



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

Wednesday, September 17, 2025, 1:00 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:

Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office*
Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office*
Ellen Graham, Senator Blumenthal's Office*
Stephen Perry, DEEP*
Kimberly Bradley, DEEP*

RiverCOG

Katherine Balocca, Old Lyme*
 Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor *
 Kristen Lopez, Connecticut Main Street Center*
 Nicole Villardi, CT DEMHS*
 Grayson Wright, DOT *
 Karen Russell, Deep River*
 Kennedy Winslow, Connecticut Main Street Center*
 Jim Irish, Middlefield*

Staff Present:

Sam Gold, Kevin Armstrong, Janice Ehle-Meyer, Susie Beckman, Margot Burns, Robert Haramut, Megan Jouflas, Brendan Geraghty, Marcos Gonzalez, Eliza LoPresti, Jake Capobianco, Vicki Harris.

1. Roll Call, Introductions

The meeting was called to order by Mr. Salvatore at 1:00 p.m., beginning with a Roll Call led by Mr. Gold.

The quorum was met with the required number of participants.

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

Nicole Velardi from CT DEMHS provided information on federal grant applications and deadlines, including the 2023 Emergency Management Performance Grant award, as well as the closing of the 2021 School Security Grant Program. All documentation must be submitted for both by September 30th. The Emergency Planning and Preparedness Initiative exercise was held earlier in the month with about 160 of the 169 towns and tribal nations participating across the state.

Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor, shared that moderator training was held on Saturday, August 23rd in Old Saybrook Town Hall. She reviewed election preparations, including moderator training and early voting procedures (October 20th to November 2nd) to include new equipment and monitoring. All the new equipment will be used in this municipal election. Ms. Conklin addressed a recurring question on the top line of the ballot which reflects the party sitting within the Governor's office.

Chair Salvatore inquired about the timeline for the use of cameras on external ballot boxes and video storage.

Ms. Conklin is to review and confirm the dates for both.

The congressional delegation, including representatives from Senator Blumenthal's, Senator Murphy's, and Representative Courtney's offices, provided updates on budget matters which are set to end at the end of September posing a potential government shutdowns, and Ms. McGrath shared forthcoming federal grant-related changes. She encouraged towns to investigate these further as they will impact federal funding going forward and will share additional information.

3. Presentation

Steven Perry and Kimberly Bradley from CT DEEP presented information on three Connecticut State Grant Programs. The Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA) with applications due November 3rd and requiring appraisals by November 1st. The Urban Green Community Garden (UGCG) with a December 17th deadline

and a matching funds requirement. The Recreational Trail Grant Program, with applications opening September 18 and due December 18th. The three grants have match requirements, which can be “in kind,” and reimbursements. Applications will be shared with RiverCOG members.

Ms. Beckman introduced Kristen Lopez from Connecticut Main Street Center and the launch of RiverCOG’s strategic membership. Ms. Lopez explained the differences between COG membership versus municipality membership and presented the implementation of the regional POCD and SEDS through downtown management and placemaking initiatives. The focus will be on Goal 2.8 of the POCD, which involves understanding how town centers are interconnected and developing tailored strategies for each. There are planned initiatives to include a workshop tentatively scheduled for October 30th, surveys to assess Main Street management status and regional connectivity, and the development of vision statements and transformational strategies for each town center.

4. LCRVMPO Business

MOTION: Mr. Couture moved to approve July 23, 2025, LCRVCOG and LCRVMPO Meeting minutes, with a second from Mr. Cox.

Vote approved unanimously.

Mr. Haramut reported that the SS4A safety plan was submitted for review by DOT and will be shared with the public for comment in October, with potential MPO board adoption in December. Additionally, the Active Transportation Microgrant Program with grants for helmets, bikes, vests, and bike racks, will only be accepting two applications this quarter due to low funds, with the next opportunity in 2026. Mr. Haramut also commented that the state and the COGS are trying to get back onto a two-year TIP schedule versus three or four years.

Mr. Gold shared that he, along with RiverCOG staff Rob Haramut, Brendan Geraghty, and Joe Comerford of the Estuary & Middletown Area Transit Districts were attending and presenting our Extra Mile program at the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations Conference in Providence, Rhode Island.

Updates on the bus shelters in Middletown were shared by Brendan Geraghty, with the project waiting on DOT and the manufacturer to produce the shelter. Permitting was split between District 1 and 2 and final routes are complete for District 2. Finally, the Clinton Trolley ridership tripled last year acknowledging the efforts of Michelle Benivegna and her team.

No updates were shared by Mr. Comerford in the Estuary Transit District.

5. LCRVCOG Business

Mr. Gold introduced new RiverCOG staff members, including Sally Rothenhaus as the new Financial Administrator and Jake Capobianco as a Regional Environmental Planner, while noting the departure of Maria from her part-time Financial Assistant role. Vicki Harris also joined at the beginning of September as the Office Manager.

Mr. Gonzalez reported on the Regional Waste Authority as having received the initial draft conditions report and outlined plans for site visits and municipal profiles pending task change approval.

Ms. Beckman thanked the Connecticut Main Street Center and shared the plans for an EPA grant related to brownfields, requesting input from towns on potential eligible sites for the Regional Economic Development Committee. A legislative agenda survey is forthcoming.

Ms. LoPresti provided an update on the Shared Foundations Program, which aims to create educational materials about affordable housing, and announced upcoming lesson modules. The Regional Housing Committee is working on the grant received from the Dept. of Housing, which have branded as the Shared Foundations program. The purpose of the grant is to create educational materials about affordable housing.

This summer RiverCOG hired two interns who helped create short-form social media videos, with four complete and two more in the works. Additionally educational & public outreach materials are being created and with a focus on commissions and committees. There will be at least four lesson modules that come from the grant; lesson one is complete and lesson two is in the works. Lesson one is completed, which is about vision planning for your community, with a focus group that includes staff, planners, P&Z members, and housing committee members. A run through was well received, and Megan and Eliza have already been invited to give the lesson to one of our municipalities. Eventually all these materials and more will be available on the project website.

Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Update was provided by Margot Burns updating on recent treatments at Portland Boat Works and in Southern Cove. The Army Corps finished dye studies at Chester Creek, and Hamburg Cove, as well as plans for future collaboration with the Army Corps. A quarterly marina owner meeting was held and now includes Massachusetts. There were three seasonal helpers this summer including Jake Capobianco.

Water chestnut is manageable, but quite widespread with Post Cove in Deep River being the only area of concern with the potential need for treatment. The Army Corp is working with DEEP for the lower river treatment next year.

Land Trust to meet September 19 at 10:00 AM. On October 9th from 3 to 5 at Chester Town Hall there is the Aquatic Invasive Species Workshop with Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. That invitation was sent to all our towns and to the Land Trusts with a target of town Public Works staff.

The contract for the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) phases one and two are complete as updated by Ms. Burns. The first round of meetings was held with each of the participating municipalities. Regional and local capability assessment updates are underway. If there is outstanding information required, RiverCOG will contact the towns. A meeting is scheduled directly after the COG meeting (today September 17.) The next step for public outreach is to distribute a survey to the participating municipalities with a goal of September 23rd. Ms. Burns requested that the survey be distributed to the town public outreach and social media posts.

The risk assessment is underway with a meeting scheduled for today (September 17) to discuss dams in the region. And the next committee and public meeting will be in December to collect input on the initial results and findings of the risk and suitability assessments.

Regional Agriculture Council (RAC) Update was provided by Ms. Ehle-Meyer who announced the restart of regional agriculture meetings and sought representatives from Middlefield, Old Lyme, Portland, East Hampton, and Deep River.

Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) program will conclude in October 2025, as updated by Ms. Ehle-Meyer, with two final events scheduled in Chester and Haddam.

Ms. Ehle-Meyer presented data on ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) households, as part of the Shoreline Soup Kitchen & Pantries Update. The percentage of ALICE households has increased from 29% to 33% in the RiverCOG. She suggested supporting this population through Shoreline Soup Kitchens, implementing child tax credits, and investing in support for 211 services.

Ms. Lignar asked how the United Way determines the statistics; specifically, how the towns would determine the demographics included. Ms. Ehle-Meyer's will contact the United Way to clarify.

6. Chairman's and Executive Director's Reports

Mr. Gold reported on potential upcoming housing legislation and discussed a proposed funding framework of \$400,000 per COG for housing planning and other needs. He supports the proposal, but with more flexibility on the split of the funds as needed by the COG's.

Mr. Gold reported that the Council had completed 2 months of fiscal year 2026, and overall spending was within parameters of the adopted \$3.1 million budget. He also noted the RiverCOG office needs a copier, and options are being investigated.

The Extra Mile presentation was very well received at AMPO in Providence, where it was learned that RiverCOG leads the way in tech and on-demand transportation.

7. Other Business

Mr. Salvatore announced the October 22nd meeting needs to be rescheduled due to a conflict. A request was made for a venue for the in-person meeting.

8. LCRVCOG & MPO Adjournment

Motion to adjourn by David Cox at 2:28

Second by Michael Pelton.

Unanimously approved.