



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

June 23, 2025 – 12:30 PM

RiverCOG Members;

Chester: Pat Bandzes* (alternate)
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: Bob Yamartino
Middletown: Gene Nocera
Old Lyme: Martha Shoemaker *
Old Saybrook: Carl Fortuna *
Portland: Michael Pelton*
Westbrook: John Hall *

MPO Members:

Darlene Briggs, Middlesex Chamber of Commerce
Joe Comerford, Estuary & Middletown Area Transit Districts
Laurie McElwee, Estuary Transit District
Jennifer Brady, FHWA

*Present

Others Present:

Nicole Velardi, DEHMS
Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Jackie Gonzalez, Congressman Courtney's Office
Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office

Staff Present:

Sam Gold, Kevin Armstrong, Janice Ehle-Meyer, Susie Beckman, Eliza LoPresti, Elizabeth Rolison, Marcos Gonzalez, Robert Haramut, Megan Jouflas, Brendan Geraghty, Marcos Gonzales, James Tom, Ella Rogerson, Nathaniel Hill

RiverCOG

1. Roll Call & Introductions

RiverCOG was welcomed by Florence Griswold Museum Executive Director, Joshua Campbell Torrance, who thanked RiverCOG for the work that it does and invited the attendees for a tour after the meeting.

Chairman Salvatore called the meeting to order at 12:29 PM. Mr. Gold conducted the roll call.

RiverCOG Summer Interns introduced themselves:

- **James Tomb** (Senior at University for Rhode Island/Studying Film and Entrepreneurship). For his internship at RiverCOG, James is working on developing educational videos on affordable housing.
- **Ella Rogerson** (Junior at Emerson College/Studying Marketing & Journalism). For her internship at RiverCOG, Ella is working on developing educational videos on affordable housing.
- **Nathaniel Hill** – Sustainable CT Fellow (UVM graduate, Environmental Policy). After his internship at RiverCOG, Nathaniel will be pursuing a Master's in International Business Policy at the University of Denver.
- **Jake Capobianco** – Jake was unable to attend the meeting due to a RiverCOG commitment. Ms. LoPresti acknowledged Jake for his GIS work with Margo Burns on Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS).

2. Public Speaking – All MPO and COG Business Agenda Items

a. Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor

Carol shared outcomes from the June 12th regional meeting of Registrars, highlighting productive feedback given to the Deputy Secretary of the State regarding election equipment. She emphasized legislative support for bills benefiting small towns and offered assistance with the July caucus process.

b. Nicole Velardi, DEMHS

Nicole reported:

- No information on Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) yet.
- Soliciting nominations for Regional Emergency Planning Team (REPT) chair, with election scheduled August 15.
- School emergency drill logs due July 1 – currently 60% missing.
- Reminder for municipalities to administer annual loyalty oaths to Emergency Management Directors. Her office can also administer this.
- Hurricane season preparedness reminders, especially ensuring DEEP approval for emergency debris sites to qualify for disaster reimbursement.

Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office

Ms. McGrath shared key updates:

Farm Recovery Support Grants: The program, created to assist farmers with 2023–2024 crop losses, has faced delays since January. Staff are hopeful applications may open by mid-July. Farmers believed to be eligible can be referred to RiverCOG for current information.

Broadband (BEAD) Guidance: NTIA released new guidance for broadband deployment. DEEP is updating its strategy accordingly. A recent webinar with helpful insights is available on DEEP's website.

Supreme Court – NEPA Changes: A recent decision narrows the scope of NEPA reviews, potentially streamlining infrastructure project approvals by limiting consideration of indirect impacts and emphasizing agency discretion. While this may reduce delays, some litigation risk remains. Staff are awaiting further legal analysis. NEPA applies to major infrastructure projects to assess environmental risks.

Her office will share additional updates as more information becomes available.

Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office

Ms. Graham reported no major updates but noted that her office is closely tracking developments related to a key federal bill. She also encouraged any constituents in the Middle East who are trying to return to the U.S. to contact her office, as they are assisting in those efforts.

Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office

Ms. McBride shared that there were no significant new updates beyond what was included in a recent email newsletter. Attendees were encouraged to reach out if they had not received it. She also reminded attendees that their office is available to provide letters of support for federal grant applications.

Additionally, the office recently hosted Senator Murphy's Regional Priority Council meetings, including sessions on transportation—attended by RiverCOG's Robert Haramut—as well as Long Island Sound and Land Conservation. These meetings were noted as productive and are expected to resume on a quarterly basis moving forward.

Jennifer Brady, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and FTA

Ms. Brady provided an update on staffing and ongoing coordination with RiverCOG:

- The previous FHWA liaison, Erik Shortell, has left federal service. Due to reduced staffing levels, Ms. Brady will now serve as the coordinator working directly with RiverCOG's Sam Gold and Rob Haramut.
- The coordinator is involved with federal transportation programs that come before the board, including the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).
- Despite limited staff, FHWA and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) will continue to provide joint approvals and aim to maintain current levels of service. Coordination will continue directly with RiverCOG staff as issues arise.

3. LCRVMPO Business

a. Approval of Minutes

MOTION: Ms. Haines made a motion to approve the minutes of the May 28, 2025, LCRVCOG and LCRVMPO Meeting; seconded by Mr. Fortuna.

VOTE: The motion was approved unanimously.

b. 2025 TIP Amendment 10

Mr. Haramut presented three project changes for the Estuary Transit District:

- i. Deletion of facility improvements project (\$500,000).

- ii. Cost estimate reduction for admin/misc. support project from \$700,000 to \$300,000.
- iii. Deletion of small bus replacement project (\$600,000).

These adjustments were due to funding not being required in FY25.

MOTION: Mr. Fortuna made a motion to approve TIP Amendment 10 items i–iii as presented; seconded by Ms. Haines.

VOTE: The motion was unanimously approved.

c. MPO Recertification

Mr. Haramut provided an overview of the recent MPO Recertification Review, a federal requirement conducted every four years for urbanized areas with populations over 200,000. This process is mandated by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 and jointly conducted by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

The Process:

- A desk audit was completed in February.
- Site visits took place in March at RiverCOG’s office.
- The final report was issued in May.

RiverCOG is part of the New Haven urbanized area, though some member towns are also part of the Hartford area. The planning process involving RiverCOG, and local public transit providers was certified commendations, corrective action and several recommendations outlined.

Commendations

RiverCOG received three commendations, which Mr. Gold noted is a record:

1. Strong coordination with the transit district, including the hiring of a joint transportation planner.
2. Work on the regional housing plan.
3. Participation in the TLD (Transformational Leadership Development) grant program focused on driving community-oriented solutions.

Recommendations

1. Update the Public Involvement Plan, which currently combines outdated RiverCOG and Estuary COG documents. The last update addressed virtual meeting procedures during COVID.
2. Improve accessibility for individuals with hearing or vision impairments.
3. Enhance freight planning coordination across the urbanized area. RiverCOG is participating in a joint purchase of freight movement data with other COGs.

Corrective Actions

1. Demonstrate financial constraint in the TIP (Transportation Improvement Program) — RiverCOG is working with CTDOT and Eco Interactive to generate the required reporting tools.
2. Provide system performance reporting in the MTP (Metropolitan Transportation Plan) — RiverCOG relies on data from CTDOT, which collects and distributes it statewide.

Additional Comments

- Ms. Brady thanked RiverCOG staff, especially Mr. Haramut and Mr. Gold, for their responsiveness and preparation during the multi-day review.
- Corrective actions are seen as part of continuous improvement, not negative indicators.

RiverCOG

- Federal agencies are evaluating whether the review cycle might shift from four to five years, based on resource availability.

d. Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Update – Consultant Selection

RiverCOG staff provided an update on the ongoing Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) Update for 15 participating municipalities.

Project Background & Funding:

- RiverCOG received a FEMA BRIC (Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities) grant and had a signed contract with DEMHS for the work. However, the future of BRIC funding is uncertain due to potential rescission by the federal administration.
- A federal judge has ordered FEMA to pay outstanding bills, so reimbursement is still possible. In the meantime, RiverCOG is exploring alternative funding sources to ensure the project continues without interruption.

Project Phasing:

- The project has been split into two phases:
 1. Initial Outreach Phase: Currently underway, funded either by FEMA (if reimbursed) or with local match funds already received from participating towns.
 2. Full Plan Update (Phase 2): RiverCOG met with CTDOT and FHWA and confirmed that Federal Transportation Planning Funds can be used for this work, as it supports transportation infrastructure resiliency.

Consultant Selection:

- RiverCOG issued a DOT-compliant RFQ and received a single response—from Dewberry Engineers, the same firm that completed the last plan update.
- Staff recommended authorizing the Executive Director to negotiate and enter into a contract with Dewberry Engineers to complete Phase 2 of the project using federal transportation planning funds.

Financial Details:

- Total Project Cost: Approximately \$300,000, with \$20,000 allocated to Phase 1 (outreach).
- Remaining \$280,000 for Phase 2 will be funded 80% federal, 10% state, 10% local.
- Local match will come from funds already contributed by participating towns or will be billed in the next fiscal year (starting July 1).
- If FEMA reimbursement becomes available, RiverCOG will prioritize FEMA funds and shift remaining costs accordingly.

MOTION: Mr. Fortuna made a motion to authorize the Executive Director to enter into a contract with Dewberry Engineers for Phase 2 of the Regional Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Update using available federal transportation planning funds, with reimbursement from FEMA sought if possible; seconded by Mr. Couture.

VOTE: The vote was unanimously approved.

e. Other Transportation Business

Mr. Haramut noted that last month the MPO Board endorsed the ‘26-’27 UPWP conditionally before the public comment period was over, which extended for about another week. There were no additional public comments, so the 1st version was the final version that was submitted for approval.

f. Estuary Transit District Update

Mr. Comerford provided a comprehensive update:

RiverCOG

- New hourly and weekend routes were launched.
- Bus stop and shelter improvements are underway in Middletown.
- Transition from flag stops to designated stops continues.
- Strong ridership growth in new and expanded services.
- Electric buses are performing well with extended ranges. Charging logistics, demand charges, and infrastructure limitations were discussed.
- Discussion covered charging limitations, battery lifespan, fire suppression systems, and the phased approach toward electrification with hybrids planned next.

4. LCRVCOG Business (continued)

a. RiverCOG FY26 Budget (Motion)

Mr. Gold presented the FY26 budget totaling \$3,137,496. Although the originally proposed budget included a \$400,000 placeholder from House Bill 5002 (which was vetoed by the Governor), these funds were not counted on for operational spending and can be added if secured through a future special session.

The FY26 budget includes a 3.5% cost of living adjustment (COLA) for staff and allows for hiring an additional staff member. It also includes anticipated but uncertain income from a FEMA BRIC grant. A modest increase in municipal dues, approved earlier in the year, is also reflected, currently comprising approximately 7.5% of revenue.

MOTION: Ms. Haines made a motion to approve the FY26 RiverCOG Budget as presented; seconded by Mr. Fortuna.

VOTE: The motion passed unanimously

b. FY26 Regional Services Grant Authorization and Statement of Work (Motion)

RiverCOG will receive \$550,145.71 from the State's Regional Services Grant through the Office of Policy and Management (OPM). The statement of work allocates funds as follows:

- \$260,000 for Comprehensive Planning
- \$250,000 for Regional Services
- \$40,145.71 for Municipal Technical Support

MOTION: Mr. Fortuna made a motion authorize RiverCOG to execute and deliver the signed grant award notice to the State and authorize the Executive Director to sign all associated documents; seconded by Ms. Haines

VOTE: Motion passed unanimously.

c. Document Digitization Program, Software License Renewal (Motion)

Mr. Armstrong presented a request for license renewal for Laserfiche software to support ongoing digitization efforts. The program has expanded to several towns including Deep River, Chester, and Cromwell. Staff restructuring following Torrance Downs' retirement prompted additional automation.

MOTION: Mr. Fortuna made a motion to approve \$12,000 to renew Laserfiche licenses for one year, using RSG funds; seconded by Ms. Haines.

VOTE: The motion passed unanimously.

d. HHW Report

i. Minimum Charge Policy (Motion)

Ms. Ehle-Meyer reported that a recent HHW collection in East Hampton did not meet the \$13,000 minimum vendor threshold, falling short by \$866.80. The HHW Subcommittee recommended covering the shortfall from RiverCOG's hazardous waste recycling fund, which has a healthy balance.

MOTION: *Mr. Fortuna made a motion approve a one-time use of up to \$2,500 from the recycling fund to cover the cost shortfall and establish this as a policy for future minimum shortfalls; seconded by Ms. Haines.*

VOTE: *The motion passed unanimously.*

Additional updates included:

- A regional gas cylinder collection program launching in the fall.
- EPR legislation passed for battery recycling.
- DEEP is considering powdered household cleaner containers as a future EPR category.

e. Regional Election Monitor Funding Letter (Motion)

Mr. Gold discussed OPM's denial of RiverCOG's request to use RSG funds for the Regional Election Advisor due to an unexecuted MOU with the Secretary of State. A letter has been drafted urging execution of the MOU. All CEOs are requested to sign the letter, which will also be sent to legislative leadership.

MOTION: *Mr. Fortuna made a motion to approve sending the letter regarding Regional Election Monitor funding for Councils of Governments to the Connecticut Secretary of State, Stephanie Thomas; seconded by Ms. Haines.*

VOTE: *The motion passed unanimously.*

f. Legislative Update

Mr. Gold noted HB 5002 was vetoed, but discussions are ongoing about a special session. Ms. Beckman reviewed highlights of passed bills, including:

- PA 25-33 concerning zoning, environmental and sustainability provisions
- Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) opportunities
- PA 25-87 expanding veterans' property tax exemptions

g. Regional Waste Authority Grant Update

Mr. Gonzalez gave a brief update on the Regional Waste Authority. Consultants have been hired, and the project is in the information-gathering phase. COG Members were asked to sign up for a 45-minute to 1-hour interview via a QR code or link, either for themselves or a staff member.

A follow-up email with interview questions will be sent Friday. Several towns, including Killingworth, Chester, and Middletown, have completed interviews, with two more scheduled. Members were encouraged to participate soon to help move the project toward public engagement.

h. DEMHS Update

Ms. Beckman reported that there were no new updates beyond Nicole Velardi's earlier report.

i. Regional Economic Development Committee Update

Ms. Beckman reported on a successful Brownfields Redevelopment session. A follow-up session is planned for September, featuring economic development expert Dale Kroop.

j. Aquatic Invasive Species Update

As Ms. Burns was unable to attend the meeting due to other RiverCOG commitments, Mr. Gold shared on her behalf:

- Army Corps dye studies and herbicide treatments are scheduled in regional waters.
- Water chestnut has been detected in several locations including Essex and Deep River.
- A fall workshop for Land Trusts and towns is being planned.

k. Land Trust Update

As Ms. Burns was unable to attend the meeting due to other RiverCOG commitments, Mr. Gold shared on her behalf:

- GIS conservation data plan is under development.
- Meetings held with all 15 towns for the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan; public meetings will begin in late July.

l. RAC (Regional Agriculture Council) Update

Ms. Ehle-Meyer reported on continued monthly meetings, highlighting a presentation from Essex's Connor Barnes on mobile slaughter services. RAC will break for summer and resume in the fall. Additional town representatives are still needed.

m. Basic Needs Task Force – Food Pantry

Ms. Ehle-Meyer reported food donations are decreasing due to federal cuts while demand increases and encouraged members to spread awareness.

5. Chairman's and Executive Director's Reports

Mr. Gold commended Ms. Rolison for her work on today's in person meeting at the Florence Griswold Museum as well as Mr. Armstrong and other staff for pitching in. He then shared RiverCOG's financial update provided by Ms. Fernald:

Financial Report:

As of May 31, 2025, all months of the fiscal year have been completed, and overall spending remains within the \$3.2 million budget. While some line items—such as service and electric fees, travel, pension, and miscellaneous expenses—are projected to exceed budget, these will be offset by savings in other areas. For example, miscellaneous expenses are currently at 97% of budget, compared to 91% of the fiscal year elapsed, indicating minimal concern.

As of May 31:

- STIF account balance: \$2,070,490
- Liberty Bank checking account: \$84,000

No questions were raised regarding the financials.

6. Other Business

The next COG meeting is scheduled for **Wednesday, July 23, 2025**, and will be held via Zoom.

7. Adjournment

MOTION: *With no further business to discuss, Ms. Haines made a motion to adjourn the meeting; seconded by Mr. Fortuna.*

VOTE: *The vote was unanimously approved.*

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:50 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth Rolison