



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 April 23, 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*
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 *

*Present

Others Present:

Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office
Grayson Wright, Stephen Hall & Sam Bean, CT DOT
Nicole Velardi & Olivia Chetcuti, DEMHS

Staff Present:

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

RiverCOG

1. Roll Call, Introductions

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

2. Public Speaking

Mr. Gold read the report of **Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor**, who was unable to attend the meeting. She reports that she has been working with new registrars on their responsibilities and with towns on new voting equipment.

Ellen Graham, Sen. Blumenthal's Office

The deadline for applications for congressionally directed spending will be April 27th. It is unknown whether this will be funded, as the federal government has no budget and is working through a continuing resolution.

Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office

She asks that anyone applying for the congressionally directed funding please call her. There are more strict caps and probably not as many projects will be funded this year. Their office would also like to know if any of your funding has been cut or rescinded.

Julia McGrath, Representative Courtney's Office

Their office is resubmitting 15 projects from last year's congressionally directed funding program, so they are not accepting new applications this year. They are watching the budget reconciliation progress, particularly Medicaid cuts. She brought up concern about a proposal to eliminate tax exempt status for municipalities; though this is unlikely to happen, she recommends advocating against it. There is possible future disruption to health and human services funds for towns due to consolidation and cuts at the federal level. The BRIC program from FEMA is being terminated. If anyone is hearing from farmers or others in the agricultural community that have been affected by cuts at the federal level, please send them to her office.

Discussion occurred on whether RiverCOG's grant funding for the update to the natural hazard mitigation plans will come through. RiverCOG has a signed contract with the state, but the state was being used as a pass-through for federal funding through the BRIC program. There were some verbal instructions to probably stop work, but no one has received or sent that in writing so RiverCOG staff are left wondering how to proceed, as work needs to get started for the plans to be updated in time. Ms. Velardi of DEMHS mentioned that the guidance they are getting is that if you don't already have the funds in an account, don't do the work.

3. Update on vendor for Phone Systems, Alarms and Cameras

Mr. Armstrong updated that RiverCOG's phone vendor has sold its business to CCI voice, who are under the CRCOG purchasing agreement, and are available to help municipalities with their needs.

4. Route 9 Middletown Project Update - Stephen Hall, CT DOT Project Manager

https://portal.ct.gov/dot/projects/route-9-middletown?language=en_US

Mr. Hall presented on the plans for removing the lights on Route 9 in Middletown; the plans can be viewed at the link above.

5. LCRVMPO Business

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

MOTION: A motion was made by Mr. Hall to approve the minutes of the March 26, 2025, meeting; second by Mr. Pelton

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

b. 25 TIP Amendment 08 (motion)

- i. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2025, \$0, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP 2025 AC Entry**
- ii. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2025, \$-6,250,000, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP 2025 AC Conv**
- iii. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2026, \$-2,500,000, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP 2026 AC Conv**
- iv. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2027, \$-2,500,000, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP 2027 AC Conv**
- v. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2028, \$-47,500,000, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP 2028 AC Conv**
- vi. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, FYI, \$-44,625,000, 80/20/0, Delete NHPP FYI AC Conv**
- vii. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NFRP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, FYI, \$43,375,000, 80/20/0, Decrease fed est from \$35.5 to \$34.7**
- viii. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2025, \$0, 80/20/0, Add DIGR AC Entry**
- ix. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2025, \$108,625,000, 80/20/0, Add DIGR AC Conv**
- x. Meriden/Middletown, I91/I691/RT15, 0079-0240, NHPP, CC, Interchange improvements SB/EB/SB, CON, 2025, \$98,000, 0/100/0, Add State Only entry**

MOTION: Mr. Lahm moved to approve 25 TIP Amendment 08, i. through x., project # 0079-0240; second by Ms. Jones.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

- xi. Statewide, I95/I395, 0170-3640, NHPP, X6, Service plaza mainline sign and sign support replacement - AC Entry, CON, 2025, \$0, 80/20/0, Change in scope**

- xii. **Statewide, I95/I395, 0170-3640, NHPP, X6, Service plaza mainline sign and sign support replacement - AC Conv, CON, 2025, \$6,700,000, 100/0/0, Change in scope/Increase est fed est from \$3.75 to \$6.7**

MOTION: Ms. Jones moved to approve 25 TIP Amendment 08, xi. & xii., project # 0170-3640; second by Mr. Pelton.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

- xiii. **Cromwell, Hartford, Rocky Hill, Wethersfield, I91/CT15, 0170-3759, CMAQ, X6, Replace/upgrade cameras and communications equipment, PD, 2025, \$1,200,000, 80/20/0, New project**
- xiv. **Cromwell, Hartford, Rocky Hill, Wethersfield, I91/CT15, 0170-3759, CMAQ, X6, Replace/upgrade cameras and communications equipment, FD, 2026, \$800,000, 80/20/0, New project**
- xv. **Cromwell, Hartford, Rocky Hill, Wethersfield, I91/CT15, 0170-3759, CMAQ, X6, Replace/upgrade cameras and communications equipment - AC Entry, PD, 2027, \$0, 80/20/0, New project**
- xvi. **Cromwell, Hartford, Rocky Hill, Wethersfield, I91/CT15, 0170-3759, CMAQ, X6, Replace/upgrade cameras and communications equipment – AC Conv, PD, 202, \$12,500,000, 80/20/0, New project**
- xvii. **Cromwell, Hartford, Rocky Hill, Wethersfield, I91/CT15, 0170-3759, CMAQ, X6, Replace/upgrade cameras and communications equipment – AC Conv, PD, 2028, \$7,500,000, 80/20/0, New project**

MOTION: Mr. McGarry moved to approve 25 TIP Amendment 08, xiii. Through xvii., project # 0170-3759; second by Mr. Couture.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

c. Other Transportation (UPWP, TIP, CTDOT ATP Updates)

Rob Haramut announced the start of the 26-27 UPWP public involvement process and noted upcoming CTDOT Active Transportation Plan site visits.

d. FTA Section 5310 Prioritization

Mr. Haramut explained that FTA Section 5310 provides capital and operating expenses to improve mobility for seniors and persons with disabilities. Funding is allocated to urbanized areas. He then reviewed the FTA Section 5310 project applications:

- Cromwell Senior Center replacement bus (Hartford Urbanized Area)
- Estuary Transit District projects (New Haven Urbanized Area).

MOTION: Mr. Pelton moved to approve the prioritization; second by Ms. Jones

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

e. Transit District Update

Mr. Geraghty provided a brief update on upcoming transit changes and initiatives. Service changes are planned for late May, including route adjustments for Routes 582, 642, and 645, and new Saturday service on Route 644 (Old Saybrook to Middletown), expanding weekend coverage along the shoreline.

Mr. Geraghty noted the transition of certain flex routes to fixed routes, which will impact ADA Paratransit and deviation services. Riders are encouraged to visit the transit website or reach out directly for more details.

Electric buses are now in service, with positive early performance feedback. Meanwhile, the Extra Mile micro transit program is seeing strong ridership, especially in Middletown, with over 2,200 rides in February. Growth in Madison, Guilford, and East Hampton has also been steady.

Efforts are underway to shift from a flag stop to a fixed bus stop system to improve safety and service visibility. A vendor is being contracted for sign installation, and towns will be contacted soon regarding stop placements.

Mr. Geraghty also discussed plans to install 3–4 bus shelters in Middletown, pending a zoning change expected in May. These shelters are state-funded and will include sidewalk improvements. Joe Comerford added that shelters cost around \$8,000–\$10,000, with site work and ADA compliance being major cost factors.

f. Letter of Support, Community Connectivity Grant for Deep River

Mr. Gold introduced a draft letter of support for the Town of Deep River’s application to the State DOT’s Community Connectivity Grant Program. The proposed project aims to fill critical gaps in the town’s sidewalk network, improving pedestrian safety and walkability in the town center.

Ms. Jones from Deep River added that the total project cost is approximately \$900,000 and emphasized the importance of the project due to pedestrian safety concerns—particularly near the town landing on River Street and along the east side of Main Street, where jaywalking and close traffic encounters are common. She noted that a letter of support would strengthen the grant application.

