



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

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Regional Planning Committee

LOWER Connecticut River VALLEY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMITTEE

Draft Minutes

Monday, April 28, 2025

7:00 p.m.

Members:

Chester	Carlie Dailey
Clinton	Lawrence Edwards*
	Eddie Alberino *
Cromwell	Nick Demetriades*
	Anthony LaCava*
Deep River	Daniel Smith*
Durham	Frank DeFelice*
East Haddam	Crary Brownell
	Debbie Langdon*
East Hampton	Michael Kowalczyk
Essex	Carey Duques*
	Thomas Pinkowish
Haddam	Raul deBrigard*
Killingworth	Alec Martin*
	Stephanie Warren*
Lyme	Mary Stone*
Middlefield	Paul Pizzo
Middletown	Beth Emery *
	Nathaniel Spencer
Old Lyme	Harold Thompson*
	Howard Margules
Old Saybrook	Douglas McCracken*
	Michael Bender*
Portland	Chantal Foster*
	Bob Ellsworth
Westbrook	Bill Neale*
	Marie Farrell

*Members Present

Staff Present:

Sam Gold
Megan Jouflas
Elizabeth Rolison
Kevin Armstrong
Marcos Gonzalez

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1. Call to Order

Chair DeFelice officially called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM. He confirmed the meeting was being recorded. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom.

2. Roll Call

Ms. Rolison conducted a roll call.

3. Seating of Alternates

No alternates were seated.

4. Adoption of Agenda

MOTION: A motion to adopt the agenda was made by Doug McCracken; seconded by Bill Neale.

There was no discussion.

VOTE: The motion was unanimously approved.

5. Public Comment

Chair DeFelice opened the floor to public comment.

No public comment was made.

6. Approval of Minutes of Past Meeting

MOTION: Mr. Neale moved to approve the minutes of the March 24, 2025, Meeting; seconded by Mr. Alberino

There was no discussion.

VOTE: The motion was unanimously approved.

7. Referrals

Mr. Gonzalez presented referral updates on planning and zoning changes:

- #152 – Middletown: Proposed a one-year moratorium on tobacco retailers and paraphernalia shops, modeled after cannabis and alcohol zoning. RiverCOG found no inter-municipal impacts.
- #153 – Middletown (Cannabis): Adjusted zoning for cannabis retail and micro cultivation. Modifications included traffic plan requirements and spacing rules. RiverCOG found it supports economic adaptability and has no inter-municipal impacts.
- #154 – Westbrook: Administrative updates to zoning regulations to align with state statutes. RiverCOG determined no inter-municipal impacts.
- #155 – Essex: Proposed text amendment allowing fast food restaurants under limited conditions, primarily focused on the Bokum Road shopping center. Public hearing scheduled for May 6, 2025. No inter-municipal impacts noted.
- #156 – Killingworth: Proposed zoning amendments to allow for active adult communities (age 55+) and more flexible housing types. Hearing not yet held; RiverCOG opinion pending.

Referral Website: <https://www.rivercog.org/regional services/referrals/>

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There were no comments or questions.

8. Presentation: Draft Connecticut Fair Share Housing Study

Ms. Joufflas shared her screen and provided an overview of the State Office of Policy and Management's (OPM) draft Fair Share Housing Study, released earlier in the month. She clarified that her presentation would cover both the allocation portion of the study and the previous needs assessment, offering both explanations and critiques of the methodology used.

Ms. Joufflas noted that while the study is complex and she did not contribute to its writing, she had made every effort to interpret its content and would be available to answer questions.

Background and Methodology Overview

Ms. Joufflas explained that the foundation of the State's Fair Share Housing Study is the Open Communities Alliance (OCA) model. Although a bill proposing this model did not pass, it led to the inclusion of Section 18 in Public Act 23-7, mandating OPM and other state departments to develop a housing needs methodology based on the OCA model.

OPM contracted with EcoNorthwest, a consulting firm based on the West Coast, to conduct the study and develop recommendations to the Connecticut General Assembly. In January 2025, EcoNorthwest released a draft needs assessment proposing three methodologies for calculating housing needs:

1. **Baseline (OCA Model):** This is the OCA Model required by statute. This model focuses solely on extremely low-income households (those earning under 30% of Area Median Income, or AMI) who are severely cost-burdened and spending greater than 50% of income on housing needs. This approach estimated a need for 136,246 units statewide, and 5,655 units within the RiverCOG region.
2. **Alternative 1 and 2:** These methodologies broadened the scope. Both started with a measure of underproduction—highlighting that Connecticut lacks sufficient housing to support its current population, considering overcrowding, household formation, and vacancy rates. This alone accounted for an estimated 36,000 units.

Additionally, they factored in homelessness, estimating a further need for 3,015 units. Lastly, they included a structural mismatch metric, examining households who are cost-burdened by housing that exceeds their affordability. This approach resulted in dramatically higher unit estimates:

- **Alternative 1** (focused on households up to 80% AMI): 72,000 units
- **Alternative 2** (all income levels): 320,000 units

Ms. Joufflas expressed concern with the structural mismatch being interpreted as a housing need. She argued that while it highlights affordability issues, it does not indicate an actual shortage of units. These households are already housed—just not affordably. Thus, she warned that producing housing to match this figure would create a significant overproduction, leading to vacancy rates well beyond the healthy benchmark of 5%.

EcoNorthwest appeared to support this interpretation elsewhere; in their work on Oregon's housing study, they dismissed the structural mismatch model as an inappropriate measure of need for similar reasons.

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Mr. Gold added that the study mistakenly applies a 5% vacancy rate to the structural mismatch number. He emphasized that the mismatch pertains to households, not housing units, making the vacancy rate metric inapplicable in this context.

Allocation Methodologies

Ms. Jouflas then transitioned to the study's recently released allocation portion, which distributes the calculated housing need across towns. Three allocation models were proposed:

1. **Baseline Allocation (OCA Model):** This method allocates based on a town's share of taxable property value, regional income differences, municipal poverty rate, and share of multifamily housing. Adjustments are made by removing high-poverty towns from the allocation pool and capping the total allocation at 20% of a municipality's current housing stock.
2. **Allocation Approach A:** Uses Alternative 1's needs estimate and a similar metric as the baseline but omits the poverty-related adjustments and the 20% cap.
3. **Allocation Approach B:** Also based on Alternative 1, this model takes a more complex, three-pronged approach:
 - Measures how many units each municipality needs to reach the regional average of affordable rental housing (less than 50% AMI).
 - Evaluates historical housing production (2013–2023) at both municipal and regional levels to determine if towns need to increase production.
 - Assesses job accessibility using statewide—not regional—data, based on commute times via public transit and car.

Ms. Jouflas pointed out that Approach B, while more comprehensive, seems to distort regional realities. For instance, towns in the RiverCOG region appear similar in the job access analysis despite having very different characteristics. She also noted that measuring housing production doesn't necessarily reveal whether a town should be building more, only whether it has done so.

Several concerns were raised about the allocation methodologies:

- **Lack of alignment with existing state policy:** Megan criticized the disconnection between the allocation metrics and the State's Growth Management Principles and Conservation & Development (C&D) Plan for 2025–2030. These statutory policies provide clear guidance for directing development, which the study fails to consider.
- **Insensitivity to local and regional contexts:** A statewide model inevitably overlooks important geographic and market distinctions. Megan warned that the assumption that all municipalities should be developed equally is flawed and could impose unrealistic expectations on towns with natural or infrastructural constraints.

Legislative Developments and Final Recommendations

Ms. Jouflas then addressed House Bill 6944, also known as "Towns Take the Lead." This proposed legislation would mandate certain municipalities—specifically those in the top 80% of income and grand list value—to develop implementation plans for their allocated units. These plans must:

- Include 20% affordable units targeted at very low-income households,
- Specify rental versus ownership breakdown,

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- Include age-restricted unit counts,
- And be submitted to the Connecticut Law Journal.

Critically, the bill also enables legal action in Superior Court against towns that fail to comply, with ambiguous remedies that leave significant legal risk.

Ms. Jouflas emphasized that this bill assumes the allocation model will be finalized and implemented by 2025, despite the final report not being due until June 2025. She characterized this as a premature and potentially conflicting approach.

In closing, Ms. Jouflas urged continued vigilance and involvement. RiverCOG and other stakeholders are closely monitoring the final study, expected in June. She encouraged participants to:

- Educate local boards and commissions,
- Speak with elected representatives,
- Coordinate efforts regionally to shape alternative, more appropriate solutions.

9. Legislative Update

Mr. Gold reported that legislative activity has quieted as focus shifts to the upcoming biennium budget.

Testimony submitted on key bills:

- Homestead exemption bill: Proposed a \$50,000 exemption on property taxes. Sam suggested an alternative method using differential assessment rates to avoid shifting tax burdens unfairly, particularly onto apartment renters.
- Car tax elimination bill: While popular, Sam opposed it due to concerns about state funding reliability during a potential recession.

Additional discussion addressed the rise in car tax values, which are now based on MSRP and a 20-year depreciation schedule.

Legislative tracking is ongoing; Ms. LoPresti and Ms. Beckman are maintaining an updated spreadsheet of bill statuses for reference.

10. Other RiverCOG Project Updates

Mr. Gold provided a comprehensive update on several ongoing projects at RiverCOG:

Central Connecticut Loop Trail Study (Airline Trail to Farmington Canal Trail Connector Study)

The study is largely complete and was recently adopted by the Middletown Planning & Zoning Commission. Next steps will involve coordination with the City of Middletown, which has allocated funding for further planning efforts.

Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A)

The SS4A program is progressing. Mr. Haramut is leading this initiative, and public engagement meetings are expected to be scheduled in the coming months.

Regional Waste Authority Study (RWA)

The RWA Study has gained urgency due to the planned dissolution of MIRA by June 30. The Town of Essex is working to keep participating municipalities united in their waste disposal efforts. However, disposal costs are expected to rise, both for municipalities and residents. RiverCOG will continue exploring regional waste solutions.

Eversource's Community Partnership Initiative

Mr. Gonzales explained that the Community Partnership Initiative is aimed at promoting energy efficiency programs to residents. RiverCOG applied to serve as the fiduciary for multiple towns, streamlining the process. While funding has not yet been confirmed, initial feedback has been positive.

Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) Update

Mr. Gold explained that although a consultant has been selected, the FEMA funding required for the project is currently uncertain due to broader federal budget issues. The concern centers on FEMA's reimbursement model, which could leave RiverCOG financially responsible if funding is not secured. The board has approved moving forward with preparatory meetings, and Chair DeFelice suggested exploring the possibility of requesting a plan extension from FEMA as a contingency.

11. Miscellaneous: State, Regional and/or Local Planning Issues

Chair DeFelice informed the Committee that the Town of Durham will soon begin work on its Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) update. Durham has also recently passed updates to both its residential zoning regulations and inland wetlands and watercourses regulations.

Mr. deBrigard followed with a notice regarding a proposal by Eversource to rebuild power lines crossing the river. The Gateway Commission is preparing to issue a request that any such rebuild place the lines underwater to minimize visual and environmental impact.

Mr. Demetriades then provided an update from the Town of Cromwell, which has approved new zoning regulations, replacing the previous version from 2011. These updates include a new use table to make the regulations more user-friendly. Cromwell is now beginning work on updating its subdivision regulations, a process expected to take six to eight months. Mr. Demetriades noted that Cromwell completed its POCD update last year and feels the town is in a strong position with its planning framework.

12. Adjournment

MOTION: With no further business, a motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Edwards; seconded by Mr. Martin. There was no discussion.

VOTE: The motion was unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison