

# Regional Performance Incentive Program

Application Guidelines: [https://biznet.ct.gov/SCP\\_Search/BidDetail.aspx?CID=51757](https://biznet.ct.gov/SCP_Search/BidDetail.aspx?CID=51757)  
Pursuant to CGS Section 4-124s.

*Proposal for Joint Provision of Services or Study to be filed with the Secretary  
of the Office of Policy and Management*

*Submit to:*  
Office of Policy and Management,  
450 Capitol Ave. MS #54 SLP  
Hartford, CT 06106-1379,  
Attn: RPI Program

## Applicant Entity

Name Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) &  
Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD)  
Address 1 Riverside Road  
City/State/Zip Sandy Hook, CT 06482

## Contact Person(s):

Name Michael Towle  
Title Deputy Director  
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## Amount Requested:

\$285,000

## Project Title:

Economic Growth Studies in Workforce, Tourism/Marketing, Agriculture Viability

## Required Proposal Elements (A-F, L, M):

### (A) Description

This project, Economic Growth Studies in Workforce, Tourism/Marketing, Agriculture Viability, encompasses three studies as identified vital to future growth in the region by its federally-approved [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy](#) (CEDS) for Western Connecticut. The CEDS takes a strategic, evidence-based approach to the region's economic challenges. Comprehensive research and analysis and public participation, including sectoral focus groups, informed the CEDS' findings, strategy selection, and project prioritization.

The project will realize three initiatives identified as critical to future economic development in the region and, accordingly, elevated as regional priorities by the CEDS. The initiatives are designed to strengthen the region's labor market, providing the human capital and talent needed for business retention, expansion, and development; and diversify the region's economic base, which is currently overconcentrated, into sectors that are underrepresented in the region but offer substantial potential for growth in revenues and employment. By deepening the labor market, and broadening the region's economic base, the region will be positioned to weather vicissitudes, generally be less influenced by economic cycles, and be able to rebound more quickly after an economic downturn such as a recession.

The initiatives are:

- i. Coordination Plan for Industry Needs and Higher Education (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
Deliverable: Recommendations for educational institutions, companies, and other stakeholders to create and improve the "pipeline of employment"  
Cost: \$100,000 | Timeline: 1-2 years
- ii. Regional Tourism Development & Marketing Plan (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
Deliverable: A plan with action steps for the region to promote tourism and bring newcomers into the area.  
Cost: \$100,000 | Timeline: 1-2 years
- iii. Regional Agricultural Viability Study (Pg. 34 of CEDS)  
Deliverable: Recommendations on the types of agriculture and what techniques (i.e. biotech, conventional, organic) can be economically viable in the Western CT Region.  
Cost: \$100,000 | Timeline: 1-2 years

The project will complete all three initiatives, advancing economic development activities from planning into implementation. To this end, each initiative will include the following components: research and analysis (including SWOT); stakeholder consultation and involvement; identification of objectives, strategies, and tactics; and development of a plan to achieve the objectives and put the strategies and tactics proposed into action. Implementation/execution of the plan is expected to begin on (or before) its completion and to be carried out by WestCOG, municipalities, and regional economic actors.

### (B) Need

Economic development is a need across Connecticut. The Connecticut economy has been defined by a slow and uneven recovery from the Great Recession, with high-paying jobs being

replaced by less well remunerated ones, a rapidly aging workforce, shortages of skilled labor, and a ‘brain drain’ of persons with high human capital and/or earnings potential (including recent college graduates and other young professionals) that, by some measures, ranks first in the nation. These trends challenge the viability of business operations in the state, both existing and future, and, if not adequately addressed, will have significant, deleterious effects on the state’s economy. It is especially critical that these problems are addressed in a timely manner in Western Connecticut, given the region’s status as the state’s economic engine—an engine whose continued humming is essential to the wellbeing of the entire state.

Resolution of a problem of this complexity and gravity requires going beyond existing knowledge and conventional approaches; as the state’s marked economic underperformance makes clear, business-as-usual is not working. In recognition of this challenge, the CEDS proposes three projects intended to address regional economic needs. The needs, which these projects would address are reproduced below.

- i. **Coordination Plan for Industry Needs and Higher Education** (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
Connecticut’s greatest export could be argued to be human capital: collectively, municipalities and households spend a fortune educating young people. Many then leave on completing high school or university, becoming the workforce of other states. This enormous transfer of wealth (in sunk costs and future earnings) from Connecticut to other states is unsustainable. This initiative would seek to reduce this and reverse the brain drain by engaging educational institutions to develop school-to-work pipelines that address the needs of businesses in the region and ‘hook’ graduates into attractive jobs and solid careers. Educational institutions would be able to highlight the outcomes of their alumni, and businesses could hire from a local pool of prepared professionals. The methods developed through this plan will impact the vibrancy of the region and the stability of its workforce, helping recruit and retain the employees that are needed for economic growth, and invest students in the future of the region and state.
- ii. **Regional Tourism Development & Marketing Plan** (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
Western Connecticut has a wealth of resources that could be attractive to, support, and generate business through tourism and support recreation, but many of these resources are poorly known beyond the immediate community. State and regional cutbacks in the area of tourism and recreation promotion have exacerbated a lack of public awareness and patronage of regional attractions; in addition, the state and region have lagged in recognizing changes in consumer tastes and catering to them. This initiative will fill these gaps, developing a comprehensive, action plan to identify and pursue opportunities for growth in tourism and recreation in the region, and to market the region accordingly. Implementation of the plan is expected to improve the region’s profile in these sectors and increase their contribution to the region’s economy.
- iii. **Regional Agricultural Viability Study** (Pg. 34 of CEDS)  
Many of the communities in Western Connecticut developed around farming; however, over time there has been a steep decline in the sector in the region. While

cost and development pressures make it unlikely that corn and dairy farms will ever return in significant numbers to the region, other regions have demonstrated that agriculture can play a sizeable economic role and can be highly profitable in areas that, like Western Connecticut, experience high labor costs and constrained land supply. The region has excellent access to the largest and one of the wealthiest metropolitan areas in the country, an area defined by a world class array of restaurants, local and immigrant communities with cosmopolitan tastes, and households with substantial disposable income and concerns about food safety and health. Western Connecticut's location just 50 miles from New York City gives it unique advantages, such as cultivation of agricultural products that require the direct supervision of a customer, or that cannot withstand refrigeration or long-distance shipping.

Before this sector is lost in the region, WestCOG will conduct a study to determine what agricultural practices may be viable in the region, and how to promote them. These practices may include cultivation of friable and/or highly perishable foods; specialty fruits/vegetables; functional foods, medical crops, and biopharmaceuticals (including personalized ones), agritourism; including events, hospitality, and recreation; food and beverage processing; and production of high value-added foodstuffs, such as cheeses and distilled beverages.

The plan will provide actionable information to existing and prospective agriculturalists considering expanding or establishing operations in the region, to officials with responsibility for or involvement in agriculture, and to businesses that support or are supported by agriculture.

### **(C) Method of Delivery**

WestCOG will manage the three initiatives covered by this project. The project will take place under the auspices of the Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD), a state-designated Economic Development District (EDD), with pending federal designation, with an active group of members meeting on a regular basis throughout the year.

WestCOG will issue a request of proposals and will choose a qualified consultant(s), to carry out the project initiatives, through an open and competitive process. Each initiative will be informed by an advisory committee, consisting of persons with expertise in the respective area and/or responsibility for implementation. Recommendations and implementation plans will be developed for each initiative, with consultation of and involvement of the respective advisory committee and of WCEDD and WestCOG.

### **(D) Responsible Entity**

Western Connecticut Council of Governments will oversee delivery of the service via management of the project and the respective consultants executing the studies.

### **(E) Recipients Population(s)**

Like the CEDS, these studies would benefit the entire region. A more detailed review of recipients benefited from each of the projects is provided below:

- i. **Coordination Plan for Industry Needs and Higher Education** (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
The project will strengthen the region's labor market, improving the congruence and linkage between educational opportunities and career paths. This will benefit education institutions (by improving job placement and hence degree value), students (by connecting them to employment), and businesses (by giving them access to the talent they need to survive and thrive).
- ii. **Regional Tourism Development & Marketing Plan** (Pg. 33 of CEDS)  
The project will expand a sector that, while important, is underrepresented and underexploited in the region, growing revenues and employment in the areas of tourism and recreation and diversifying the region's economy to be more resilient.
- iii. **Regional Agricultural Viability Study** (Pg. 34 of CEDS)  
The project will expand a sector that, while important, is underrepresented and underexploited in the region, growing revenues and employment in the area of agriculture, and diversifying the region's economy to be more resilient.

## **(F) Economies of Scale**

Economies of scale for this project are realized in two ways:

1. Reduced costs by eliminating duplication. While these projects could be conducted at the municipal level, doing so would be inefficient and unnecessarily costly, as the same tasks (e.g., data collection, research, analysis, preparation of recommendations, presentation) would be carried out repeatedly.
2. Improved Project Performance by addressing problems at the appropriate scale. Strategies will be most successful if they are effected at the level and scale of the problem(s) they are intended to solve. In the case of the challenges the project initiatives address, the scale is regional. Economies, labor markets, and college/university catchment areas are regional.

## **(L) Proposed Match**

WestCOG and the participating municipalities can provide up a 5% cash match (\$15,000 of a total project cost of \$300,000).

## **(M) Lamont Administration Themes**

The project is intended to Promote Economic Growth, the first of the three major themes identified by Governor Lamont's administration. The three initiatives that make up the project are designed to bolster the labor market, a need for business in the region, and to contribute to the expansion of two economic sectors with substantial potential for growth in revenue and jobs. Together, these initiatives will improve economic resilience, by providing the resources needed for succession and expansion, fostering business growth, as well as diversifying the economy so that it better withstands shocks. The success of these endeavors is expected to result in job creation, for residents of the region and of neighboring ones, increased patronage of and spending in the region, expansion and creation of new enterprises, and increased local and state revenues.