and will prioritize funding projects that were near completion before being halted.

3. Presentation: UConn Technical Assistance to Brownfields (TAB) and Proposed Roundtable for RiverCOG

Presenter: Katie Malgioglio, Community Engagement Coordinator, UCONN TAB

Katie Malgioglio presented an overview of the UConn TAB program, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The program offers technical assistance to municipalities, nonprofits, and other organizations addressing brownfields — properties where redevelopment may be complicated by the presence of hazardous substances.

She proposed the formation of a Brownfields Roundtable for the region, which would provide a collaborative space for stakeholders to exchange ideas, explore funding opportunities, and share best practices. Topics at the roundtable would include liability protections for municipalities, funding application support, and redevelopment strategies.

Ms. Malgioglio explained that municipalities often hesitate to acquire brownfields due to liability concerns. UConn TAB provides guidance on managing these risks. The program also offers support with grant applications, project assessments, and community engagement. A regional roundtable would facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration, strengthening redevelopment efforts across RiverCOG communities.

Several attendees expressed interest in participating. If COG members choose to proceed, UCONN TAB will coordinate with RiverCOG to plan the first roundtable session in the coming months.

4. LCRVMPO Business

a. Approval of Minutes of the February 26, 2025, LCRVCOG and LCRVMPO Meeting (motion)

MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve the minutes of the February 26, 2025, meeting; second by Mr. Rea

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

b. 25 TIP Amendment 07 (motion)

Mr. Haramut outlined 2025 Transportation Improvement Program 07 (TIP) specifically addressing bridge improvements:

I. Essex, River Road, 0049-0113, CPCDH, X6, Bridge improvements BR 04663 over Falls River, PD, 2025, \$188,000, 80/20/0, New project

- II. Essex, River Road, 0049-0113, CPCDH, X6, Bridge improvements BR 04663 over Falls River, FD, 2026, \$188,000, 80/20/0, New project
- III. Essex, River Road, 0049-0113, CPCDH, X6, Bridge improvements BR 04663 over Falls River, CON, 2027, \$875,000, 80/20/0, New project

Project Details:

- Bridge 4663 on River Road over Falls River in Essex will undergo essential repairs and upgrades.
- The amendment includes funding for preliminary design, final design, and construction phases from 2025 to 2027.
- Federal and state funding would support the project.

*MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Cox to approve TIP Amendment 07; second by Mr. McGarry.
VOTE: All in favor. The motion carried unanimously.*

c. 2026-2027 UPWP

Mr. Haramut outlined the draft for UPWP FY 2026-2027. The workplan outlines transportation planning activities for the next two years which is broken down into 5 categories:

1. Administration
2. Data Collection and Analysis
3. Planning Activities
4. Technical Assistance
5. Public Involvement

Mr. Haramut informed the group that the draft has been sent to DOT for comment and will be sent back to the COG by late April for the COG’s 30-day public comment period. Formal endorsement by the MPO Board would occur in May 2025.

There will be an authorization form for the RiverCOG Executive Director to enter into agreement with DOT so funds can be obtained over the next 2 years.

d. SS4A Comprehensive Safety Action Plan

Mr. Haramut stated that they are setting up a public or advisory committee meeting within a couple of weeks to look at the last public meeting, mapping tool summaries, policy review, draft recommendations, technical memo, and the corridor study selection process.

There will also be individual municipal profiles for each town and talk about the next steps. The next steps after the advisory committee meeting will be a public meeting, and the consultant – Fitzgerald and Halliday, Inc. (FHI) will begin developing the draft plan. A draft plan is anticipated by August or September 2025 and expected to be finalized by the end of November 2025.

The project remains on schedule.

e. Other Transportation (5310, Active Transportation Microgrant)

Mr. Haramut informed the group that 5310 applications are due on April 1, 2025.

DOT renewed the Active Transportation Microgrant the program for 2025 for the 1st quarter and applications are due on March 28, 2025.

DOT is updating their active transportation plan and Mr. Haramut and/or Mr. Gonzales may reach out to municipalities regarding working the DOT consultant – HDR. This may involve a full day tour in April/May to figure out where they may want to focus existing plans and data. Mr. Haramut encouraged the group to reach out with suggestions of which locations in the region have the most vulnerable road users.

f. Transit District Update

Mr. Geraghty reported that new service changes are scheduled to go live on May 27, 2025. This includes shoreline routes from a flex route to a fixed route, adding Saturday service to Route 644 from Old Saybrook to Middletown. He also discussed adjusting 582 in Middletown for better access to the new Big Y supermarket.

The new electric buses should be operational next week.

An RFP was submitted, and proposals are now being reviewed for a contractor to install replacement signs regarding the current bus stop transition.

The Xtra-Mile expansion is doing well in Madison, the Guilford zone and Middletown. It is struggling slightly in East Hampton, so it has been moved to increase ridership.

Mr. Geraghty reported that Tap and Ride and new fair payment devices are going well. An online process for seniors and riders with disabilities to receive a 50% discount by assigning that discount to their card has now been implemented.

5. LCRVCOG Business

a. Regional Election Advisor

i. Regional Election Advisor Report

Ms. Conklin, Regional Election Advisor, reported that new election equipment is starting to arrive including new tabulators and all that was negotiated with the State. The company is called ESS out of the Midwest, with an office in Enfield, CT. ESS has been in business 45 years. They have a large, 24/7, customer service team and are starting training and delivery in CT towns, based on their referendum dates. Up to up to 4 people from a town can be attend the training class. Typical attendees are registrars, deputies, or registrar's moderators.

ii. Regional Election Advisor Contract

Mr. Gold went over the memo regarding Ms. Conklin's contract that was sent to COG members prior to the meeting to review. He explained that the Regional Election Advisor position (Formerly the regional election Monitor program) is about 10 years old, and that Ms. Conklin Carol has been the contractor for those services for almost 10 years.

RiverCOG did not approve a contract renewal last fall because it was waiting on the Secretary of State to distribute funds which they never did. Mr. Gold testified to the Government Administration Elections Committee and the Co-chairs were very interested in the fact that that there was no movement on this, so Mr. Gold is hopeful that they will follow up.

If received, the funds would amount to \$25,000 per year for a program that has cost much less, but, as Mr. Gold explained, as Executive Director, Mr. Gold continued a month-to-month basis on the previous contract.

Mr. Gold recommended entering into a new 2 Year agreement with Mr. Conklin through the end of December 2026 at the rate of 12,500 per year for a total of \$25,000 over 2 years.

MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Couture to enter a 2-year contract totaling \$25,000 with Carol Conklin as Regional Election Advisor; second by Mr. Rea.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion carried unanimously.

b. Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Update

Ms. Ehle Meyer provided updates on the HHW program, including the first event on April 5, 2025, in East Hampton and another on April 19, 2025 in Clinton. A new flyer, including Spanish translations, will be distributed.

Discussion included clarification on the disposal of sharps, which are not part of the hazardous waste collection.

i. Household Hazardous Waste Intermunicipal Agreement – East Haddam joining HHW (motion)

Ms. Ehle Meyer discussed East Haddam's inclusion in the Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) program. The interlocal agreement for hazardous waste collection, previously signed, allows new towns to be added with a two-thirds majority vote. RiverCOG Attorney Steve Mednick confirmed that East Haddam could join under the existing agreement, avoiding the need for a new contract.

MOTION: A motion was made by Ms. Lignar to approve East Haddam's participation in the HHW program with a 2/3 majority vote; second by Mr. Cox.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

It was noted that adding another town would lower costs for all participants. A revised flyer, including East Haddam, will be distributed in both English and Spanish.

c. Regional Agriculture Council (RAC) Update

Ms. Ehle Meyer provided an update focusing on a recent initiative regarding recycling agricultural plastic. She explained how this effort is designed to help farmers manage waste more effectively by reducing their dependency on landfill disposal. There was a brief discussion on the feasibility of expanding this program and the need for additional funding sources. Members suggested exploring

potential partnerships with state environmental agencies to further promote sustainable farming practices.

d. Regional Waste Authority (RWA) Update

Mr. Gonzales announced that RiverCOG is officially under contract for RWA, the \$30,000 grant from DEEP, which allows for partnering with Resource Recycling Systems (RRS) based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The contract is signed, and an internal meeting is scheduled to finalize logistics before work begins in early April.

There was a discussion about the region's waste management future, given ongoing discussions about the MIRA Transfer Station and potential privatization. Most participating towns expressed an interest in continuing collaboration for waste solutions. However, uncertainty remains regarding the final structure of the RWA.

e. Community Partnership Initiative (CPI) Update

RiverCOG was approached by sustainability committees from multiple towns—Chester, Deep River, East Hampton, and Portland—who sought assistance in applying for Eversource's Community Partnership Initiative. This program aims to connect eligible residents with energy efficiency programs and home energy assessments.

Eversource also requested RiverCOG to act as the fiduciary agent. RiverCOG has submitted a single, composite application for Chester, Deep River, East Hampton, and Portland. If selected for funding, the initiative will run from April 1 to December 1, pushing awareness and facilitating access to energy-saving programs. Additionally, a parallel initiative targeting small businesses will be coordinated through local chambers of commerce.

This is the first time Eversource has worked with a Council of Governments (COG) as a fiduciary agent. If successful, RiverCOG will receive \$28,000 in administrative funding to oversee the initiative, with Ms. Ehle Meyer and another team member managing the program logistics. Volunteers from sustainability committees will be instrumental in outreach efforts.

f. Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Update

RiverCOG has officially contracted with a DEMHS as of March 18th and will be contracting with a consultant to assist with updating the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan. The first planning meeting with consultant for contracting is scheduled for April 1st, at which time contract details will be finalized, and the project will move into full implementation mode within the next four to six weeks.

A regional planning committee, which includes representatives from each town, will be assembled. Unless a town designates an alternate participant, all town leaders are expected to attend. The planning process will involve three regional meetings spread over 14 months—two half-day sessions and one three-quarter-day session. Additionally, two or three public meetings will be scheduled to gather community input.

One of the most critical aspects of the process will be organizing individual municipal meetings. These meetings will bring together emergency management officials, public works directors, planners, and other key stakeholders to discuss town-specific needs and priority projects. The consultant emphasized the importance of securing town staff participation to ensure the plan is comprehensive and actionable.

A formal email will be sent out requesting each town's designated representative for the planning process.

g. Land Trust Update

Ms. Burns informed the group that the fourth technical committee meeting for the Regional Conservation Plan Update took place recently, with a focus on natural resource-based planning. This meeting was timely, given concerns about federal funding interruptions due to the National Park Service's continuing resolution.

The planning process will continue in collaboration with National Park Service, with RiverCOG taking the lead on mapping and public outreach efforts to ensure that towns can effectively integrate the final conservation plan into their municipal planning strategies.

Additionally, RiverCOG awarded the Melvin Woody Regional Conservation Award to Bob Nussbaum of the Essex Land Trust. Mr. Nussbaum has been actively involved with the Land Trust since 2007, serving in every leadership capacity and contributing significantly to conservation efforts in the region. The award presentation was a highlight, and as per Ms. Burns, Mr. Nussbaum was genuinely surprised and deeply appreciative of the recognition.

Two other nominees were considered for the award, and it was strongly recommended that they be resubmitted next year due to their outstanding contributions. Town representatives were encouraged to promote the award within their communities to ensure continued recognition of dedicated conservation volunteers.

h. Invasive Species Update

Keith Hannon (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) and Greg Bugbee (Office of Aquatic Invasive Species & Invasive Aquatic Plant Program) joined Ms. Burns in leading a discussion on ongoing efforts to combat the invasive aquatic plant, Hydrilla, in the Connecticut River and its tributaries. It was noted that the Army Corps of Engineers is leading a partnership with RiverCOG and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station to address the issue through a structured mitigation plan.

A key aspect of this initiative is the proposed cost-share agreement, which would bring federal resources into the project. The Army Corps of Engineers has expressed a commitment to conducting comprehensive research and implementing control measures. Their collaboration with local and state agencies aims to develop effective strategies to curb the spread of Hydrilla, a species that poses a significant threat to the river's ecosystem and recreational use.

