

SWRMPO
SOUTH WESTERN REGION
METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

APPROVED MINUTES OF 8/12/2016

Meeting held at the Ridgefield Community Center
316 Main Street, Ridgefield, CT 06877

Public access by phone was also available from the WestCOG Stamford Office

Chairman Jayme Stevenson - Vice Chairman Robert Mallozzi

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

- Darien First Selectman Jayme Stevenson
- Greenwich First Selectman Peter Tesei
- New Canaan First Selectman Robert Mallozzi
- Norwalk Alternate Director of Public Works Bruce Chimento
- Stamford Mayor David Martin

- Weston Absent
- Westport Alternate Second Selectman Avi Kaner
- Wilton Director of Planning Robert Nerney
- Transit Norwalk Transit Manager of Planning Stephanie Scavelli
- CTDOT Supervising Planner Roxane Fromson (non-voting)
- MPO Staff Director Francis Pickering (non-voting)

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

CT Fifth District U.S. Representative Elizabeth Esty, CT Fourth District U.S. Representative James Himes, CT State Senator Tony Hwang, CT State Representatives Terrie Wood and Gail Lavielle, Killingworth First Selectman Catherine Iino, Darien Selectman Susan Marks, New Canaan Selectman Nick Williams, Xholina Nano of Representative Esty's Office and Shante Hanks of Representative Himes Office.

In addition, Bethel First Selectman Matthew Knickerbocker, Brookfield First Selectman Stephen Dunn, Danbury Chief of Staff Dean Esposito, New Fairfield First Selectman Susan Chapman, New Milford Economic Development Director Kevin Bielmeier, Newtown First Selectman Patricia Llodra, Redding First Selectman Julia Pemberton, Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi and Sherman First Selectman Clay Cope.

Also, George Linkletter of Sherman, Ellen Graham of Senator Blumenthal's Office, WestCOG Counsel Steve Mednick, Will Poundstone and Paul Kim of the Ridgefield First Selectman's Office, RiverCOG Deputy Director J.H. Torrance Downes, Stamford Chief of Staff Michael Pollard, Jim Cameron and John Ararilios of Darien TV79, and WestCOG staff members Carl Zimmerman, Mike Towle, Rob Sachnin and Jon Chew.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Jayme Stevenson called the SWRMPO meeting to order at 12:10 PM. CT Fifth District U.S. Representative Elizabeth Esty and CT Fourth District U.S. Representative James Himes were welcomed. Introductions were made.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

ACTION ITEM

USDOT Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Coordination and Planning Area Reform: Francis Pickering provided an introduction to this issue, explaining that Congress mandates that transportation planning and the use of federal transportation funds be governed by a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in all sizable urban areas.

MPOs were largely created to ensure that states build projects and spend funds in ways that are supported by municipalities, he said, SWRMPO in place since 1981.

He then briefed members on the US DOT's proposed rule on MPO boundary changes and distributed several background items. The proposed rule would initially impact 120 of the 420 MPOs nationally, with the potential for further impacts in successive years. This includes us, yet SWRMPO and HVMPO jointly are already larger than 80% of MPOs nationwide, and already successfully coordinate many activities and processes, such as conducting joint meetings.

Mr. Pickering then made a PowerPoint presentation on this topic, noting that the primary focus of the new regulations is to require merger of MPOs that share an "Urbanized Area" by 2018. He explained that Urbanized Areas are constructs designed by the U. S. Census bureau for statistical use only, not transportation planning.

Also that SWRMPO and HVMPO were created after the dissolution of the much larger Manhattan based MPO known as the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission. As that arrangement had a dramatic collapse due to internal conflict and overextension, we should be wary of returning to such a large MPO, he said.

Most current SWRMPO members could lose their voting rights. There would be a dilution of local influence and a reduction in the ability of MPOs to set local priorities and impact use of federal transportation funds. Part of the presentation then reviewed ways in which MPOs in Connecticut and New York State already effectively coordinate.

The resulting new MPOs would certainly not correspond to any of Connecticut's "master regions" the nine new Council of Governments boundaries, he said. "Those would be scrambled."

The specifics are that SWRMPO would grow from 8 municipalities to 40, split across two states and six COG/MPO areas. There is no information as to who would fund the permanently higher administrative costs of such a transition.

Mr. Pickering noted that the new rules do provide an option but it is still not attractive. Should the Governors and MPOs agree not to merge, SWRMPO would still be required to develop, with others, a single Long Range Transportation Plan and a single Transportation Improvement Program for each of the new much broader areas, a highly complex process.

He added that the proposed guidance does not articulate what happens should the Governor and MPO not reach agreement, or the logistics of multi-state MPOs.

WestCOG Counsel Steve Mednick also briefed the members. MPO financial endorsements, required by CT DOT, are currently about \$1.6 billion for SWRMPO, he said. He has filed a freedom of information request with US DOT to obtain the reasoning behind the proposed rule change, which is to date obscure.

Federal Representatives Estes and Himes then made joint comments. Key points were that utilization by US DOT of a short sixty-day review period was inappropriate. Also that they could see that impacts upon the current MPO arrangements in Connecticut would be substantial.

However, rather than immediate and total opposition to the proposed rule change, they recommended a staged response of first determining the federal intent to better calibrate the response. There was discussion.

The federal representatives agreed to make the high level calls needed to investigate and report back as to the purposes behind the proposed dramatic changes. They advised that once we better understand the federal objectives we may be able to document that current arrangements already meet them.

As for the short review period, both support an extension to 180 days, citing a 60-day comment window during the summer as bad policy deserving of our skepticism. As an administrative matter, it was noted that Director Pickering has already asked for the extension.

Discussion continued. David Martin recommended keeping an open mind as to how alternative MPO arrangements could be preferable if they made the region more competitive. Jayme Stevenson stated her interest in determining how transportation funding resources currently available to suburban and small towns are affected by any MPO changes.

Representatives Esty and Himes both recommended that to protect our interests a letter of comment be submitted regardless of whether an extension beyond 8/26/2016 is granted. They suggested our providing examples of how MPO coordination is already being accomplished.

There was further discussion. Then on a motion made by Rob Mallozzi and seconded by Peter Tesei it was voted unanimously to authorize Director Pickering to draft a letter on behalf of SWRMPO to be circulated back to the members for comment, and if need be a teleconference, for revisions before its release.

ADJOURNMENT

It was noted that there will be no WestCOG meeting later this month, with the next COG and MPO meeting scheduled for September 15. Then on a motion duly made and seconded it was voted unanimously to adjourn the SWRMPO meeting at 1:25 PM.