



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: 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: 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
Michael Salter

*Present

Others Present:

Sean Scanlon, CT State Comptroller
Joshua Barnes, Office of the CT State Comptroller
Brandon Young, Office of the CT State Comptroller
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office
Kathryn Russell, Deep River
Allison Dvorak, Senior Resources

Staff Present:

RiverCOG

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

1. Roll Call & Introductions

The meeting was called to order at 9:01 AM by Chair Salvatore. Mr. Gold conducted roll call.

Special guest **State Comptroller Sean Scanlon** was introduced, accompanied by his staff -Brendan Young and Josh Barnes.

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

a. Comptroller Sean Scanlon

Chair Salvatore welcomed Comptroller Sean Scanlon and praised his proactive engagement with municipalities.

Comptroller Scanlon thanked the group and explained that, true to his policy style, he is drawn to tackling complex problems that others avoid. He has made **property tax reform** a major focus of his office this summer—not with a plan already written, but through active listening to municipal leaders across the state.

He explained that Connecticut’s property tax system:

- Is the **biggest tax burden** faced by most residents and businesses.
- Is **structurally flawed**, placing undue pressure on municipal governments and the state.
- Is **repetitively debated** every decade, but with little to no resolution or bold reform.

He noted that typical reform proposals—like revenue diversification, regional shared services, and rethinking municipal aid formulas—have been recycled repeatedly. His goal is to break the cycle and develop **realistic, long-term reforms** that have municipal buy-in.

He also committed to providing his personal phone and email in the Zoom chat to encourage private follow-up conversations for those not comfortable speaking publicly.

Discussion Highlights

- **Mr. Pelton** asked Mr. Scanlon to identify his primary reason for addressing property tax.
→ *Scanlon responded that it ranks among the top three issues limiting Connecticut’s economic growth and stability, and that political fights over municipal aid are chronic and counterproductive. He emphasized the unsustainable loop of towns needing more aid while the state lacks capacity to provide it without reform.*
- **Mr. Cox** expressed concern about instituting mill rate caps or similar restrictions without offering alternate revenue sources.
→ *Scanlon agreed, stating he does not support a cap unless paired with broader reform. He described caps without support as “tying municipalities’ hands behind their backs.”*
- **Mr. Couture** spoke of the state legislature’s ongoing tendency to create tax exemptions and mandates that draw directly from municipal budgets without reimbursement (e.g., veterans’ exemption).
→ *Scanlon acknowledged that, as a former legislator, he understands the political pressures but believes it’s time for a more coordinated system that doesn’t offload state obligations onto towns.*
- **Chair Salvatore** expressed frustration over the cumulative effects of new unfunded mandates, such as sick leave rules and firefighter cancer relief, that contradict or bypass collective bargaining.

→ Scanlon noted the concern and agreed these actions increase financial strain on towns without a matching funding mechanism.

- **Mr. Fortuna** called for bold thinking. He highlighted:
 - The impracticality of “shared fire marshals” as a meaningful cost-saver.
 - The value of revisiting prior reports from CCM and others proposing “grand bargain” strategies.
 - The need for **collective bargaining reform**, citing that municipal management has little leverage.
 - A “municipal veto” concept—where legislative mandates could be blocked by consensus from a supermajority of municipalities.

→ Scanlon found the concept intriguing and reiterated his preference for achieving consensus solutions rather than top-down mandates.
- **Ms. Haines** discussed taxing tourism-based activity, such as events and accommodations, and frustrations with low PILOT returns for tax-exempt properties.

→ Scanlon agreed and shared examples of towns like Woodstock that receive no local benefit from major fairgrounds, and Guilford dealing with heavy Airbnb traffic. He raised the idea of giving towns optional taxing authority for local events or lodging, not as a mandate but as a tool.
- **Ms. Lignar** encouraged exploring regional or interstate collaboration and revisiting controversial tools such as tolling to bring in revenue.

→ Scanlon responded with humor, noting tolls may arrive after world peace, but stressed the need for creative, sustainable solutions. He welcomed ideas such as self-insurance and more intelligent investment planning.
- **Mr. Couture** concluded the discussion by commending Scanlon’s openness..

→ Scanlon thanked everyone, reaffirming his willingness to pursue this reform effort seriously, not symbolically.

He closed with a request for ongoing communication and pledged to follow up individually with anyone wishing to provide more ideas.

Erin McBride – Office of U.S. Senator Chris Murphy

Erin thanked the group and provided a brief update. She noted that the Senator’s office is currently reviewing the recently passed **reconciliation bill**, and that an **informational breakdown** will be distributed soon. This resource will detail the bill’s expected impact on Connecticut and other states. She encouraged municipal leaders to reach out directly with any questions or concerns, noting that their office remains available and engaged. She then introduced Julia McGrath to speak on behalf of Congressman Courtney’s office.

Julia McGrath – Office of U.S. Representative Joe Courtney

Julia echoed Erin’s message and shared that their team is also reviewing the reconciliation package. They are preparing **summary “cheat sheet” documents** for various stakeholders to help explain funding and policy changes. However, some elements of the legislation remain unclear, and the team is being cautious to avoid premature guidance.

Julia noted that their office is actively **tracking disruptions in federal funding flows**—and urged towns to report any delays or issues they’re experiencing. This feedback is important to developing a real-time understanding of how the legislation affects the region. She added that Congressman Courtney is returning to the district this week, as House votes in Washington had been canceled.

Ellen Graham – Office of U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal

Ellen greeted the group and echoed support from Senator Blumenthal’s office. She offered assistance and encouraged municipalities to reach out with questions, particularly related to federal infrastructure funding and grant opportunities.

While she did not present a formal update, she reaffirmed the office's availability to support towns on policy or project issues.

3. LCRVMPO Business

a. Approval of Minutes

MOTION: Mr. Cox made a motion to approve the minutes of the June 25, 2025, LCRVCOG and LCRVMPO Meeting; seconded by Mr. Couture

VOTE: The motion was approved unanimously.

b. 2025 TIP Amendment 11

TIP Amendment Items Bi.–Bvi:

Rob Haramut (RiverCOG) presented six line items concerning seawall revetment and toe protection along Route 154 in Old Saybrook. Phases included preliminary and final design, right-of-way, A/C entry, and construction over multiple years.

MOTION: A motion to approve TIP items B1 through B6 was made by Mr. Hall

SECOND: seconded by Ms. Lignar.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

TIP Amendment Items Bvii–Bviii:

Rob presented two additional items related to replacement of deteriorated highway illumination systems in District 1 (correction noted from District 2) across areas including I-91 and Route 9. These projects are in design phase.

MOTION: Motion to approve TIP items B7 and B8 was made by Mr. Cox

SECOND seconded by Mr. Pelton.

VOTE: Motion carried unanimously.

c. LOTCIP Update

Mr. Haramut provided a detailed update on the Local Transportation Capital Improvement Program (LOTICIP) for the RiverCOG region. He noted that the program supports construction on federal-aid eligible roads at the municipal level.

Completed projects include:

- Westlake Drive and Millbrook Road in Middletown
- North Main Street in Old Saybrook
- Higganum Road in Durham
- Coles Road in Cromwell
- Main Street in Chester

Active or committed projects:

- East Main Street (Clinton) – nearly complete sidewalk project on Route 1

- *Saybrook Road (Middletown) and Candlewood Hill (Haddam)* – both in design, with some delays due to engineering changes, utility coordination, and environmental (NDDB) reviews

Next in line:

- *Saybrook Junction (Old Saybrook)*
- *Main Street (Durham)* – both in design, pending updated cost estimates and scopes
- The goal is for final design submission by fall 2025, with spring 2026 construction.

Future pipeline projects:

- *Candlewood Hill Phase 2 (Haddam)* – western extension
- *Long Hill Road (Clinton)* – realignment project
- *Plains Road sidewalks (Essex)*

Mr. Haramut noted substantial cost increases since the 2019 project applications, with inflation and scope refinements contributing to an estimated 60% increase in projected costs overall. Despite this, the region currently has enough funds budgeted to move the next four projects to construction. All projects have had their plans approved with the exception of Halls Road, Old Lyme.

MOTION: *Mr. Couture moved to endorse the Halls Road Project in Old Lyme.*

SECOND: *Mr. Cox seconded the motion.*

VOTE: *Motion carried unanimously.*

d. Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Update

Mr. Haramut provided an update on the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Safety Action Plan. He stated that the rough draft of the plan is anticipated in early September 2025, with plans to hold public information sessions in the following months. The goal is to seek formal MPO endorsement by November or December.

In the near term, RiverCOG or its consultant FHI will begin distributing draft town-specific profile sections to individual municipalities for review, likely within the next couple of weeks.

No questions or discussion followed, and the update concluded.

e. CT Loop Trail Study – Phase 2

Mr. Gold and Mr. Haramut reported on the advancement of Phase 2 of the Connecticut Loop Trail Study, focusing on Middletown's North End. Mr. Haramut and Mr. Gold recently met with the new Mayor of Middletown – Gene Nocera, and the city planner to coordinate use of remaining State bonding funds secured by Senator Matt Lesser to support the project. A portion of those funds had previously been used for the non-federal match on RiverCOG's completed study.

The current phase prioritizes a trail connecting the North End to Newfield Street, where new apartments are being developed. The city is currently experiencing staffing constraints, with no Public Works Director and a retiring City Engineer. In response, RiverCOG has proposed taking on project management responsibilities. The Middletown Mayor expressed support for this idea. RiverCOG will continue discussions with the City to develop a proposed scope and fee for project management services.

The proposed trail would partly follow existing trolley and rail alignments, potentially including boardwalk sections and a reconstructed bridge over the Coginchaug River. Developers on Newfield Street have shown interest in integrating the trail into their projects. Additionally, Middletown High School has some existing trail infrastructure that this segment could connect to. Both the city and RiverCOG have some implementation funds available, and the project is expected to support revitalization of the North End and capitalize on existing open space and industrial reuse opportunities, such as at the Remington Rand factory site.

f. Other Transit Updates

None to report

g. Estuary Transit District (ETD) Update

Mr. Geraghty delivered a comprehensive update on recent transit developments:

- Middletown Planning & Zoning approved four new bus shelters, to be installed soon.
- In late May, ETD launched service changes and expansions, including:
 - New or adjusted Route 640 and Route 642 service impacting Old Saybrook and Deep River.
 - Route 644 Saturday service between Middletown and Old Lyme.
- New brochures have been released and are being distributed to towns; municipalities were encouraged to make them available at town halls.
- ETD is transitioning from a flag stop system to a formal bus stop model, citing safety concerns. Many proposed bus stop locations have been finalized.
 - Towns will be contacted directly by ETD or contractor K5 Corporation to coordinate permitting and receive input.
 - Signed bus stops will help ensure safe boarding locations, improve operational efficiency, and raise public visibility of services.
 - QR codes linking to route schedules will be featured at each bus stop.

i. Estuary Transit District Employee Sharing Contract

Mr. Gold introduced a request from ETD Executive Director Mr. Comerford to extend the employee sharing agreement between RiverCOG and ETD. Under this agreement, Brendan Geraghty, a RiverCOG employee, is loaned to ETD for transit planning duties, with ETD reimbursing RiverCOG for his time.

Mr. Comerford explained that ETD seeks to enter into a 5-year contract extension to allow formal obligation of federal relief funds set aside for this staffing arrangement. This would ensure the funds are not subject to recapture due to lack of obligation. He emphasized Mr. Geraghty's contributions, citing recent transit expansions and infrastructure progress as evidence of the partnership's success.

Sam Gold clarified that while the new agreement would extend five years, the contract retains a 90-day termination clause by either party. If Mr. Geraghty were to leave RiverCOG, the organization would retain the responsibility to hire a replacement, allowing continuity of the relationship with ETD.

MOTION: Ms. Jones moved to authorize the Executive Director to negotiate and sign an extension to the employee sharing agreement with the Estuary Transit District.

SECOND: Mr. Lahm seconded the motion.

VOTE: *The motion passed unanimously.*

4. LCRVCOG Business

a. Authorization for Executive Director to enter into contract with the CT River Gateway Commission (CRGC) on behalf of RiverCOG (motion)

Mr. Gold introduced the renewal of the Annual Services Agreement with the Connecticut River Gateway Commission. He explained that this agreement formalizes the longstanding relationship by detailing staff billing rates and mutual expectations. This practice began several years ago to ensure clarity and structure in the partnership.

Ms. Beckman added that this year's agreement specifies that she will attend a defined number of Gateway Commission meetings and spend approximately 40% of her time supporting the Commission's work. She noted that the Gateway Commission reimburses RiverCOG for that time and that they will monitor the arrangement to potentially adjust her time allocation to prioritize other RiverCOG initiatives such as economic development.

MOTION: *Mr. Cox made a motion to authorize the Executive Director to enter into a contract with the Connecticut River Gateway Commission for the FY25 annual services agreement.*

SECOND: *Mr. Hall seconded the motion*

VOTE: *The motion passed unanimously.*

b. Adoption of MOU for Eversource Community Partnership Initiative (motion)

Mr. Gonzalez presented details of a recently awarded \$85,300 grant from Eversource under its Community Partnership Initiative (CPI). The initiative originated from a collaborative application submitted in April 2025 by RiverCOG, in coordination with the sustainability committees of Chester, Deep River, East Hampton, and Portland. The grant supports two outreach programs:

- Home Energy Solutions (residential energy efficiency outreach)
- Small Business Energy Advantage (targeted outreach to small businesses)

RiverCOG will partner with PACE (People's Action for Clean Energy) to implement the outreach and retain a \$28,000 management and administration fee for coordinating and distributing funds. Mr. Gonzalez emphasized RiverCOG's role as fiduciary and liaison between municipalities, PACE, and Eversource.

During brief discussion, Mr. Couture asked for clarification on the grant's purpose. Mr. Gonzalez explained that the initiative is an outreach campaign to connect residents and businesses with Eversource's existing energy efficiency programs, with a focus on income-eligible and environmental justice communities.

RiverCOG

MOTION: Ms. Lignar made a motion to authorize the Executive Director to enter into a contract with the Eversource Energy Service Company (Eversource), for the Community Partnership Initiative Grant in the amount of \$85,300.00 and with each of the four participating municipalities, as well as with PACE, in order to disperse funds for work performed under the grant.

SECOND: Ms. Jones seconded the motion.

VOTE: The motion passed unanimously.

c. Regional Election Advisors FY26 Funding Update

Mr. Gold thanked members for signing a recent joint letter to the Secretary of State supporting RiverCOG's Regional Election Advisor program. As a result, RiverCOG quickly received an executed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and confirmation from OPM that the region will receive \$25,000 in funding for the upcoming fiscal year. Mr. Gold noted that while the award is less than the amount budgeted for contractor Carol's services, he would meet with her to explore potential programming adjustments. He expects the funds will need to be spent by June 30, 2026, and emphasized that they will directly benefit training and support for local election officials.

d. Regional Waste Authority (RWA) Update

Mr. Gonzalez provided an update on the regional waste management study, thanking municipalities for their participation in town-level interviews. Based on feedback, RiverCOG will refocus the study to include individual profiles of each town's transfer station. These profiles will include:

- Basic operational characteristics (e.g., tonnage, cost, accepted materials)
- Hours of operation and equipment needs
- Opportunities for capital improvement
- Potential funding sources

This adjustment aims to promote peer-to-peer comparison, share lessons learned, and support localized, actionable improvements over broader regional authority proposals. Mr. Gonzalez explained that this pivot will foster collaborative, tailored waste solutions more aligned with each municipality's needs.

e. Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) Update – July 30, 2025, Public Presentation of draft Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP)

Mr. Gonzalez reminded the group about an upcoming virtual public meeting for the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) program on July 30, 2025, from 12:30–1:30 PM. RiverCOG is collaborating with Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) and consultant Dewberry to finalize a Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP). Key proposed strategies include:

- Urban tree canopy expansion
- Solar deployment

- Municipal fleet electrification
- Organic waste diversion
- Heating oil reduction
- Transit expansion

The final CCAP will be brought back to the COG for adoption in the fall.

f. Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS) Update

Ms. Beckman informed the Council that she would defer to Nicole Velardi or Olivia Chetcuti of DEMHS if either was present to report on the activities of DEMHS Region 2. As neither representative was on the call, Ms. Beckman noted that members should be receiving a bi-weekly newsletter from Ms. Velardi which provides updates on relevant training, funding opportunities, and regional coordination efforts. She encouraged members to reach out to her or to Ms. Velardi directly with any questions or needs related to emergency management.

g. Regional Economic Development Committee (REDC) Update

Ms. Beckman provided a brief update on behalf of the Regional Economic Development Committee (REDC). She reported that no response had yet been received regarding RiverCOG's application for Economic Development District (EDD) designation from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). Ms. Beckman noted that delays are likely due to staffing shortages at the federal level, but that Deborah Beavin, RiverCOG's EDA contact, would notify them if any additional or updated information is required.

In the meantime, Ms. Beckman has scheduled a meeting with Ms. Beavin for later this month to discuss potential funding opportunities for regional economic development projects, even without the designation. She hopes to bring an update on funding availability to the next meeting.

h. Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Update

Ms. Burns of RiverCOG presented an update on aquatic invasive species management efforts in the region. She highlighted ongoing work to control water chestnut infestations in the Connecticut River and its tributaries, with significant activity in Chester, Deep River, East Haddam, and Lyme. She thanked the Public Works Departments in Chester and Deep River for assisting with debris removal, which has been essential in making progress this season.

Ms. Burns also recognized efforts by community volunteers and partner organizations, including Mark Yakinoff in Lyme, John Hall and the Jonah Center, and the Connecticut River Conservancy. Despite these efforts, she warned that water chestnut continues to spread into unexpected freshwater areas, such as Mill Pond in Essex and South Cove, where low salinity levels may be allowing the plant to take root.

On the Connecticut River Hydrilla Project, Ms. Burns reported that a supplemental environmental assessment issued by the Army Corps of Engineers had received a strong public response expressing both concerns and support. A recent press conference held by Senator Blumenthal and Representative LaMark Muir in Deep River demonstrated federal attention and endorsement of the project. RiverCOG continues to monitor the situation and support regional coordination in response.

i. Land Trust Update

Ms. Burns provided an update on behalf of the regional land trusts. She announced that the land trusts would be sponsoring an Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) workshop in collaboration with the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. The workshop is intended primarily for municipal staff, such as inland wetlands agents, public works employees, land use commission members, and local land trust board members. The tentative date for the event is Thursday, October 9, 2025, from 3:00 to 5:00 PM. The final location is yet to be confirmed. Ms. Burns requested that any members who foresee scheduling issues communicate with her promptly to explore rescheduling options.

j. Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) Update

Ms. Burns also gave an update on the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP). She announced that a public information meeting for the plan update was scheduled for 6:00–6:30 PM that evening and would be held virtually via Microsoft Teams. The meeting was publicly noticed in the Middletown Press, local newsletters, and RiverCOG’s website and social media channels.

Ms. Burns thanked municipal leaders for submitting their Letters of Intent and team rosters, which have helped advance the planning process. All initial town meetings have now concluded, with the final meeting held in Cromwell. These meetings were reported to be productive and well-received.

k. Regional Agriculture Council (RAC) Update

Ms. Ehle-Meyer reported that the Regional Agriculture Council would not meet in July or August due to its standard summer recess. However, members were encouraged to reach out to their RAC representatives or RiverCOG staff with any agriculture-related concerns that might warrant a special meeting or response during the summer months.

l. Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Update

Ms. Ehle-Meyer also provided an update on the Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Collection Program, stating that the most recent event held the prior Saturday was very successful and well-attended. There were no major issues with waste received, and weather conditions were favorable.

She noted a persistent issue with the public finding incorrect HHW and paper shredding event information through search engines and AI-driven sources. Residents are still being misled by outdated or false listings. Janice emphasized that towns should direct residents to the RiverCOG website for accurate and up-to-date information.

Mr. Couture added that this issue extends beyond HHW events; his municipality has also encountered search engine misinformation related to outdated pistol permit application forms, highlighting the broader problem of algorithmic inaccuracies.

5. Chairman's and Executive Director's Reports

Chairman Salvatore had no additional remarks.

Mr. Gold shared that RiverCOG's long-serving Financial Administrator, Paula Fernald, would be departing at the end of the week to take on the role of Finance Director for the Town of Deep River. Sam expressed deep appreciation for Paula's 11 years of dedicated service, noting the agency's 11 consecutive clean audits under her leadership. Ms. Fernald thanked RiverCOG and its members, describing her experience as part of a professional "family."

Mr. Gold also announced that Sally Rothenhaus of Old Saybrook had accepted the position of Financial Administrator following a competitive interview process. He shared his confidence that Ms. Rothenhaus would continue to uphold the strong systems Ms. Fernald helped establish.

6. Other Business

- a. Next COG meeting is Wednesday, September 17th, 2025, via Zoom.
- b. Mr. Fortuna gave an update on the Saybrook Probate Court construction. He noted that renovations were underway, with furniture procurement and IT planning in progress. He invited fellow members to visit the site if interested in seeing the ongoing updates. He expects the move to occur in September.

7. LCRVCOG & MPO Adjournment

With no further business, Chairman Salvatore called for a motion to adjourn.

MOTION: *Mr. Cox made a motion to adjourn the meeting.*

SECOND: *Mr. Lahm seconded the motion.*

VOTE: *Motion passed unanimously*

The meeting was adjourned at 11:33 AM.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison