



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

145 Dennison Road Essex, CT 06426 | +1 860 581 8554 | www.rivercog.org

Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments And Lower Connecticut River Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization

DRAFT MINUTES OF REGULAR MEETING

December 11, 2024 – 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: Norm Needleman *
Haddam: Bob McGarry *
Killingworth: Eric Couture *
Lyme: David Lahm *
Middlefield: Jim Irish *
Middletown: Ben Florsheim
Old Lyme: Martha Shoemaker *
Old Saybrook: Carl Fortuna *
Portland: Ryan Curley *
Westbrook: John Hall *

MPO Members:

Middlesex Chamber of Commerce: Darlene Briggs *
Estuary & Middletown Area Transit Districts: Joe Comerford *

*present

Others Present:

Betsy Gara, COST
Erin McBride, Senator Murphy's Office
Julia McGrath, Congressman Courtney's Office
Matt Reich, Congressman Joe Courtney's Office
Ellen Graham Senator Blumenthal's Office
Kathryn Russell, Deep River
Brianna Horton, Senator Mark's Office
Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor

Staff Present:

Sam Gold, Kevin Armstrong, Elizabeth Rolison, Janice Ehlemeyer, Brendan Garaghty, Eliza LoPresti, Marcos Gonzalez, Robert Haramut, Margot Burns

RiverCOG

1. **Call to Order, Roll Call, Introductions**

Chairman Salvatore called the meeting to order at 12:25 P.M. The meeting was conducted via Zoom and in person at The Belden Room at Cromwell Town Hall, in Cromwell, Connecticut.

2. **Adoption of the 2025 Legislative Agenda**

Mr. Fortuna moved to adopt the 2025 Legislative Agenda. Second by Mr. Cox. All in favor. Vote was unanimously approved.

a. **Discussion with Legislators**

Congressman Joe Courtney

Mr. Gold thanked Congressman Courtney for the letter of support for RiverCOG's Federal Economic Development District and noted that anything that can be done to try to get the economic development district through EDA before the change of administration is appreciated.

Mr. Gold also stated that RiverCOG would like to keep the Army Corps in the Connecticut River fighting invasive plants like Hydrilla, and to maintain funding and appropriations for the bipartisan infrastructure law to keep that funding coming to Connecticut for transportation.

Representative Courtney informed the group that there would be a ribbon cutting on Monday for the East Haddam Swing Bridge. He noted that pedestrian walkways would be a part of that bridge which is exciting in terms of improving walkability on both sides of the river.

Yesterday, Representative Courtney said that Congress voted on the Water Resource Development Act Authorization Act (WORDA). Connecticut was included in that measure in their hydrilla efforts. The bill passed on a very strong bipartisan vote. He believes the prognosis is very good that it is going to get to the President's desk and get signed into law.

They will be signing an appropriations bill for 25 million dollars for environmental infrastructure, flow water and wastewater infrastructure in East Hampton which will also raise visibility on projects. East Lyme was also included on this list as part of SEECOG.

In terms of funding for the infrastructure law, Representative Courtney told the group to "be on their toes" as the person the President elect has named as his OMB budget director - Russell Voight, is someone who believes in the presidential authority to exercise impoundment, which means the executive branch has the authority to take back funding which has already gone through the Congressional appropriations process. He stated that Voight thinks that the Article 2 authorities of the President give any President the authority to continue exercise impoundment. There has been a lot of discussion to evaluate what the best protections are to make sure that funding that Congress has already enacted is safe from impoundment. He noted the DoGE Committee has been actively meeting with members of Congress. In terms of evaluating which funding is the safest, he thinks the money that's already been distributed to awardees falls well outside what any Presidential authority is. What has already been through, not just the

Congressional process, but through the agency process, to have been approved and awarded, in his opinion, should also be beyond the reach of any impoundment effort. However, money that has been just appropriated and has not gone through the obligation and awarding process is subject to high anxiety.

His office has been going through every single community funded project they have gotten over the last 2 or 3 years to make certain municipalities and nonprofits are focused in terms of making sure that they move their process along as quickly as possible. They have talked to the White House to make sure that they accelerate the obligation of funds from community funded projects as quickly as possible. He noted that the response in terms of getting paperwork submitted has been somewhat healthy to date.

His biggest concern is the USDOT as they are associated with a lot of community funded projects and they have got to speed things up regarding paperwork so the funds can get obligated.

Regarding impoundment, Representative Courtney stated that they are trying get as much through the process as they possibly can.

As far as the economic development district, they are going to continue to follow up with economic development and are trying to get that finalized as he knows it is important to the RiverCOG area. Julia McGrath is going to track this issue and understands the urgency of it.

Senator Norman Needleman

1st selectman, Carl Fortuna, raised a question regarding early voting. Senator Needleman responded that they are going to go back and amend some of the regulations around early voting and at that moment he wished he had an answer.

He stated that he would appreciate it if requests for that information were sent and he would make sure Maria gets it. He thinks we spent \$32,000, and for the primaries it was excessive. He mentioned the need to make it more efficient as it was not very efficient.

Representative Devin Carney

Representative Carney congratulated Mr. Curley on his new position and thanked him for his service to the town of Portland.

Representative Carney has looked over the top priorities and noted that some of these are things that he would like to work on. He has heard from registrars about the early voting issues with costs as well as the potential legalities and specifics of putting it through voting machines.

He mentioned that he continues to try to prevent passing additional mandates on towns and schools to prevent property taxes from going up. He will be monitoring potential legislation regarding passing some of the teacher pension costs on to municipalities.

Senator Chris Murphy

Mr. Gold noted that he had provided Senator Murphy's staffers with some of Federal issues that RiverCOG has including protecting appropriations from the bipartisan infrastructure law and RiverCOG's application for a Federal Economic Development District. He stated that he did not bring up restoring funding to Shoreline East and keeping Army Corps involved in combating invasive species in the Connecticut River.

Senator Murphy mentioned that he appreciates all the fantastic work that both Republicans and Democrats do at the local level. As different as the next 4 years will feel, he emphasized the importance of driving home what matters to people on both sides of the isle.

One of the things focused on right now is getting as much money out the door prior to January 20th as possible. He is uncertain what the new Administration will do with the money that was available to Connecticut primarily under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the CHIPS Act. They are working to get that money out of the door on both the state and community levels. He is also trying to get as much Rail funding down to Connecticut this month and next month for Shoreline East.

They have been pushing to get the invasive species grants to be higher and have historically had about 5 million dollars. They were successful in the Senate version of the bill this year to get that up to 7.5 million. He noted that it will be harder to win this fight next year with a Republican controlled Congress that is not interested in spending additional money on habitat restoration.

He expects that the 1st of maybe 2 big legislative packages the new Administration will move on in January are an increase in defense spending an increase in funding at the border.

He talked about upcoming immigration policies, raids, and deportations under the new Administration.

He believes that 2nd package is likely to be the tax package and that there could be harm for Connecticut. According to Senator Murphy, this could continue the trend of loss of deductibility for mortgages and local and state taxation. He stated that they will fight it.

He thinks they will roll out more money to Connecticut between now and January 20 and then everyone will assess at the beginning of the year. Senator Murphy said that they want to help in any way that they can and thanked everyone for everything they do for the State and the Communities.

Breanna Horton, Senator Martha Marx Office

Ms. Horton stated that she was listening in to take notes and that there were no updates from their end.

3. Public Speaking

a. Carol Conklin, Regional Election Advisor

Ms. Conklin informed the group that there were 4 COG towns that underwent audits. Some of them performed them in their own Town Halls, and some of them opted to go to the state where UConn performs the audit with their own equipment. If a municipality has newer registrars or if a municipality would like to go over the numbers, please reach out to Ms. Conklin. Ms. Conklin stated that is safe to say that a towns' registrar's budget can be less than last year without a Federal and without 14 days of early voting. She did not know the intervals where registrars received increases. The cost of performing elections within budget should drop this year with the municipal. There will be probably less days assigned to early voting, which will be equivalent to less payroll costs there, and there is new equipment coming down the road, but the State should be covering the training of that.

Ms. Conklin believes RiverCOG is in pretty good shape and stated that people can reach out to her with questions.

Questions arose regarding voter fraud and receipt of information to registrars. Ms. Conklin responded that the State has been encouraging Town registrars or Town attorneys contact FOI.

Chairman Salvatore instructed the group to be consistent and to please provide a breakdown on the municipalities' registrars for this year and to provide Mr. Gold the number of voters in each municipality so he could put it together for COG staff, and then get it out to everyone.

Mr. Gold informed the group that he and Ms. Conklin are speaking with the Chair of the Connecticut Association of COGs to lobby the Secretary of State to get the MOUs to get funding for her position. They are hoping that in 2025 that \$25,000 will be allocated.

b. Betsy Gara, Executive Director, COST

Ms. Gara informed the group that Connecticut Small Towns will be approving its Legislative Agenda on Tuesday at the Board meeting and will sending it out to members for additional input. She stated that they are an organization that is devoted to representing their members and to do that, they need to hear from their members. Typically, they do a legislative survey, but did not get a lot of responses so they did not do the survey this year.

She informed the group that their annual meeting, which is their 50th anniversary of representing small towns, is on January 29th, 2025, at the Aquaturf. They expect to have the Governor, Legislative leaders, Forum, and other Constitutional leaders there to speak about some of the issues they may be faced with during the legislative session.

4. FY24 RiverCOG Audit Presentation and Approval (motion)

Mr. Gold informed the group that the auditors did not get the draft audit in time to be able to circulate to the COG members. Ms. Fernald is working with the auditors to get a draft out to members to give them at least a week to review it. A doodle poll was sent out to COG members to schedule a short special meeting for the end of next week to entertain a motion to approve the audit.

Without objection, item 4 remained on the agenda.

5.LCRMPO Business

a. Approval of Minutes of the November 20, 2024, LCRVCOG and LCRMPO Meeting (motion)

Mr. Fortuna moved to approve the minutes of the November 20, 2024, regular meeting; second by Mr. Hall. Vote was unanimous in favor.

b. 25 TIP Amendment 04 (motion)

- i. Killingworth. RT 148 0069-0081, STPR, X7, Kroupa Pond Dam (ID 07014) Improvements, PD, 2025, \$895,000, 80/20/0, Project Changed (e.g. Schedule/Funding/Scope)
- ii. Killingworth. RT 148 0069-0081, STPR, X7, Kroupa Pond Dam (ID 07014) Improvements, FD, 2026, \$646,000, 80/20/0, Project Changed (e.g. Schedule/Funding/Scope)
- iii. Killingworth. RT 148 0069-0081, STPR, X7, Kroupa Pond Dam (ID 07014) Improvements, ROW, 2026, \$50,000, 80/20/0, Project Changed (e.g. Schedule/Funding/Scope)
- iv. Killingworth. RT 148 0069-0081, STPR, X7, Kroupa Pond Dam (ID 07014) Improvements, CON, FYI, \$0, 80/20/0, AC Entry, Project Changed (e.g. Schedule/Funding/Scope)
- v. Killingworth. RT 148 0069-0081, STPR, X7, Kroupa Pond Dam (ID 07014) Improvements, CON, FYI, \$12,400,000, 80/20/0, AC Conversion, Project Changed (e.g. Schedule/Funding/Scope) Update from Estuary Transit District

Mr. Fortuna moved to approve TIP Amendment 04, items i. – v.; second by Mr. McGarry. Vote was unanimous in favor.

b. Upcoming Public Meetings Safe Streets and Roads for All and Central CT Loop Trail

Mr. Haramut briefed the group on SS4A meetings that had just occurred virtually and in Chester. The purpose of these meetings is to continue to gather public input on various locations of concern as well as to show the draft high accident locations. As per Mr. Haramut, currently, they do have the draft of existing conditions report to the Committee which has the safety analysis. The next steps are to start looking at various policies and countermeasures that can be done at these locations, and that will probably take about a year to get this project wrapped up.

A public information meeting regarding the Loop Trail was held on November 20th to present the preferred alternative routes that are being considered to the public. As per Mr. Haramut, it went well. It is now out at the Advisory Committee for that study to get endorsed at the next Advisory Committee meeting. Once that is complete, a draft report will go out for public comment, then brought to the MPO board in March provided everything stays on schedule for endorsement and then get the project completed.

c. Estuary Transit District Report

Mr. Geraghty provided update on the Tap and Ride pilot through USDOT in October which went very well. He explained that the program is their fare payment validator for all the buses so riders

can tap their credit, debit cards, Apple pay or mobile wallet to pay for their bus fare in addition to the traditional cash or ticket options.

They are also currently working on allowing senior and disabled buyers to be able to pay half fare, as currently it's just one fare.

There was a second focus group with customers last week in Middletown during which they received valuable feedback that will be used for a report that CTDOT will be completing for USDOT. The goal is to have these systems statewide, so that riders can seamlessly transfer from one system to the next.

Mr. Geraghty then discussed the Bus Stop Enhancement Program which is state funded opportunity from CTDOT funded through the Legislature. This will allow improvement of bus stop infrastructure across the state including 4 bus shelters slated for Middletown.

Mr. Geraghty highlighted upcoming events including a Legislative breakfast on January 6, 2025 from 8AM-9AM. There will also be an electric bus unveiling event on Tuesday December 17th, 2024, 11AM at 91 North Main Street in Middletown. Many speakers and legislators will be present.

Mr. Geraghty updated the group on Fixture Expansion and reported that it was going very well. There has been a significant increase in Sunday ridership.

2. LCRVCOG Business

- a. **Regional Waste Authority Study - Authorization to enter into an agreement for a consultant to conduct the Regional Waste Authority study project funded by grants received from CT DEEP for the study and startup costs (motion)**

Mr. Gold explained that this is a DEEP funded study to make recommendations and to study the feasibility regarding a Regional Waste Authority for the region and that an RFP was held.

Ms. Elhe-Meyer told the group that there were 7 firms that applied, of which 4 were interviewed. A team helped in the decision to proceed with a firm by the name of RRS. Mr. Gold explained that they are looking for authorization to enter negotiations and a contract with RRS to conduct the Regional Waste Authority study using DEEP funds.

Mr. Gold explained that there are a few different parts to the grant. The first is a planning study to look at available options and opportunities to join existing Waste Authorities in other parts of the State, creating RiverCOG's own, making some recommendations regarding that, and also gathering background information. The 2nd phase of this project, which may or may not happen, is an operational and engineering study of the MIRA facility in Essex. There's a portion of this project

which would be the legal work to either set up a new Regional Waste Authority or to join an existing Waste Authority. The final portion of the grant is up to \$250,000 for startup funds for a new Regional Waste Authority.

Mr. Gold explained that the grant is \$620,000, and that while he is uncertain if the check was received yet, DEEP will fund 25% and this would begin the project. However, if any of the phases are not started, the money is returned to DEEP.

Mr. Gonzalez confirmed that the RRS bid was \$259,970.00.

Mr. Couture moved to accept entering into an agreement with RRS as a consultant to conduct the Regional Waste Authority study; second Ms. Shoemaker. Vote was unanimously approved.

b. 2025 RiverCOG Officers and Executive Committee Election

Mr. Gold explained that officers serve 1 year. RiverCOG has 4 officers and 2 At-Large members of its' Executive Committee. He has spoken to all members of the existing Officers and Executive Committee, and they are all willing to serve another term.

As per Mr. Gold, Mr. Couture has agreed to serve next year.

Mr. Curley proposed a motion to approve the slate of: Tony Salvatore, Chair; Dave Cox, Vice Chair; Bob McGarry, Secretary; Carl Fortuna, Treasurer; Eileen Haines, At-Large and Eric Couture At-Large

Ms. Shoemaker made a motion to accept the slate; second by David Lahm. The vote was unanimously approved.

3. Chairman's and Executive Director's Reports

Mr. Gold provided the group with the RiverCOG Financial Report. As of November 30th, 2024, the Council completed 5 months of fiscal year 2025, and overall spending was within the parameters of the adopted 3.2 million dollar budget.

The dues, subscriptions, professional development, seminars, and conferences budget had already reached 54% of this budget versus the 42% of the year that was previously completed. Mr. Gold stated that he does not expect RiverCOG to go over.

As of November 30th, 2024, the STIFF account balance was \$1,859,677 and the Liberty Bank checking account balance was \$21,259.00.

Mr. Gold reported that he was in Washington D.C. for the Thriving Communities Project. This is the project for 4 transit-oriented development plans around 3 shoreline stations and downtown Middletown on the bus passenger terminal. Ms. Beckman and Ms. Jouflas are still down in Washington D.C. learning a lot about how this program can set us up for potential implementation.

He also noted that he had met with David Corris, the new Executive Director of Municipal Redevelopment Authority (MRDA) and explained that they are the new State authority that municipalities can partner with to do projects such as transit-oriented development. The idea is that they will have the capacity to do private and public partnerships. They would have borrowing authority and other authorities that could help facilitate projects.

4. Other Business

5. Adjournment

Mr. McGarry moved to adjourn the meeting at 1:37PM; seconded by Mr. Couture. Vote was unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,
Elizabeth Rolison