The meeting also highlighted the importance of securing federal funding to support these efforts. Participants acknowledged the need for ongoing monitoring and management to ensure long-term

success. Further discussions will focus on finalizing the funding structure and solidifying partnerships among involved stakeholders.

2. Chairman's and Executive Director's Reports

Mr. Gold provided the COG with the below updates:

Financial Report:

As of February 28, 2025, the Council completed eight months of its fiscal year. Overall spending was within the parameters of the \$3.2 million budget. However, dues and subscriptions, as well as professional development expenses, were slightly over budget, with 67% of the fiscal year completed. Miscellaneous expenses were running a little high but not excessively so. Service contracts may exceed the budget by the year-end due to hiring financial assistance from the Robert Half temp agency.

Personnel Update:

The Council had initially attempted to cover the temporary hire's expenses under the transportation planning grant. However, that approach was unsuccessful. A decision is pending on whether to hire the temporary worker as a part-time assistant to Ms. Fernald (River COG Financial Administrator).

Legislative Activity:

RiverCOG has been actively testifying at hearings and submitting testimony on various bills. A [Bill Tracker](#) spreadsheet is being maintained to monitor legislative developments. Several bills under review are of concern, while only a few received supportive testimony. RiverCOG urged members to submit testimony on relevant bills and continue monitoring legislative developments. The discussion highlighted concerns over unfunded state mandates and the burden placed on local property taxpayers due to state budget-balancing practices.

Convenience Fees

One key issue discussed was a proposed bill prohibiting towns from charging convenience fees for credit card tax payments. Concerns were raised about the financial impact on municipalities, as credit card reward programs could lead to increased costs for towns. An alternative suggestion was proposed: the Department of Revenue Services could negotiate a statewide merchant services contract to reduce fees.

Additionally, a discussion arose regarding a similar restriction on state professional licensing fees, where credit card fees could no longer be charged separately, leading to potential increases in licensing costs.

Housing and Zoning Bills

Several proposed bills seek to allow by-right housing development in commercial buildings and motels. RiverCOG, along with the Connecticut Chapter of the American Planning Association, opposed these measures due to concerns about infrastructure compatibility and local control. One such proposal, Senate Bill 12, has advanced despite lacking content at the time of its public hearing.

The state's "Fair Share Housing Study" was also a topic of discussion. The study aims to allocate housing development goals per town but has raised methodological concerns, including possible double counting. While it is officially an academic exercise and not a policy directive, related bills have already begun

circulating in the legislature. There was concern that legislators may not fully grasp the study's implications due to its complex methodology.

Funding and Taxation Proposals

A notable proposal discussed was the introduction of a five-cent surcharge on cell phone bills to fund firefighter cancer compensation, an alternative to covering costs through worker's compensation, which could significantly increase municipal insurance premiums.

Another bill proposes that police officers and firefighters must be enrolled in the state pension system if their municipal benefits are deemed inadequate, potentially overriding local collective bargaining agreements.

A proposed \$10,000 property tax credit for police officers serving in distressed municipalities was debated, with concerns raised about its effectiveness and impact on municipal tax revenues.

Short-Term Rental Regulation

A bill proposing an Airbnb registry was reviewed. This would help municipalities hold landlords accountable for property-related issues and introduce a 2.75% local tax on short-term rental revenues. However, the revenue would be earmarked for local housing trust funds rather than general municipal use. Additionally, concerns were raised that there is no provision in the bill to revoke a landlord's registration in the event of violations.

3. Other Business

- a. The next COG meeting is on Wednesday, April 23, 2025, via Zoom.
- b. The next in person COG Meeting to take place on June 25, 2025. Chairman Salvatore asked the group to forward venue suggestions to Ms. Rolison.

4. Adjournment

MOTION: Mr. Cox moved to adjourn the meeting at 10:53a.m.; seconded by Mr. McGarry.

VOTE: The vote was unanimously approved. Motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison