

MINUTES OF THE NHCOC MEETING OF December 14, 2017

Members or Representatives in Attendance:

Barkhamsted, Don Stein	Burlington, Ted Shafer
Canaan, Henry Todd	Colebrook, Tom McKeon
Cornwall, Gordon Ridgway	Goshen, Bob Valentine
Hartland, Wade Cole	Kent, Bruce Adams
Litchfield, Leo Paul	Morris, Tom Weik
Norfolk, Matthew Riiska	North Canaan, Charles Perotti
Roxbury, Barbara Henry	Salisbury, Curtis Rand
Sharon, Brent Colley	Torrington, Elinor Carbone
Warren, Craig Nelson	Washington, Mark Lyon
Winchester, Bob Geiger	

Others in Attendance:

Renee Giroux, NWCT Food Hub; Amy Wynn, Northwest CT Arts Council; Dan Morley, CT OPM; Michael Muszynski, CCM; Gertrude O'Sullivan, Northwest Community Foundation; 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, NHCOC staff; Media Representatives; Brian Ohler, State Representative; Jay Case, State Representative

Call to Order and Opportunity for Public Comment.

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

As there were new COG members, Chairman Mark Lyon asked attendees to introduce themselves.

Representatives Ohler and Case, both acknowledged that it has been a very difficult budget period for the state. The legislature is still working out the details on the final budget since the governor added holdbacks.

Welcome to New NHCOC Members. Chairman Mark Lyon congratulated and welcomed the new COG members: Henry Todd, Canaan/Falls Village First Selectman; Matt Riiska, Norfolk First Selectman; and, Charles Perotti, North Canaan First Selectman.

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

As they presented their updates, most NHCOC members extended holiday greetings to the room and welcomed the new NHCOC members.

Bruce Adams asked other members if they received regular written reports from their Resident Troopers. He also announced that Kent received a \$500,000 grant to redesign and construct sidewalks in the town center. He also offered a series of culinary-themed posters for \$20 each with all proceeds donated to the Kent Food Bank.

Leo Paul said Litchfield is working to convert the former courthouse into affordable housing. The local Housing Trust has presented on the project's potential. The Preservation Trust purchased the courthouse in the center of town and the town is considering it for municipal offices.

Elinor Carbone said the city of Torrington is struggling to reconcile changes to their municipal budget under the evolving state budget. The city is considering closure of one of the five elementary schools. The

city is also finishing a few economic studies funded by Department of Economic and Community Development and recently adopted a new blight ordinance to address aging housing stock purchased by absentee landlords.

Bob Geiger reported that the Winsted school system is improving dramatically with a new slate of administration, an effective working relationship with the Gilbert School, and additional students. Like Torrington, they are combating issues such as excessive blight. A water main break recently required closure of Main Street, and is indicative of the aging infrastructure in town.

Don Stein noted that he had invited Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman to swear in new municipal officials. He said it was a nice event for town and Lt. Gov. Wyman did a great job. Barkhamsted is mid-way through the process of forming a 501(c)(3) housing trust to install senior housing. The town is working with Winsted to install sewers across town lines to improve sewer disposal for commercial businesses. He also expressed appreciation for the commercial success of the new Tractor Supply store & renovated movie theater.

Gordon Ridgway announced the local bridge project by local contractors finished on time and under budget. He also announced that Cornwall is hosting the largest live solar-lighted Christmas tree in Connecticut. Set up by local contractors, these projects demonstrate what can be done locally.

Curtis Rand has mostly a new board of Selectmen joining him. The town's road projects are dormant for the winter. The town continues to work on the Salisbury-Sharon transfer station.

Charles Perotti explained that the first selectman's administrative assistant and the municipal tree warden have retired. Canaan now has two new members on the board of selectmen. The town is working on an ordinance for boarding houses. Earlier versions of the proposed ordinance were 27 pages long and the newer version will be much shorter. The Railroad Station renovation continues with the brewery nearly complete.

Barbara Henry noted that she hopes to replace a problem culvert and pursue a blight ordinance in the coming year. Roxbury is also working on Sustainable CT certification.

Matthew Riiska announced that Norfolk has 12 new affordable housing units becoming available. The City Meadow project was just completed. He looks forward to reaching greater budget certainty.

Tom McKeon announced that Colebrook will be opening a farm brewery in the spring. He stated that the school population recently increased by 14 and the school is replacing the heating system. The town's housing market has been very active lately.

Henry Todd announced the final Certificate of Occupancy for Canaan's new emergency services facility. He reported that there will be two new art galleries opening in the village center, and there is interest in the old market. The old firehouse may be re-zoned as a multi-use building with multiple store-fronts and office(s) above.

Ted Shafer invited members to the Lewis Mills high school on January 10 at 7:00pm for a discussion panel on the opioid crisis. The discussion, sponsored by the Burlington Community Foundation, will be moderated by Tom Farrey of the Aspen Institute (formerly of ESPN). Then, on January 18 at 10am, there will be the regional launch of Sustainable CT at the Torrington City Hall auditorium. He said that he is looking forward to the launch and he will serve on the organization's board.

Bob Valentine urged new members to call anyone at NHCOC if they need help as it is a very supportive and helpful group. Goshen is still working through the state budget uncertainty and the additional holdbacks. This year, Wamogo School has a reduced number of students and that may impact the school funding.

Craig Nelson advised the new members that if they want to survey other municipalities, it is helpful to ask COG staff to coordinate the question and the responses. The town is doing a re-valuation. Warren is installing a new reader board for the center of town and considering a capital project for the library as it hasn't been significantly renovated for many years. The town had a festive and successful "Holiday on the Hill" event with the Hopkins Vineyard and Litchfield Distillery.

Mark Lyon said Washington has a local business association that is actively working with Parks & Recreation and the Economic Development Commission. They are considering various improvements for the business district such as Wi-Fi. The streetscape in Bryant Plaza was recently renovated to good effect. Finally, with permission from CT DOT, two local bridge projects are proceeding through the winter to be finished in the spring.

Summary of the Economic Impact Data for Northwest Connecticut's Nonprofit Cultural Sector. Amy Wynn, Executive Director, Northwest CT Arts Council.

Amy Wynn summarized the recently released "Arts & Economic Prosperity 5" report. Support from the NHCOC and the Northwest CT Community Foundation enabled the Northwest CT Arts Council to collect regional-specific data for this study. The report studied the economic contributions by nonprofit arts and cultural organizations across the country, with region-specific details.

Within the region, organizations and audiences spend about \$34.4 million annually and provide 812 full-time equivalent jobs (not including part time and volunteers). As a regional industry, it adds about \$3.4 million in state and local revenue. Attendees to events spend about \$24.10 per event (excluding admission) on things such as lodging, meals, transportation, and souvenirs. The event audiences were about 60% local and 40% non-local. For a majority of attendees from outside of region, attendees were only there because of that event. Residents said they would travel elsewhere to attend similar events.

Across the nation, the US Arts Industries contribute 4.2% (second highest contributor behind Retail trade and above construction, transportation, and mining) to the national GDP.

The Northwest CT Arts Council is available to direct towns to resources, support local volunteers looking to start arts groups, and publicize arts and culture events. As a state-funded organization, they are also waiting to hear about the final state budget. Ted Shafer commented that the Council provided helpful suggestions and information as Burlington considers how to utilize a recently purchased 60-acre parcel.

Statutorily Required Governor Request for NHCOC to Address Municipal Fiscal Disparities. Dan Morley, Assistant Division Director, CT OPM.

The NHCOC received a letter from the Office of Policy and Management, required by statute, directing the NHCOC to propose ways to mitigate financial disparities in the city of Torrington. Dan Morley of OPM explained that Secretary Barnes asked him to have these conversations with the COGs. This statutory requirement was a surprise to OPM as the numbers have been calculated for 16 years and never used in this way before. OPM had been cited by a compliance audit that they had not followed through on this requirement and were required to do so.

Across the state, Torrington, Hartford and Waterbury all met the required criteria (briefly: equalized mill rate, adjusted equalized net grand list per capita, median household income, and decrease in population).

Dan Morley invited members to air any concerns and offer suggestions. The legislated deadline for a response is December 31 but OPM is open to accepting suggestions into early 2018. OPM hopes to follow through on ideas of consensus across the other selected cities and COGs to address issues legislatively or fiscally. They may consider easing certain legislative mandates.

Elinor Carbone said the city was upset by OPM's letter. As a small city under 50,000 persons with limited access to federal funding, it was not appropriate to compare Torrington to the region's rural and small towns. The statute tries to apply a "one size fits all" approach. She stated that there is very little that other regional towns can do to affect changes in the city. Furthermore, the city has done much in the past 5 or 6 years to collaborate with surrounding towns. She requested OPM to review the statute with consideration of the specific NHCOC circumstances.

Highlighting the differences with other NHCOC towns, the Mayor stated that Torrington has significantly different population density, housing stock and needs, and several schools with high special needs obligations. The city's efforts at increasing the fund balance were "life-saving" this year as Moody's told municipalities to "expect to be downgraded" as a result of the state's budget crisis. She asks help from the state to access federal funding schemes such as CDBG, TIGER, and other transportation funding. Since the city is under a 50,000-population grant threshold, yet serves the medical, commercial, and transportation needs of the region, they depend on the state and the local taxpayers for funding.

The Mayor continued that one way to increase funding is by growing the real estate grand list, especially since the city experienced an 18% reduction in the list which necessitated an increase in the mill rate. A private developer recently sought to construct a senior housing development, which is needed for the city's aging demographic. The mayor said the older demographic will grow 40% over the next seven years. During negotiations, the developer struggled to meet the requirements set by the Connecticut Department of Housing as they required certain percentages for low-income and transition housing. The mayor noted the city has already exceeded the low-income housing quota set by the state.

Mayor Carbone pointed out the irony that while OPM's letter asks what measures Torrington will take to address the fiscal disparity issues, the state has proposed cutting the City's ECS funding, which totals about \$20 million per year.

COG members agreed that NHCOC towns already address many local government challenges from a regional perspective. Mayor Carbone noted the city's decision to participate in the pilot program for a regional animal control shelter, which would reduce costs to taxpayer and offer higher services for participating towns.

Bob Geiger stated that he anticipates the towns in the region will continue to help each other and is not in need of legislated requirements. Bob Valentine said the region has always worked cooperatively such as the public works equipment co-op. He finds it disconcerting that local elected officials are told to find ways to regionalize since they already do. Towns throughout the region have smaller partnerships such as mutual aid agreements. In addition to Litchfield, Goshen and Torrington working on a regional animal control facility, Goshen's Woodbridge Sewer District is considering an agreement with Torrington, where the fees would help Torrington and meet the environmental obligations. Towns need to be able to secure grants and bonds to do these projects.

Leo Paul said Litchfield and Torrington considered regionalizing the police force and fire marshal. For some services, it is too expensive for smaller municipalities as the combined police force would have been a 1.5 to 2 mills increase to Litchfield taxpayers whereas the animal control pilot has worked well so far. He has asked state to move forward on bonding for animal control facilities. In another example of

interlocal cooperation, Goshen residents can bring refrigerators to Litchfield's recycling facility.

In his new position, Henry Todd said his first act was to meet with the NHCOC Executive Director, discuss regional issues, and visit an animal hospital that would offer cheaper solution for multiple towns. As a small town, they will frequently be looking to the region for support. He sees the statute as an insult to what the group has done.

Don Stein added that Barkhamsted coordinates refuse disposal through Regional Refuse Disposal District #1 with Winsted and New Hartford. They are also looking at combined police forces. He suggested that the state should look at unfunded mandates like special education and prevailing wage. He further explained that OPM is convinced that towns have extra funding.

Gordon Ridgway explained that the recent state proposals were a big distraction from local revitalizations. Towns had to spend time fighting potentially devastating proposals such as teachers' pensions just to keep themselves afloat. They need mandate relief. Towns should get credit instead of penalized for their own pension reforms and balanced budgets. State proposals should also consider the challenges of small cities not just the larger cities.

Leo Paul said the Governor made a comment on television that he would like to get every municipality to between 30 and 45 mills. Governor and Sec. Ben Barnes need to stop looking at mill rates for decisions. Bob Valentine added that many towns may have lower mill rates because they cannot afford to offer services such as trash pick-up.

Leo Paul stated that if the state wants to help, they need to find other ways to save money. Regardless of the legislators and OPM Sec. Barnes statements that they do not want to increase taxes, reduced state aid leads to increased taxes at the local level by forcing towns to increase mill rates.

Bob Valentine commented that Goshen residents look for services from Torrington, especially housing. Lower income families seek out available housing stock from Torrington and Winchester, which helps all surrounding towns with services and housing stock.

Barbara Henry said Torrington has been helpful in recent years with homeland security planning. She stated that Roxbury already participates in numerous shared services through a regional health district, animal control, paramedic, cooperative fuel purchasing, recycling group, and resident trooper. They were required by the state to join in a regional probate arrangement thereby increasing their costs. The state should not be forcing regionalization since the towns will regionalize voluntarily if it makes sense to do so.

Dan Morley said it would be good to put these suggestions and comments into writing. Rick Lynn said he would draft a response to OPM for NHCOC to review next week in order to accommodate the submission deadline of December 31.

Draft CEDS Goals and Objectives and Regional Food Hub Update. Jocelyn Ayer.

Jocelyn Ayer introduced Renee Giroux, the regional Food Hub Manager. The Food Hub now occupies a warehouse space on Broad Street in Torrington. A new NWCT Food Hub website will be completed soon which will allow wholesale customers to place their order online. Since the Food Hub did not receive the USDA grant, they are looking for additional funding to help meet their operating costs until they can scale up. Jocelyn thanked Craig Nelson who passed along an update on the Hub to someone in his town which ultimately resulted in the Food Hub securing a \$15,000 grant from the Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation. She noted that networking efforts like this will be essential for the Hub moving forward.

Currently in the middle of the planning process, the region's CEDS plan must be adopted in April 2018. There have been two focus group sessions thus far. The Tourism, Arts, & Culture focus group had 23 attendees. They felt the region needs a coordinated marketing strategy, a collaborative event calendar, and to brand the region as a "rural innovations lab". The Manufacturing & Healthcare focus group agreed that there are jobs available in the region but there needs to be a better method to communicate about the available jobs and the region's quality of life. They noted young families were not aware of available activities and the region's employers need transportation for their workers.

She then used polling cards to survey the NHCOC members on which draft CEDS strategies they would like to see their town or the region pursue. The results of this survey will be used to inform the CEDS plan. If members have any other key ideas for CEDS strategies to include, they should contact her. She also announced the NWCT Economic Development Summit will be held this year on Tuesday, January 30 from 6pm-8:30pm in Winsted.

Summary of NHCOC's Municipal GIS Survey. Joanna Wozniak-Brown.

Joanna Wozniak-Brown distributed a report, which summarizes the results of a GIS survey conducted earlier this year. There is a significant interest in this topic among municipal staff in the region. NHCOC will continue to seek out grants to achieve the interested objectives.

She also introduced a new Map Viewer, available on the NHCOC website. The viewer includes the 2016 aerial photography, the new regional Trails Map, and layers from the CT Environmental Conditions Online website. Viewers can print information from the new viewer as needed.

Leo Paul noted that Litchfield just received a grant to create a municipal GIS program. Bob Valentine commented that their GIS viewer is helpful to residents.

Legislative Issues

- a. Legislative Provision for State Oversight of Towns. Tom McKeon.
Tom McKeon reported on the 11-member Municipal Accountability Review Board designed to scrutinize the fiscal health of all the towns. The board will sort towns into various tiers. He is concerned that fiscally responsible towns will lose funding to support Tier III towns under this new state mandate.
- b. OPM Holdbacks and Implications for Towns and COGs.
In addition to the impact of the holdbacks at the municipal level, the state also cut the Regional Services Grant, which is a major funding source for the NHCOC. The NHCOC will need to utilize their unobligated fund balance in order to balance the budget this fiscal year.

Request for NHCOC Endorsement of U.S. Census Bureau Designation of County Equivalent.

Rick Lynn explained said WestCOG researched this concept and conducted a legal review. The county equivalency designation would allow COGs to apply more directly for funding from the federal government and allow the Census Bureau to aggregate data on a COG basis. It would not otherwise change the regular operations of the NHCOC. Bob Valentine, seconded by Don Stein, made a motion to endorse this designation. All voted in favor.

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

Rick Lynn reported that the two new minivans recently arrived, one each for the NW CT Transit District and Geer. The program will be operational when Geer finalizes the insurance arrangement. The program will increase the region's capacity to offer non-emergency medical services.

Administrative Items

- a. Approval of Minutes for Regular Meeting of October 12, 2017. On a motion duly made and seconded, the minutes were unanimously approved.
- b. Approval of Financial Statement for 9/2017 and 10/2017. On a motion duly made and seconded, the financial statements were unanimously approved.
- c. Acceptance of NHCOCG Audit for FY 2016-2017. On a motion duly made and seconded, the NHCOCG Audit for FY 2016-2017 was unanimously approved. Bob Valentine expressed appreciation to the NHCOCG staff for the clear bookkeeping and financial records.
- d. ConnDOT Request for Endorsement of Proposed STIP Amendments Pertaining to Bridge Replacement along Route 109 in the Town of Morris. On a motion duly made and seconded, the request was unanimously approved.
- e. DEMHS Region 5 Update. Mark Lyon reported that the committee voted to fund the Incident Management Team following a presentation by the IMT.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:11 p.m.