MOTION: Ms. Haines moved to approve the letter of support for the Town of Deep River’s application to the State DOT’s Community Connectivity Grant Program; second by Ms. Shoemaker

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

6. LCRVCOG Business

a. Authorization for Direct Hire of Part-Time RiverCOG Financial Assistant

Mr. Gold recommended hiring Maria Figueredo as a part-time financial assistant, following three successful months working through Robert Half. Paula Fernald praised Maria’s performance, noting her attention to detail and quick learning. The Executive Committee had previously endorsed the hire, and a supporting memo was distributed.

MOTION: Mr. Couture made a motion to authorize the direct hire of Maria Figueredo as the part-time RiverCOG Financial Assistant; second by Ms. Lingar

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

b. RiverCOG Fiscal Year 2025 Auditor Appointment

Paula Fernald and Sam Gold explained the limited availability of audit firms, recommending retention of HRT for FY25.

MOTION: Mr. Hall made a motion to appoint HRT as RiverCOG’s auditor for FY25; seconded by Ms. Jones
VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

c. CT River Gateway Commission Appointment of COG Representative and Alternate

RiverCOG recommended Gail Reynolds as the representative and Ann Redfield as the alternate to the Gateway Commission.

MOTION: Mr. Lahm made a motion to approve the appointments of Ms. Reynolds and Ms. Redfield; second by Mr. Hall

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

d. Briefing on State Draft Fair Share Housing Study

Ms. Jouflas delivered a presentation summarizing and analyzing the recently released second part of the OPM Fair Share Housing Study. Ms. Jouflas presented findings and concerns regarding the study, which aims to allocate housing needs across Connecticut municipalities.

She provided background on the statutory basis for the study, which stems from a previously proposed fair share model by the Open Communities Alliance. OPM, in partnership with DOH and DECD, hired ECO Northwest to develop methodologies for calculating and distributing housing needs.

The presentation detailed three main methodologies:

Baseline (Open Communities Alliance model) – Focuses on households under 30% of Area Median Income (AMI) who are severely cost-burdened.

Alternative 1 – Includes underproduction, homelessness, and structural mismatch for households up to 80% AMI.

Alternative 2 – Expands the structural mismatch analysis to all AMI levels.

Ms. Jouflas emphasized that the structural mismatch inflates housing need figures by including cost-burdened but currently housed households. She pointed out that similar methodology was dismissed by ECO Northwest in a prior Oregon study due to concerns about overestimating housing needs.

The report estimates varied needs from 111,000 to 380,000 new units statewide, depending on methodology and assumptions. Megan explained that combining structural mismatch data with actual housing shortages can distort policy decisions.

The allocation methodologies (Baseline, Approach A, and Approach B) use various metrics like affordability, recent housing production, and job accessibility. Megan raised concerns that these do not align with Connecticut’s State Plan of Conservation and Development or statutory growth principles, nor do they account for regional context.

Finally, Ms. Jouflas discussed a proposed bill (HB 6944) requiring certain towns to create enhanced affordable housing plans under “830-J” with specific targets for very low-income units, rental types, and housing configurations. She noted the lack of clarity and coordination in how this would be implemented.

The presentation concluded with a call for more transparency, alignment with state policy, and regional nuance in housing planning.

e. Legislative Update

Mr. Gold provided a detailed legislative update, noting that most public hearings had concluded for the session. He shared RiverCOG's submitted testimony, particularly opposing the proposal to eliminate the car tax. His concern centered around increasing municipal dependence on volatile state revenue sources such as income and sales taxes, particularly during uncertain economic times.

Gold also discussed testimony in support of a homestead property tax reduction proposal. While supportive of the concept, he recommended a more equitable approach via differential assessment percentages. He explained that maintaining the current 70% assessment for primary residences and increasing it for second homes and short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnbs) could better meet the proposal's intent without unfairly burdening businesses and multifamily properties.

Gold expressed concern over the proposed OCA (Office of Community Affairs) bill, particularly its vague language regarding a "reasonable opportunity" for municipalities to provide affordable housing. He warned this could expose towns to litigation from housing advocates, potentially forcing municipalities into subsidizing developments. In his testimony, he emphasized the need for collaboration over litigation to increase housing supply. He highlighted the mismatch between housing needs assessments and unit counts, calling for clearer communication around housing affordability data.

