

MINUTES OF THE NHCOG MEETING OF October 12, 2017

Members or Representatives in Attendance:

Barkhamsted, Don Stein	Burlington, Ted Shafer
Canaan, Pat Mechare	Colebrook, Tom McKeon
Cornwall, Gordon Ridgway	Goshen, Bob Valentine
Hartland, Wade Cole	Harwinton, Michael Criss
Kent, Bruce Adams	Litchfield, Leo Paul
Morris, Tom Weik	Norfolk, Sue Dyer
North Canaan, Doug Humes	Roxbury, Barbara Henry
Salisbury, Curtis Rand	Sharon, Brent Colley
Torrington, Elinor Carbone	Warren, Craig Nelson
Washington, Mark Lyon	Winchester, Bob Geiger

Others in Attendance:

Debra Aleksinas, LARC; Michael Muszynski, CCM; Sara Radasci, CT DOT; Gertrude O'Sullivan, Northwest Community Foundation; Brian Mirizzi, Litchfield County Dispatch; Jessica Fowler and Felicia Jones, NWConneCT; Wiley Wood, Norfolk; Steve Silver, Eversource; Bernie Harrington, League of Women Voters of Litchfield County; Jocelyn Ayer, Joanna Wozniak-Brown, and Rick Lynn, NHCOG staff; Media Representatives

Call to Order and Opportunity for Public Comment.

The meeting, held at the NHCOG office, was called to order by Chairman Mark Lyon at 10:04 a.m.

Steve Silver announced that there would be an emergency management exercise in December.

Debra Aleksinas from The Arc of Litchfield County (LARC) introduced herself and explained that LARC is hoping to place their clients with businesses in the region. There is no cost to the company for the workers and it will help integrate the workers into the community.

Toast of Appreciation to Doug Humes, Pat Mechare, and Sue Dyer for their Years of Public Service as a First Selectman and NHCOG Member.

As they will retire from their First Selectman duties at the end of this term, Mark Lyon congratulated Doug Humes, Pat Mechare, and Sue Dyer for their leadership, representation of their communities, and active participation on the NHCOG.

Town-by-Town Issues and Updates by COG Members.

As members discussed each town's latest projects, they individually took time to thank Doug Humes, Pat Mechare, and Sue Dyer for their leadership, experience, and commitment to public service.

Bruce Adams commented that "The Kent" facility project is still in process and the Gilmore Girls fan festival will be next weekend. He appreciated the group's response to a request for information about transfer station employees. Barbara Henry said Roxbury's Board of Finance is working on a "Plan B" in the event of failed state budget negotiations. The town is doing road, bridge, and park work. Leo Paul announced that the Whites Woods Bridge is still closed. Their Public Works Department is reviewing projects for cost savings because of budget cuts. The town hopes internal changes will prevent the need for a supplemental tax bill. He explained that, at the recent Chamber of Commerce meeting, members voted to send a strongly worded letter to the legislature in support of an override of the Governor's veto. He also expressed appreciation of the NHCOG members' ability to work beyond party lines and he hoped that the legislature would do the same.

Elinor Carbone announced that the Litchfield County courthouse is open and operating. The Yankee Peddler Inn,

currently under renovation, plans to open in spring 2018. Due to the devastating potential impact of the governor's Executive Order, the city of Torrington, along with Connecticut Education Association (CEA), is suing the state of Connecticut. Cuts from the education cost-sharing (ECS) program and state aid reduced Torrington's aid by over \$20 million, despite Torrington's nomination as an Alliance district. The lawsuit posits that the governor does not have authority to amend the ECS funding. These cuts would result in a 12-mill increase in local taxes and potential real estate buyers are avoiding new purchases.

Leo Paul said Litchfield would pursue legal action if the towns receive the burden of teacher pension repayments. Discussion followed about education funding. Bob Valentine said he would support other towns as they protest the transference of state costs onto municipalities. He noted that any impacts to Torrington will affect the whole region and that all towns must be steadfast in their opposition to transferring the pension obligations.

Bob Geiger explained that Winchester is in a unique position with the recent return of school administration to the town. They support the regional concerns but also appreciate the state support. Otherwise, Winchester is also looking to reduce expenses while working on issues such as blight, excess housing, and external ownership of properties.

Wade Cole explained that Hartland is losing \$1million in ECS funding from their total municipal budget of about \$6.5 million.

Doug Humes followed by commenting that Berkshire County and Litchfield County are viewed as "step-children" in their respective states. The town of North Canaan passed a municipal budget but has not yet set a mill rate. The town also recently developed a boarding house ordinance.

Curtis Rand announced that the Salisbury-Sharon Transfer Station was approved by Special Permit. Using a federal grant, the major paving project in Lakeville is almost complete.

Pat Mechare thanked the other members for their kind words. Public service and her relationships with NHCOC members enriched her life. The town is doing well with an operating emergency services facility and the recent repaving of Route 126. While the school is facing declining enrollment, a recent town meeting moderated by Jonathan Costa, consultant, helped with emotional discussion and produced some helpful ideas. The municipal budget assumes no state support but will have a modest mill rate increase.

Sue Dyer thanked other members for their kind words and noted that she has really enjoyed participating in the COG's regional programs. Norfolk's City Meadow project should be complete in the beginning of November.

Tom McKeon commented that the new Litchfield County courthouse is beautiful. Colebrook is finishing a STEAP funded road project. Don Stein explained that Barkhamsted is tentatively canceling their larger roadwork projects due to the uncertain budget situation. They will soon have a public hearing for their municipal POCD. He thanked Jocelyn Ayer for her guidance on the draft plan.

Ted Shafer reported Burlington has started their library expansion process. The library will feature a 100-person meeting room. He noted Sustainable CT, a voluntary municipal certification program, would be launched at the CCM Convention in November. The program will provide grants for sustainability programs and be an attraction to the millennial generation. Ted will serve on the Board of Directors.

Michael Criss explained that state grants to Harwinton would be reduced by about \$3 million under current proposals. The Region 10 school district, which joined CEA's lawsuit, is working to manage the shortfall to education funding. The town has issued a spending freeze and put road projects and capital purchases on hold. The town seeks to cut \$500,000 from the budget and will be conducting lay-offs if the town does not receive ECS funds. Harwinton is also refusing to send any state revenue to the state until a budget passed. In other news, the town is waiting on final administrative approvals to continue the Shingle Mill Road bridge project. The Senior

Center was rebuilt and is now open. The Planning & Zoning Commission is working on revisions to the home-based businesses regulations. The town is reviewing policing options. He thanked Leo Paul and Don Stein for their information regarding troopers and constables.

Craig Nelson reported that Warren will have a very slight mill rate increase with a budget assumption of no state funding. Reduction in the state's agricultural education grant and the out of district tuition to the town could be detrimental. As a town, they feel the teachers' pension obligations could be a long-term issue. They are seeking additional revenue streams by renting the town beach and using docks for storage.

Overall, Washington will lose about \$91,000 in state funding and Mark Lyon is relatively optimistic about the feasibility of their municipal budget. He also reported that a large-scale street project in Washington Depot is nearly complete after a four-year process.

Gordon Ridgway reported on a finished bridge project, which came in under budget, on time, and using Litchfield County contractors. He feels that the teachers' pension proposal could be potentially devastating to towns such as Cornwall. He also reflected on the benefits of cooperative regionalism and suggested that the successful projects, and the long-term dedication by the retirees, should be celebrated at the soon to be opened brew pub in the renovated North Canaan railroad station.

Brent Colley, after congratulating the retirees, followed up on Gordon's comments that the regional forum provided by the COG serves as a tremendous learning and coordination opportunity. He noted the recent influx of private investment in Sharon and the number of cultural opportunities in town.

Tom Weik shared his congratulations to the retiring members.

#### Summary and Request for Approval of Northwest Hills Regional Plan of Conservation and Development. Jocelyn Ayer.

Jocelyn Ayer reviewed the public outreach and plan development process for the regional POCD. Now, at the completion of the 19-month process, she asked the members to officially adopt the plan based on the redlined version they received prior to the meeting. The outreach process included a 65-day public comment period with two public hearings. All land use commissions received a draft of the plan. Twenty commissions sent feedback and 23 organizations are willing to endorse the plan as drafted. She explained that the plan will inform the NHCOC staff work plan and the strategic list of actions (consistent with local plan actions) will assist in coordinating efforts among regional partners. NHCOC will host an annual meeting on progress of implementation of the plan. The plan will be supported by a web-based toolkit. Gordon Ridgway, seconded by Pat Mechare submitted a motion to approve the plan. The plan was unanimously adopted.

#### Update on NWConneCT Broadband Project. Jessica Fowler, NWConneCT Chairman and Felicia Jones, Project Coordinator.

Felicia Jones, Project Coordinator for the NWConneCT, thanked the board members for the time and opportunity to present on the broadband project. She explained that NWConneCT is an advocacy group comprised of elected representatives and volunteers that hope to create a "21-century communications infrastructure" in the region to encourage economic development. They propose the installation of the gold-standard fiber-optic system that would support broadband internet, mobile connectivity and data. It would allow employees to work remotely and create more reliable cell phone services. Fiber optic cables are wires the width of human hair, which allow transmission of data at rates millions of times faster than current technologies. Upon approval, the fiber optic cables would be installed underground and on poles.

The project includes all 21 NHCOC towns and four towns from WestCOG (Sherman, New Milford, Bridgewater, New Fairfield). Including this many towns creates the critical mass needed to achieve such a large-scale infrastructure project. During her outreach, Felicia Jones heard "a call" for improved Wi-Fi, a number of public safety concerns, disparities among educational opportunities, and lost tourism opportunities. For example, Sharon Hospital has the infrastructure to monitor patients from home; however, patients have a wide variety in

quality of internet access. Visitors to the area are unable to use common apps like Yelp or Google Maps to find interesting destinations. Home-based businesses, especially creative productions, struggle in sending files to business partners. She explained that the fiber optic network could pave the way for telemedicine in the region and attracting new businesses.

Brian Mirizzi serves as the Systems Administrator for the Litchfield County Dispatch. He explained that a fiber-optic network would allow for micro-cells that would deliver mobile support. Such a network would allow ambulances to transmit data immediately to the receiving hospital. The dispatch system recently switched over to a similar system and he found that the fiber system has a 99.8% "up time".

While NWConneCT is still exploring options, the financial model would likely be a public-private partnership that would require some community investment. Felicia Jones noted that there would be a high return on investment by stimulating the tax base and creating new jobs. The preliminary numbers are approximately \$15/20 per month per resident. Each town would get proportionate share back. The monthly cost would be an upfront cost to build it with a decreasing cost in the customer's internet bill after implementation. For the rest of the year and into early 2018, NWConneCT will distribute an RFI/RFP to selected vendors then host a regional conference for stakeholders in May 2018. She also suggested that local comprehensive plans should consider including broadband in their long-range vision. Additional information can be found on their website [www.northwest-connect.org](http://www.northwest-connect.org).

Pat Mechare requested more information on the costs for infrastructure installation and costs to customers. She also inquired if every household would be required to participate. Jessica Fowler explained that the final arrangements had not yet been decided.

Jocelyn Ayer noted that the NWConneCT effort is funded by a regional performance incentive grant. The main deliverable being a model for the Private-Public Partnership and what it would cost.

Curtis Rand remarked that Berkshire County, including similar small towns, is also working on this. Felicia Jones explained that the Massachusetts government appropriated \$70million for the effort and towns can apply for a grant. Some towns created municipal utility companies while some created public-private partnerships. NWConneCT operates under the assumption that the state of Connecticut will not be providing funds. Jessica Fowler suggested that if the state continues to consider penalizing towns for positive fund balances, then perhaps a portion of this balance could be used for such an investment. She noted other municipalities broadening their internet infrastructure such as West Hartford and Bristol. Several companies offer broadband services such as SciFy, Axia, and Frontier.

Ted Shafer said Felicia Jones came to a Burlington town meeting to share this project. A municipal board member, who works for ESPN production, explained that ESPN installed an underground direct fiber-optic cable to Los Angeles. While he can send huge amount of data in a split second in Bristol, he struggles with the internet connection at home.

#### Request for Endorsement of Applications for Corridor Planning Studies.

On a motion by Bob Valentine, seconded by Michael Criss, the following projects were unanimously endorsed.

1. City of Torrington, Route 202 (East Main Street).
2. Town of Burlington, Route 4 (in Town Center).

#### Authorization to Accept CIRCA Grant Award for "Enhancing Rural Resiliency: A Vision and Toolkit for Adaptation in the Northwest Hills".

Joanna Wozniak-Brown explained that the NHCOC was recently awarded an approximately \$55,000 grant to create a Resiliency Vision and Toolkit for the region. The project follows on the region's natural hazard

mitigation plans and will seek out efficient and effective strategies appropriate for rural communities to adapt to climate change. The outreach methods will use existing NHCOG partnership and institutions such as the 5<sup>th</sup> Thursday and the Regional Emergency Planning Team. She noted that the project funding is not related to the state budget. She will serve as the Project Manager and be responsible for most of the tasks. The project will take place over the next year.

On a motion by Don Stein, seconded by Ted Shafer, acceptance of the grant was unanimously authorized.

#### Rural Independent Transportation System (RITS) Update. Rick Lynn.

Rick Lynn reported on the RITS program. All participants have now signed Memoranda of Understanding and the handicap-accessible van should arrive in the next few weeks. The RITS program, to be served throughout the region by Geer Village, the Northwest CT Transit District, and EdAdvance, offers non-emergency medical trips for the elderly and disabled. Funded by the state, the program will be administered by NHCOG with the vans and operating assistance granted to the transportation providers. GEER and Northwest CT Transit District will each maintain and operate one vehicle. EdAdvance will use their existing vehicles but operation thereof will be funded by the program. Bob Valentine asked if the service areas have been determined and how priorities for use will be determined. Rick Lynn explained that the principal service areas have been determined but the program allows for flexibility within those boundaries. The priority areas will be non-emergency medical trips such as recurring needs for dialysis, cancer treatments, and heart/pulmonary rehab, but operators will have to make day-to-day decisions. While providers will not travel out of state, they will provide out of region trips within Connecticut such as to UCONN Medical Center and Yale-New Haven.

Barbara Henry asked who would have to pay for services. While the operators can accept donations to be returned to the program, the services are provided at no cost to riders since operating funds have been provided by ConnDOT. NHCOG is developing a one-page flyer for distribution to the towns, municipal agents, and operators.

#### Administrative Items

- a. Approval of Minutes for Special Meeting of July 6, 2017 and Regular Meeting of September 14, 2017. On a motion duly made and seconded, the minutes were unanimously approved.
- b. Approval of Financial Statement for 8/2017. On a motion duly made and seconded, the financial statement was unanimously approved.
- c. Approval of NHCOG Meeting Schedule for 2018. On a motion duly made and seconded, the proposed meeting schedule was unanimously approved.

#### Committee Updates

- a. Legislative Committee. Michael Criss said the committee has little to provide by way of update, as the state has not yet approved a budget. Mike Muszynski of CCM explained that legislators have been meeting but have no concrete proposal yet. A spirited discussion on the various budget proposals followed. The legislature has not yet made final decisions on a proposed hospital tax, movement of teachers' pension burden to municipalities, etc. CCM has called for a study on the pension matter. Some discussions included requiring teachers to increase their contributions. Leo Paul commented that the state is trying to pass on costs yet they exempt 25% of their pension from income tax. Pat Mechare noted there is a state statute on how to fund pensions. Leo Paul noted that the bond covenant says towns will not pay. Mike Muszynski said the legislature will likely rewrite or work around the statute and bond covenant.
- b. Regional Animal Control Facility Committee. Elinor Carbone explained that the committee recently met for a design review of the proposed facility. They expect to meet again in about a month to finalize the design and will report on the progress.
- c. Recycling Advisory Committee. Sue Dyer announced the next household hazardous waste collection

day will be on Saturday, October 14 from 9am to 2pm at Torrington Water Pollution Control Plant in Harwinton. About 500 Residents have signed up to participate. She invited other COG members to volunteer.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 11:47 a.m.