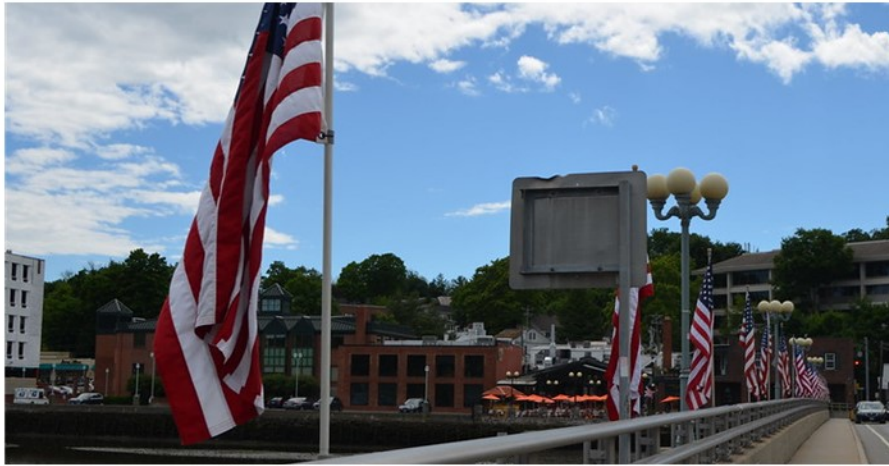


# Western Connecticut

## COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS



# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

*For the fiscal year July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020*

# Western Connecticut Council of Governments 2020 Annual Report

For the fiscal year July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020

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Requirements of the Annual Report per [CGS §4-66r](#):

- Summarize the expenditure of such grant funds. **[See Appendix.]**
- Describe any regional program, project or initiative currently provided or planned by the council. **[See Sections 2 through 8.]**
- Review the performance of any existing regional program, project or initiative relative to its initial goals and objectives. **[See Section 1.]**
- Analyze the existing services provided by member municipalities or by the state that, in the opinion of the council, could be more effectively or efficiently provided on a regional basis. **[See Section 1.]**
- Provide recommendations for legislative action concerning potential impediments to the regionalization of services. **[See Section 9.]**

## 1 WestCOG in 2020

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) is one of nine regional Councils of Governments in Connecticut (COGs), established per CGS §8-31b. A COG is a regional body consisting of chief elected officials (mayors and first selectmen) of its member municipalities. COGs act as a forum to promote intermunicipal coordination and cooperation. At the direction of its board, and funding permitting, COGs can provide a range of services, from animal control to zoning assistance. WestCOG and its predecessors have served the region for over 50 years.

COGs also connect municipalities with funding and play a key role in securing eligibility under federal grant programs. These include access to grants for transportation, economic development, and disaster recovery, among others. Efforts are underway to use the COGs as a vehicle to bring in additional federal funds to Connecticut, putting the state on equal footing with its peers.

### Members

WestCOG consists of eighteen member municipalities:

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Chief Elected Official</b>	<b>COG Office</b>
Bethel	Matt Knickerbocker	
Bridgewater	Curtis Read	
Brookfield	Steve Dunn	
Danbury	Mark Boughton	
Darien	Jayme Stevenson	Vice Chair
Greenwich	Fred Camillo	
New Canaan	Kevin Moynihan	
New Fairfield	Pat Del Monaco	
New Milford	Pete Bass	
Newtown	Dan Rosenthal	
Norwalk	Harry Rilling	
Redding	Julia Pemberton	Treasurer
Ridgefield	Rudy Marconi	Chair
Sherman	Don Lowe	
Stamford	David Martin	
Weston	Chris Spaulding	
Westport	Jim Marpe	
Wilton	Lynne Vanderslice	Secretary

Collectively, these municipalities account for approximately 610,000 residents, making the Region the second most populous in Connecticut.

## Staff

Francis R. Pickering	Executive Director
Michael Towle	Deputy Director
Patricia Payne	Finance Director
Victoria Ricks	Office Manager
Kevin Mahoney	Senior Project Manager
Charles Vidich	Senior Project Manager
Paula Burton	Project Manager
Kristin Hadjstylianos	Principal Planner
Todd Fontanella	Senior Planner
Kristin Floberg	Planner
Nicole Sullivan	Associate Planner
Nick Trabka	Senior GIS Analyst
Tucker Beckett	GIS Analyst

## Performance of existing regional programs, projects, or initiatives

WestCOG's regional services efforts have been well-received, with no adverse comments during the fiscal year (FY).

The primary challenges faced in the program have been:

- **Public emergency.** WestCOG has continued to operate without suspension or reduction in capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic, thanks to strong internal preparation for disasters and disruption. However, Covid-19 did slow some WestCOG projects, as emergency needs and changing regional priorities displaced existing workloads. (As the Covid-19 situation has come under control, WestCOG has made up for this slowdown, and projects are back on schedule.)
- **Delays in funding.** WestCOG did not receive approval of its Regional Services Grant (RSG) Spending Plan, an executed RSG contract, nor authorization to charge from OPM until approximately October 2019. This delay pushed back the start of contract projects by three months. (To its credit, OPM partly mitigated this by extending fiscal year 2020 RSG funds to December 31, 2020 for contracted projects.)
- **Resource limitations.** The larger and more complex the region, the larger and deeper the opportunities for service sharing are, as are the analytical and logistical challenges in evaluating, preparing for, and launching such services. Current resources suffice for gradual development of shared services; a faster approach would require significantly more.

All projects for the current fiscal year are on track. It is expected that projects will meet their scheduled targets, provided no further external shocks are encountered.



## Opportunities for service provision on a regional basis

There is strong interest on behalf of COG members in regional services. Regional opportunities WestCOG is pursuing include:

- Pandemic response
- Economic recovery development
- Public safety operations
- Infrastructure finance
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and IT architecture
- Tax and fee portal, enabling payment bundling across local departments and municipalities and automatic billing, with a shared payment processor (for lower interchange rates)
- Animal control
- Waste management

COG members have also expressed an interest in the following, which WestCOG does not have the resources to prosecute at present but may do so in the future:

- Coordination of student transportation, particularly for out-of-district trips
- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Coordinator
- Brownfields assessment/cleanup/redevelopment Program
- Veterans Services Coordinator
- IT coordinator
- Purchasing coordinator



Figure 1. WestCOG Office

## 2 Regional Services

### **Regional Viewer**

WestCOG developed and deployed an interactive, online regional GIS viewer. The viewer maps parcels in conjunction with other layers of interest to municipalities, businesses, and the public. Viewer functions include map design, abutter property selection, layering of planning datasets such as zoning, flood zones, impervious cover, building footprints, tree canopy, and current and historical aerial imagery (2019, 2018, 2016, 2012, and 1990 imagery is available for viewing), as well as a link to property cards. The parcel and property data are set to be updated at least annually. The viewer can also stand in for or substitute for a municipal GIS viewer.

☆ [WestCOG's Regional Viewer](#) - Published January 2020

### **Regional Public Safety Study**

WestCOG evaluated current conditions and opportunities for intermunicipal sharing in the areas of police, fire, and EMS services and in New Canaan, Ridgefield, Redding, Wilton, and Weston. The study, which had strong participation by all local departments, identified several opportunities for service improvements and made recommendations for enhanced municipal cooperation. These include the interconnection of existing public safety answering points, dispatch, and data systems or the creation of a new, shared virtual PSAP/dispatch, as well as training facility sharing.

☆ [Public Safety - Current Situation Report](#) - Published February 2020

☆ [Public Safety - Recommendations Report](#) - Published June 2020

### **Regional Waste Management**

WestCOG launched a study of regional opportunities in waste management. The project, which includes development of an implementation plan, is anticipated to finish in 2021.

### **Regional Animal Control**

WestCOG launched a study of regional opportunities in animal control, both facilities and services. The project is anticipated to finish in 2021.

### **Municipal Services Modernization Study**

WestCOG is comprehensively evaluating opportunities for cost savings and service improvements in local government through regional sharing, consolidation, and of municipal processes. A region-wide, multidepartmental survey identified focus areas including connected paperless workflows, cybersecurity, technical assistance and training, and electronic payments and regional processing. Project outputs include cost benefit analyses, recommendations, and implementation strategies for selected services. The project will be complete by the end of December 2020.

## 3 Regional Planning

### **Plan of Conservation and Development**

WestCOG is statutorily responsible for the creation and maintenance of a regional comprehensive plan, to ensure that development is orderly, economic, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

WestCOG adopted its first *Regional Plan of Conservation and Development* in January 2020. The Plan identifies and influence development toward the priorities of the region for the next ten years. Specific plan elements include infrastructure, housing, the economy, water supplies and natural resources, community character, air quality, and agricultural resources. The Plan relies heavily on analyses of statistical and spatial data in these areas, many of which are a first for the region and elsewhere in the state.

☆ [2020 -2030 Regional Plan of Conservation and Development - WestCOG](#)

## **County equivalency**

Over the last several years, WestCOG has worked with its peers and with the State to put Connecticut's COGs on a level playing field with non-county regional governments in six other states. Such "county equivalency" will not change relationships in Connecticut, including traditions of home rule, but will align the actions of federal agencies with state law, which empowers COGs to participate in any "grant, donation, or program made available to counties by any other governmental or private entity." (CGS §8-31b(b)) When recognized as county equivalents, the state's COGs will be able to engage directly in federal programs, when the regions so desire. This will enable COGs, for the first time, to apply to federal grants as regions, increasing the competitiveness of grant applications, and, it is hoped, ultimately bringing in more federal assistance to Connecticut.

In 2020, WestCOG worked with federal, state, and regional partners to develop a process for the county equivalency at the federal level in fiscal year 2023. This timeline allows the Census Bureau to coordinate equivalency with already-planned transitions in its programs and products, providing a natural breakpoint for the implementation of county equivalency and easing its recognition by partner federal agencies and stakeholders.

## **WestCOG Legislative Committee**

The WestCOG Legislative Committee met throughout fall and early winter 2019, in order to review 2019 priorities and establish priorities for 2020. The Committee forwarded its priorities to the COG for action at its January meeting, where they were approved. The COG's priorities were presented at its February 13, 2020 Legislative Luncheon in Hartford, which was well-attended and resulted in insightful and productive discussions with regional legislators. WestCOG appreciates the involvement of its legislators and looks forward to continuing the conversation in fiscal year 2021.

## **Land Use Planning for Wireless Telecommunications Task Force**

WestCOG established the [Land Use Planning for Wireless Telecommunications Task Force](#) on October 17, 2019 to develop a coordinated strategy to make the region a digital leader. A regional approach to addressing the rollout of fifth generation broadband will work towards creating a standardized strategy to facilitate a more consistent and coordinated approach to economic development and the protection of community character and public health; an important factor for telecommunication providers' willingness to work with municipalities on the design of its facilities. It has also been central in creating a comprehensive assessment that weights the cost and benefits of the various strategy options while identifying gaps in municipal telecommunication strategies and recommending improvements.

The Task Force held its first meeting on March 2, 2020 with representation from chief elected officials, town planners, and a town attorney. The task force met on a regular basis over the next six months receiving briefings from the telecommunications industry, legal professionals, and Senator Blumenthal's office. Using this information and by researching various strategies used around the country, the taskforce assembled four municipal strategies to guide the development of 5G telecommunication services in the region, including a municipal ordinance, a right-of-way ordinance, zoning regulation revisions, and a municipal licensing strategy. A "Final Recommendations Report" will be available in fall 2020.

## **Land Use Referrals**

Proposed changes to municipal zoning regulations and maps, subdivision ordinances, and Plans of Conservation and Development ("referrals"), are evaluated by WestCOG for consistency with the regional Plan of Conservation and Development and to reduce conflicts among municipalities. WestCOG responded to 89 referrals this past year.

## **Planners Lunch**

WestCOG convenes regular educational and collaborative sessions for municipal planners to build capacity and facilitate intermunicipal collaboration in the region. Discussion items included:

- Plan of Conservation and Development Review (July 2019)
- Solar Energy and Land Use (July 2019)
- Internet of Things (November 2019)
- Data Needs Assessment (November 2019)
- COVID-19 (April 2020)
- Wireless Telecommunications (April 2020)
- WestCOG's Regional Viewer (April 2020)

## **Letters of Support**

WestCOG issues letters of support or letters of concurrence for municipal, private, and non-profit organizations for grant applications that are in alignment with the goals of the COG. This year, staff prepared 15 letters of support and consistency for:

- HVA, *Long Island Sound Stewardship Fund Proposal* 1/16/2020
- Ives Trail Regional Greenway Association, *Ridgefield Thrift Shop* 1/29/2020
- Bartlett Arboretum and Gardens, *CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Urban Green & Community Garden Initiative* 6/25/2020
- Town of Brookfield, *Long Island Sound Stewardship Fund Proposal* 6/25/2020
- Town of Greenwich, *Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program* 6/25/2020
- Aspetuck Land Trust, *Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program* 6/26/2020



## Photos of the Region

WestCOG hosts photos of the region on a FLICKR account. Images are organized by municipality. These photos are heavily leveraged in the drafting of WestCOG documents. The collection of photos is updated annually and made fully available for the public without restriction.

☆ [Photos of the Region FLICKR Page](#)

## Regional Fee Schedule

User fees can be an important source of revenue for municipalities and help to reduce the burden on the property tax. However, information on fees is highly fragmented. To facilitate comparison and benchmarking among municipalities, and to provide an empirical basis to conversations about revenue diversification, WestCOG is compiling fees charged by municipalities across the region. WestCOG has collected and classified fees; the next step of compiling the data is expected for completion in FY2021, with annual updates in future years.



*Figure 2. New Milford Farm Scene*

## 4 Transportation Planning

### **Metropolitan planning, including LRTP and TIP**

WestCOG hosts two Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), which are federally mandated, designated and funded transportation policy-making organizations. These MPOs together comprise the WestCOG Board, in addition to transit representatives, the COG Executive Director, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation. MPO designations provide access to federal funds, both formula-based and discretionary grants. To access these funds, an MPO must develop and maintain a Long-Range Transportation (LRTP) and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The two MPOs functionally operate as one region, with joint and concurrent meetings and shared documents. The TIPs for Western Connecticut are programmed to deliver approximately \$3 billion in transportation investment during the federal FY2018-2021 period across the region. The federal FY2021-2024 TIPs for both MPOs are expected to be endorsed in October 2020.

WestCOG also play a role in identifying and selecting projects under federal programs including Transportation Alternatives and Congestion Management/Air Quality funds.

### **Technical Advisory Group (TAG)**

WestCOG's TAG comprises municipal planners, engineers, public works officials, transit district representatives, and COG staff. The TAG collaboratively reviews and evaluates proposals, making recommendations to the WestCOG Board. Examples of recent TAG initiatives include prioritizations for federal and state funded project solicitations, assistance with the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) program, and regional efficiencies, transportation performance management, TIP amendments, and other important regional efforts.

### **LOTICIP and Regional Engineer**

The Local Transportation Capital Improvement Program (LOTICIP) provides funding for projects on roads throughout the region. WestCOG solicits and develops projects and programs funds. COG involvement enables efficiency in project delivery, freeing State resources for other activities. Responsibilities include application and design review, with WestCOG's Regional Engineer giving programmatic and technical guidance to municipalities to advance and implement critical infrastructure projects. To date and notwithstanding budget uncertainty, WestCOG received over \$63 million in LOTICIP funding (state FY14-19). WestCOG has committed to funding 35 projects that are in various stages of project development, ranging from design to completion.

### **Municipal Transportation and Engineering Assistance**

WestCOG provides technical assistance to the region. Assistance includes programmatic and funding guidance, engineering review, planning studies, and data analysis. A recent example include is an intensive evaluation of concerns by municipal public works officials regarding premature deterioration of asphalt pavements. WestCOG conducted a statewide survey of recent municipal experience with pavements and identified pavement core sites in the field with municipal public works personnel. This effort concluded with Jim Mahoney from the University of Connecticut's CAPLAB presenting the findings of a technical analysis and recommendations to the TAG.

## **Regional Data Collection Program**

WestCOG installs temporary traffic cameras that collect up to 50 hours of traffic video for an intersection. Outputs include turning counts for pedestrians, bicycles, cars and heavy vehicles. This data is used in a wide range of analyses, including level of service (LOS), pedestrian and cyclist, intersection signal timing and capacity, traffic control type and signal coordination. In addition, WestCOG deploys radar counters to collect bidirectional volume, speed and vehicle classification for up to four, mid-block lanes. This program provides cost savings for member municipalities through equipment sharing and by using trained WestCOG staff to conduct analyses. WestCOG conducted 15 turning movement counts this year that were used in project design and safety analysis for the municipalities in the region.

This past year WestCOG procured 3 trail counting infrared devices and a processing application. WestCOG has been providing on-going assistance at the Fairfield Hills Trail in Newtown since February 2020. Assistance includes data collection and analysis for use in future applications for funding and studies that would improve the heavily used trail. The trail counters are currently being used to monitor trail usage at select parks around the region and can be requested for specific studies by municipalities.

## **Congestion Management Process**

The Congestion Management Process (CMP) for Western Connecticut. The overall goal of this process is to identify, benchmark, and quantify congestion in the region to leverage future investments and improvements in the regional transportation system to alleviate congestion in a targeted, cost-effective manner. The CMP also includes reporting on federally mandated transportation performance measures. Results of this analysis will be shared in fall 2020.

## **Regional Transportation Safety Plan**

WestCOG has been working with CTDOT and VN Engineers to develop a Regional Transportation Safety Plan. The overall purpose of the study is to reduce fatalities and injuries, increase safety awareness, and outline measures to reduce potential future crashes by assessing regional data and local roads. Recommendations will be made at prioritized locations.

## **Bicycle Planning**

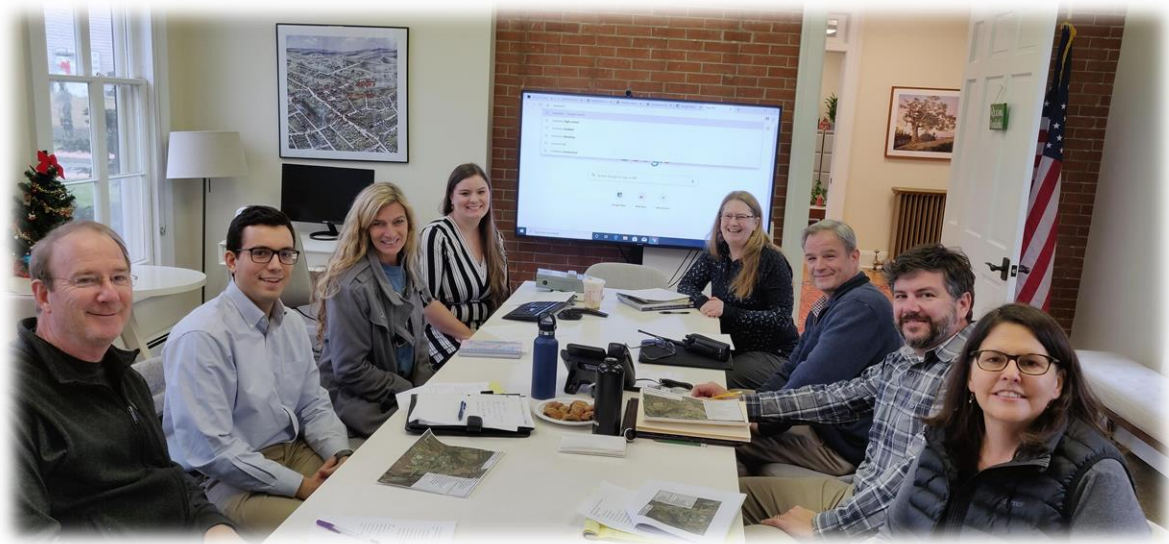
WestCOG is developing a Regional Bicycle Plan that will propose and advance a connected bicycle network in the region. The plan will build on the recommendations from existing studies and will support regional corridors that will become the “spine” of a nonmotorized transportation network. A draft of the plan is expected to be shared with the region in fall 2020.

## **Trail Planning and Technical Support**

WestCOG has been inventorying and collecting data on trails and their use in the region. The data will be analyzed, and plans for trail connections between communities, public facilities, and parks and open space will be developed. Technical assistance is provided to municipalities and land trusts to determine trail alignments, grants, trail enhancements, and feasibility of multiuse trails. WestCOG communicates and coordinates with CTDOT, CT Trail Census, and the Department of

Energy and Environmental Protection on issues regarding trails in the region. Trail technical support was provided for the following municipalities and agencies:

- Bethel (Bethel Land Trust, Town of Bethel)
- Danbury (Richter Park Hiking Trails, Ives Trail Committee)
- Newtown (Newtown Bike and Trails Committee, Newtown Parks and Recreation, Fairfield Hills Walking Path )
- New Milford (Northwest Connecticut Land Trust and Town of New Milford, New Milford River Trail)
- Norwalk (Norwalk Parks and Recreation)
- Brookfield (Still River Greenway)



*Figure 3. December 2019 Meeting to discuss trail census procedures as requested by the Newtown Bike and Trail Committee.*

☆ Newtown's Bike and Trails Committee receives National Parks Services Grant

## **Transportation Advisory Committees**

WestCOG actively participates in numerous transportation advisory committees, where members share insight and feedback on statewide planning efforts and local projects. This past year, WestCOG has supported:

- Connecticut Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board
- Connecticut Association for Community Transportation
- Strategic Highway Safety Plan Steering Committee
- Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee
- Danbury I-84 Project Advisory Committee
- Norwalk 7/15 Interchange Project Advisory Committee
- Metropolitan Area Planning Forum
- Multi-State Freight Working Group



- TRANSCOM
- Active Transportation Steering Committee
- Safety Circuit Rider Advisory Committee

## **Norwalk Main Avenue Study**

WestCOG worked with the City of Norwalk on a study to evaluate opportunities to address existing transportation deficiencies along Main Avenue (Route 719). This corridor parallels Route 7 and provides an integral connection between the Merritt Parkway and Route 7, access to the Merritt 7 train station, and access to commercial businesses on Main Avenue. A Complete Streets and Access Management Plan was completed which outlines several improvements including new sidewalks, crosswalks, bus pullouts, pedestrian signals, and other streetscape amenities.

☆ [The Main Avenue Transportation Plan](#) – Published March 2020

## **Danbury and New Fairfield Route 37 Corridor Study**

Federal funding through the Surface Transportation Block Grant was secured for the Danbury and New Fairfield Route 37 Corridor Study. The study's purpose is to analyze physical and operational characteristics of Route 37 and recommend future improvements in the corridor. The corridor is a portion of Route 37, from I-84 Exit 6 in Danbury to 0.2 mile north of Route 39 in New Fairfield. The major objectives of this study are to discover solutions to alleviate traffic congestion levels, improve pedestrian mobility, and to promote safety as well as healthy and environmentally friendly modes of transportation. The Corridor Study is expected to be completed by February 2021.

## **Rail Improvements - Value Capture**

The United States Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Discretionary Grant program, is a unique opportunity for the DOT to invest in road, rail, transit and port projects that promise to achieve national objectives. The BUILD program enables USDOT to use a rigorous merit-based process to select projects with exceptional benefits. WestCOG was awarded an USDOT federal FY21 BUILD grant to conduct a Danbury and New Canaan Branch Value Capture Study. The study will investigate the feasibility of using alternative funding mechanisms such as value capture as a tool to pay for infrastructure improvements on the branch lines, including potential electrification an extension of the Danbury branch northward to Brookfield and New Milford, which has been a longstanding regional goal.

## **Rail Improvements - Quiet Zones**

WestCOG has submitted a proposal to CTDOT to conduct a Quiet Zones implementation study for the New Canaan Branch of the Metro-North Railroad. If approved, a consultant will be hired to assist with this three-municipality effort (Stamford, New Canaan and Darien). This study would analyze existing rail line and grade crossing conditions, determine what infrastructure improvements may be required at specific grade crossings at which trains currently must sound their horns, and where it would be feasible to implement quiet zones in the vicinity of these crossings. If implemented, residents and other sensitive receptors (churches, schools, medical facilities) in the vicinity of the Branch would potentially benefit. This implementation study is the next step following a

meeting on train horn noise held in Stamford by State Representative Matt Blumenthal in January 2020 which was attended by the CTDOT Commissioner and other area legislators, and residents who worked together to organize the event. Many members of the public attended this event and shared their concerns for disruptions to their quality of life due to train horns.

## **Connecticut Active Living and Active Transportation**

WestCOG has participated with CRCOG through the Active Transportation component of DPH's State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) grant. Through this program, WestCOG was granted the opportunity to host a regional training and complete a pilot project in the region, the following provides more information on each of these efforts:

### **Pilot Project: Darien-New Canaan Bicycle Loop**

WestCOG worked with Darien and New Canaan to develop a 25.5-mile bicycle loop to connect to the two municipalities to key destinations including their downtowns, businesses, transit stations, schools, parks, beaches, and other recreational areas. The recommendations of this plan and the final routing were based on an approach that reviewed existing infrastructure and analyzed the physical attributes of the roadway to determine the best facility types. Recommendations were categorized into short-, mid-, and long-term improvements and cost estimates were provided for each municipality.

### **Training Webinar: Managing Parks and Open Spaces During a Pandemic**

WestCOG partnered with FHI to host a webinar on how municipalities can manage their parks during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic called for lockdowns and social distancing regulations, which disrupted life throughout Connecticut, and beyond. Concurrently, the increased use of trails and open space in the spring was extraordinary. These facilities experienced record highs. Open space managers, towns, and state agencies grappled with how to best manage and promote use while upholding new (and constantly evolving) public health and safety protocols.

This webinar provided participants an opportunity to hear about best practices for managing parks, communication tools, and creative campaigns. The webinar also included presentations from Dan Rosenthal, the First Selectman of Newtown, about the municipality's CodeRED system, as well as Jim Wood from the Aspetuck Land Trust about their response to increased trail usage. While this training was geared toward Western Connecticut, the webinar was shared with all COGs, municipalities, environmental agencies, and other interested parties.

## 5 Environmental Planning

### **Municipal Stormwater Support Service (MS4)**

To achieve economies of scale, WestCOG provides MS4 stormwater planning services regionwide. These include a stormwater management template, stormwater infrastructure mapping, directly connected impervious cover mapping (DCIA), and case study IDDE efforts; WestCOG monitors advancements, resources, and updates from DEEP, other COGs, and UConn CLEAR regarding the MS4 permit. All products developed by WestCOG are replicable and available statewide. In this past year WestCOG worked closely with CTDOT, MetroCOG, and UConn to develop a regional GIS schema, to allow towns to collect data to meet the requirements of the MS4 permit.

An additional resource started this year, WestCOG developed a project to assist municipalities with the daunting task of mapping all their stormwater infrastructure for MS4 compliance. WestCOG has hired a dedicated GIS analyst to assist with this effort. The analyst will trek through streams, locate outfalls, digitize site plans, and develop a data collection process for municipalities to reach their 100% mapping targets.

### **Sustainable CT**

WestCOG Hosted Sustainable CT Fellows Chadwick Schroeder and Kendra Beaver in for the 2019 Summer Session. WestCOG provides office space, resources, and professional development for the hosted Sustainable CT Fellows. The Fellows work with WestCOG municipalities to register and engage within the Sustainable CT Program which provide recognition and access to grant funds towards sustainable activities. Sustainable CT Fellows also provide support for WestCOG. During the 2019 summer they captured over 250 photos of the region and provided guidance within WestCOG's Draft POCD to include Sustainable CT actions.

The June 2020 Sustainable CT 2020 Summer Session began in June, where WestCOG hosted Fellows Chadwick Schroeder and Hamsa Ganapathi.

### **Conservation Support Services**

WestCOG aims to incorporate energy, land, and water conservation practices into planning by providing data, analytical, and information monitoring services for regional conservation groups and member municipalities.

☆ H2H Partner: WestCOG has become a partner with the regional conservation planning organization Hudson to Housatonic (H2H). H2H works with local land trusts and conservation partners towards the vision of “a landscape mosaic abundant in forests, farms, wildlands, and waterways of the Hudson to Housatonic Region that enriches the quality of life for all who live, work and play here.”

## 6 Economic Development

### **Western Connecticut Economic Development District**

The Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD) is state-designated Economic Development District that serves regional economic interests for WestCOG's eighteen member communities. The WCEDD meets quarterly to provide economic insight for the COG and to pursue the goals outlined by the *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy* (CEDS). An approved and unexpired CEDS is required to qualify regions and municipalities for federal economic development funds. WestCOG developed and adopted a CEDS in 2017. It received state approval that year 2017 and federal approval in 2018. The CEDS is updated annually.

WestCOG's multiyear push for WCEDD become a federally-designated Economic Development District designation bore fruit in 2020, with designation announced by the U.S. Economic Development Administration in July. This status, which complements regional and state designation, enables WCEDD to access additional grant funds to support ongoing regional economic planning as well as to apply on a regional basis for public works and economic adjustment grants.



Figure 4. Downtown Westport



## 7 Emergency Management

Through regional partnership, WestCOG works with the Department of Emergency and Homeland Security (DEMHS), member communities, and neighboring COGs to prepare and plan for regional emergency response and mitigation. WestCOG falls within two DEMHS planning regions, Region 1 and Region 5, and takes part in Steering and Full Committee meetings and advocates for its member communities.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Response and Recovery**

As one of the areas that was hit first and hardest by Covid-19, WestCOG spent much of fiscal year 2020 responding to the public health emergency and, as response has shifted into recovery, WestCOG is playing a key role in planning for the state's recovery from it.

To address Covid-19, WestCOG redeployed COG staff, convened weekly meetings of the region's CEOs, and provided legal counsel to the region. These activities enabled the region's municipalities better to coordinate their response to the emergency, providing them with consistent information, vital advice, and a process to identify matters of shared concern and to elevate them where needed for state action. This cooperation also resulted in cost savings through the use of shared (rather than duplicative) resources such as a single attorney.

WestCOG is advancing the region's and state's recovery through management, coordination, and support of the Long-Term Recovery planning process hosted under Emergency Support Function 14 of DEMHS Regions 1 and 5. In conjunction with DEMHS and the Connecticut Metropolitan, Naugatuck Valley, and Northwest Hills COGs, WestCOG has organized and is staffing Steering Committees as well as subcommittees in the areas of health and human services; business and jobs; finance and philanthropy; education and technology; and arts, culture, tourism, entertainment, and recreation. The purpose of this engagement is to bring together a broad, diverse cross-section of society and economy in the state comprehensively to identify, describe, and elevate needs resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic that remain unmet and that stand in the way of recovery from the pandemic. WestCOG has committed three employees to this effort.

COG involvement in the recovery process has been undertaken statewide at the direction of the Governor's office. In response to directive from DEMHS and OPM forbidding the use of DEMHS and Regional Services funds, respectively, for Covid-19 recovery, and an invitation from to apply for federal funds, the state's COGs collectively submitted a request for reimbursement for these substantial unforeseen (and unbudgeted) activities under the CARES Act to OPM in June; to date this request has not been acted on. The lack of reimbursement for these efforts is producing financial challenges for COGs and may result in a slowdown/cessation of these efforts.

With its peer COGs and regional economic development organizations, WestCOG submitted a grant application to the U.S. Economic Development Administration to fund continuation and expansion of economic recovery work in calendar years 2021 and 2022.

### **Hazard Mitigation Plan Updates**

WestCOG, along with its member municipalities, is developing its first regional Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) for all eighteen members. This plan, which will be the first fully regional plan in

Western Connecticut, will identify actions and strategies for communities to reduce impacts from various disaster scenarios. An HMP helps communities understand risks and take steps to reduce natural hazard impacts. The plan is expected for completion in January 2021.

☆ Received HMP Grant Award – October 2019

## **Resilient CT**

WestCOG, together with MetroCOG, NVCOG, and SCRCOG, is working with UConn's Connecticut Institute for Resilience & Climate Adaptation (CIRCA) to identify coastal and flood-related needs, catalog projects, and develop detailed Resiliency Projects for each region. The timing for this effort is well aligned for WestCOG, which will be simultaneously developing their first region-wide Hazard Mitigation Plan. WestCOG will be working with CIRCA and partner COGs to coordinate efforts. The planning efforts will continue until the completion of the project in March 2021.

## **Emergency Service Function Transportation (ESF1)**

As part of supporting the DEMHS regions, WestCOG coordinates with transportation planners from NHCOC, NVCOG, and MetroCOG to develop and strategize transportation planning issues related to emergency management functions across DEMHS Regions 1 and 5. ESF1 attempts to provide a planning function annually. This year Diversion Routing support was provided. CTDOT provided diversion route plans to WestCOG to verify with the Emergency Management Directors within the region. This task was accomplished for WestCOG's ten northern members, with work for the southern eight members waiting on receipt of the diversion routes from CTDOT.

## **ESF1 Transit Inventory**

WestCOG working with MetroCOG, NHCOC, NVCOG, and DEMHS helped develop a Transit Resource Inventory. The inventory, which was developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, was designed as a reference of contacts and resources in case transit vehicles were required for an emergency response. The transit inventory is intended to be updated in coordination with neighboring COGs annually.

## 8 Analytics

WestCOG provides regional web-based analytics, mapping services, technical support, and training for WestCOG member communities as well for WestCOG's own planning initiatives. In addition to the projects listed within this document tagged with GIS label, the following services are provided:

- Analysis Request
- Map Design Requests
- Data Visualization Requests
- [Public GIS Data Inventory](#)
- Large Scale Printing Services
- Automating WestCOG Work Processes
- Data Request

Additionally, WestCOG develops its own regional planning data sets either from scratch or through standardizing municipal datasets. Datasets created and maintained at WestCOG include:

- Parcels
- Zoning
- Wetlands
- Land use
- Planimetric and Imagery
- Canopy
- Critical Assets
- Building Footprints
- Pavement
- Intersections

### Census PSAP

WestCOG actively participated in the United States Census Bureau's Participant Statistical Areas Program (PSAP), a once-in-a-decade opportunity for local governments to update the statistical boundaries used by Bureau in tabulations for the 2020 Census, American Community Survey, and Economic Census. WestCOG evaluated and gave feedback on appropriate boundaries on behalf of its members. The goal of the PSAP was to ensure that Tract and Block Group boundaries reflected logical shapes, met population and household standards, and adequately addressed special use areas such as parks, prisons, ponds, malls (large areas, with little population, or drastically different population). WestCOG coordinated with municipalities, state agencies, and Census to ensure boundaries were acceptable. The new boundaries will be reflected in the 2020 Census.

### Regional Parcel Data

Following [PA 18-175](#), WestCOG coordinates with municipalities to collect parcel data and Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal (CAMA) data in the spring of each year. As many of these datasets are unique to their municipality, a substantial level of effort is required to bring them into a regional format. WestCOG is developing processes to automate this effort to allow detailed property data that includes CAMA features. This level of automation is expected in FY 2021. Further automation efforts would allow for automatic upload and transfer of CAMA data from municipal databases to WestCOG servers, which would allow for a near Realtime CAMA dataset.

### GIS State Outreach & Standards

WestCOG serves on the CT GIS Network Steering Committee and the CT GIS Network Standards Subcommittee. In this capacity WestCOG develops partnerships and standards to connect GIS datasets across regions and for the state. In this Capacity WestCOG also organized COG GIS staff

peer exchanges with CTDOT and the Connecticut State Library, as well as help host the CT GIS Network GIS Day Conference. Standards in development include, trails, open space, parcels, CAMA reports, stormwater.

WestCOG also participates on a statewide Regional Assessment Workgroup. This body comprises municipal assessors, tax collectors, and COG staff, and is exploring options to increase efficiency in property value assessment and tax collection.

### **WestCOG Data Assessment**

In line with WestCOG's effort to identify regional services, WestCOG surveyed municipal staff in various departments to understand the data needs for each department. The survey was intended to identify which data is most valuable and where there are data gaps.

### **Redding POCD Assistance**

Redding requested support in the development of its planning maps for its' Plan of Conservation and Development. Maps created for planning purposes included a natural resource map, land use, and special district map. These maps are intended to support sections of Redding's POCD.



## 9 Recommendations for Legislative Action

The following recommendations would advance service sharing and delivery cost savings.

### **Expand opportunity through hybrid learning during normal times**

The innovations produced in response to Covid-19 should not be lost when life returns to normal. Hybrid learning presents an innovative opportunity to expand educational opportunity at low cost. It can allow districts to offer a greater range of subjects than is possible in person (e.g., Chinese); home schoolers to use professional educators in subjects in which they may feel less comfortable (e.g., advanced STEM); and students who learn better with technology to be more fully integrated into education. Students regardless of district should have access to a catalog of online courses that are treated equivalent to in-person courses with respect to academic credit and requirements. In addition to high school courses, courses offered by universities and (community) colleges could be offered to capable students online.

### **Make the sharing of noneducational services the default**

Municipal governments and municipal school districts can and have realized savings through the sharing of noneducation services, e.g., finance, HR, IT, facilities maintenance. However, examples remain the exception rather than the rule. This is because service sharing is legally an ‘opt-in’: services are not shared unless both parties agree. Reversing this assumption, so that intramunicipal sharing of noneducation services is required unless both the municipal legislative body and municipal school board agree not to, would accelerate service consolidation and deliver savings. Noneducation service sharing should be the default. (Require an ‘opt-out’ rather than ‘opt-in.’)

### **Consolidate special districts**

The 446 special districts in Connecticut greatly outnumber the 169 municipalities in the state. Some have outlived their original purpose, to provide a service that the host municipality did not (e.g., fire protection); others exist because state law does not allow municipalities to vary mill rates by district or taxpayer to account for differences in service level (e.g., public water and sewer vs. private well and septic). In some cases, a public service may be split among several independent taxing districts in a municipality. To reduce administrative duplication, and improve efficiency, municipalities should be empowered, at their discretion, to absorb noneducational special districts they host, or to compel the districts to merge; to facilitate this, all municipalities should be enabled to set different tax rates to reflect differences in service provision.

### **Develop a municipal master agreement for service sharing**

Legal, contractual, and logistical questions that attend efforts at service sharing often result in those efforts falling apart. Development and adoption of a master agreement that would a) act as a framework for service sharing, b) lay out a process to establish and govern sharing arrangements, c) cover the range of municipal services, and d) be authoritatively and definitively vetted with respect to Connecticut law would decrease the complexity and uncertainty of service sharing, increasing the number, breadth, and impact of projects that make it to completion.

### **Enable regional approaches in state mandates**

Many of the mandates that are required of municipalities lend may be more efficiently met on a regional basis. These include, for instance, collection of vital statistics, issuance of dog licenses, and development of affordable housing plans. While state law enables municipalities to perform any of these functions jointly through a COG, whether such an arrangement would be deemed to satisfy a mandate is a gray area. Clarifying that municipalities may satisfy a range of mandates through collective action would enable more regional and share approaches.

### **Devolve administration of more state grants to the COGs along the lines of LOTCIP**

The Local Transportation Improvement Program (LoTCIP), which delegates project selection and oversight to the COGs, has been a success, delivering projects faster and more efficiently than earlier, state-run programs. Other programs, including in the area of transportation, may benefit from a regional approach and should be considered for devolution to the COGs.

### **Allow specific changes to municipal charters with regard to regionalism, without opening the entire charter for revision**

Some charters contain language that impedes service sharing. While this language may be addressed through charter revision, the cost, complexity, and unpredictability of the process often means that the language persists. Municipalities should be able to amend specific sections of their charter without opening the entire charter for review.

## 10 Appendix: Expenditure of Regional Services Grant funds

WestCOG utilizes its Regional Services Grant (RSG) funds in accordance with its approved RSG Spending Plan, the state fiscal year 2020 version of which is summarized below. Due to delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the timeline and \$177,798 in funding for three studies noted below were extended to December 31, 2020. WestCOG is on track to carry out its RSG Spending Plan for state fiscal year 2021 within the fiscal year, assuming no interruptions to funding or process.

Activity	Cost	Notes
Public safety study	\$150,000	Contract ends on 12/31/2020.
Regional GIS	\$62,731	
Reg. IT architecture	\$131,979	
County equivalency	\$65,000	Contract ends on 12/31/2020.
GIS/analytics (muni. tech assistance)	\$32,326	
Regional Plan	\$11,617	
Municipal Services Modernization	\$134,273	Contract ends on 12/31/2020.
CEDS update	\$5,484	
ED coordination	\$5,484	
DEMHS	\$3,656	
Annual report	\$2,812	
Direct charge	\$30,000	
Transportation planning	\$20,000	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$655,362</b>	