He also encouraged attendees to stay informed and share any relevant legislative developments. RiverCOG plans to promote broader awareness of the Fair Share Housing study by offering presentations to other COGs, citing a general lack of public understanding and press coverage.

f. Regional Economic Development Committee (REDC) Update

Ms. Beckman provided an update on the REDC's recent activities. Over the past year, the committee has been laying a strong foundation and has enjoyed robust participation. Key topics of focus include presentations from the Connecticut Main Street Center.

The REDC is currently evaluating a \$2,000 annual regional membership with the Connecticut Main Street Center. If approved, this would provide all member towns access to the center's resources. An additional mapping service offered by the Center is under consideration for future planning and development work. Members were invited to express concerns or request additional information.

Attendees were also asked to save the date for the upcoming Brownfields Roundtable, scheduled for Monday, June 9 at Middlesex Community College. This will provide an opportunity for towns to discuss Brownfields-related projects directly with state officials.

g. Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Update

Ms. Burns revisited the earlier discussion around scheduling planning meetings despite current funding uncertainties. She proposed scheduling the regional committee's initial planning meeting for the next RiverCOG meeting, and individual municipal meetings for the first and third weeks of June. She clarified that moving ahead with scheduling would not incur major expenses and would allow the group to remain on schedule should grant funding be restored.

There was consensus among the council members to proceed with scheduling, provided expenditures remain minimal. Mr. Gold added that RiverCOG is exploring cost-effective alternatives and may return to the board with a proposal if local funding is needed.

h. Invasive Species Update

Ms. Burns announced a public meeting scheduled that evening at Lyme Town Hall regarding Hydrilla treatment in Hamburg Cove and the greater Connecticut River. Unfortunately, the program had not received its full \$5 million budget request for the upcoming season. Treatment and monitoring efforts will continue in a limited capacity with leftover funds from the previous year.

Regarding the water chestnut program, hiring for seasonal interns is underway. One job offer has been made, and another interview is scheduled.

i. Motion to Add DEMHS Update to Agenda

MOTION: Ms. Lignar made a motion to add DEMHS to the agenda; second by Mr. Couture.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Olivia Chetcuti, DEMHS Region 2 Emergency Management Program Specialist, delivered the DEMHS Region 2 update:

- Preparation of the 2025 Homeland Security Grant Program budget.
- The next REPT Steering Committee meeting is scheduled for this Friday.
- Region 2 ESF-6 will conduct three tabletop exercises focused on mass care and sheltering:
 - May 21 in New Haven
 - July 30 (location TBD)
 - September 10 (location TBD)
- An in-person “Hurricanes Mean Business” flood awareness workshop is scheduled for May 7 in Milford. Further information is available through the DEMHS Region 2 office.

7. Chairman’s and Executive Director’s Reports

Mr. Gold delivered the financial report for RiverCOG as of March 31, 2025, marking the completion of the first nine months of the fiscal year. He reported that overall spending remains within the parameters of the Council’s adopted \$3.2 million budget. While some line items such as service contracts, fees related to temporary staffing via the Robert Half agency, travel, and miscellaneous expenses have exceeded projections, these overages are expected to be offset by other budget areas that are underutilized. Sam noted that with the transition from temporary to permanent staff, the associated agency fees will be eliminated.

He also reported the account balances:

STIF Account: \$1.8 million

Liberty Checking Account: \$50,660

Mr. Gold concluded his report without further remarks, and there were no questions from Council members.

8. Other Business

Next COG Meeting

The next regular COG meeting will be held virtually on Wednesday, May 28, 2025.

Lithium-Ion Battery Disposal

Mr. Couture from raised an important public safety issue regarding waste management. He noted that both the town's Public Works Director and Fire Chief expressed concern about improper disposal of lithium-ion batteries. Unlike standard alkaline batteries, lithium-ion units pose serious fire hazards due to their flammable and self-sustaining chemical reactions. Eric suggested increased public awareness around proper disposal practices.

Chairman Salvatore acknowledged the concern and confirmed with Ms. Ehlemeyer that RiverCOG's hazardous household waste program already addresses the safe disposal of lithium-ion batteries. Ms. Ehlemeyer confirmed that this was correct.

9. Adjournment

MOTION: Mr. Couture moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:08 a.m.; second by Mr. Irish.

VOTE: All in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison