

Western Connecticut

COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS



2022 ANNUAL REPORT

For the fiscal year July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022

Western Connecticut Council of Governments 2022 Annual Report

For the fiscal year July 1, 2021, through June 30, 2022

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

- Summarize the expenditure of such grant funds. **[See Section 9.]**
- Describe any regional program, project or initiative currently provided or planned by the council. **[See Sections 2 through 7.]**
- 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 8.]**

1 WestCOG in 2022

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 the chief elected officials (mayors and first selectmen) of the municipalities within a planning region designated by the State of Connecticut.

COGs serve as 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 data analysis, from grant management to zoning assistance. WestCOG and its predecessors have served the region for over 50 years.

Following a decade of preparation, COGs are set to be recognized as county equivalents by the U.S. Census Bureau. County equivalency will result in the Census aligning its data products to the regional geographies designated by Connecticut (the planning regions). This change will improve the relevance and usefulness of Census data to COGs, providing the informational basis needed for the data-driven regional planning, policy, and programming of the 21st century.

Members

WestCOG consists of eighteen member municipalities:

Municipality	Chief Elected Official	COG Office
Bethel	Matt Knickerbocker	
Bridgewater	Curtis Read	
Brookfield	Tara Carr	
Danbury	Dean Esposito	
Darien	Monica McNally	
Greenwich	Fred Camillo	
New Canaan	Kevin Moynihan	Secretary
New Fairfield	Pat Del Monaco	
New Milford	Pete Bass	
Newtown	Dan Rosenthal	
Norwalk	Harry Rilling	
Redding	Julia Pemberton	Vice Chair
Ridgefield	Rudy Marconi	Chair
Sherman	Don Lowe	
Stamford	Caroline Simmons	
Weston	Samantha Nestor	
Westport	Jennifer Tooker	
Wilton	Lynne Vanderslice	Treasurer

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

Staff

WestCOG employed 13 persons in fiscal year 2022:

Title	Name
Executive Director	Francis R. Pickering
Deputy Director	Michael Towle
Finance Manager	Victoria Ricks
Office Manager	Cricket Carpenter
Senior Project Manager	Kevin Mahoney
Senior Project Manager	Charles Vidich
Project Manager	Betsy Paynter
Transportation Director	Kristin Hadjstylian
Senior Planner	Todd Fontanella
Senior Planner	Kristin Floberg
Planner	Nicole Sullivan
Senior Data Scientist	Nick Trabka
Senior Data Scientist	Tucker Beckett

Performance of existing regional programs, projects, or initiatives

WestCOG's regional services efforts have operated as expected during the current fiscal year, with the following caveats:

- **Challenges in recruiting personnel.** The tightest labor market in half a century, together with low production by the education system of persons with applicable qualifications, has made it extremely difficult to fill positions. The resulting vacancies limited the ability of government at all levels – which includes the COG – to deliver. WestCOG has not experienced staff attrition, so the impact of the talent shortage has been confined to delays on new programs/projects. (Existing services have not been affected.)
- **Challenges in engaging consultants.** Increased national demand for professional services have made it harder to find consultants. WestCOG's use of third-party, subject matter experts for many projects has increased the agency's exposure to the negative impacts of this shortage, with many projects securing one qualified bid, or failing to secure any bids at all. While this has not resulted in substantive changes to work plans, it has delayed the new programs/projects and increased the burden on COG staff.
- **External review/approval processes.** Slow reviews and approvals at the federal and state level for new spending have compounded procurement delays, in one case delaying project launch by more than two years. While these processes may offer benefits in some cases, they have not resulted in material changes to any WestCOG programs/projects.
- **Workload explosion.** New laws (ARPA, IIJA, IRA) have transformed the federal funding, providing unprecedented array of grant opportunities. In response, WestCOG has dramatically expanded grant assistance to its members; however, the sheer number, diversity, and value of grants available exceed the current resources of the COG. To fully take advantage of the grant opportunities available – applying every year, to every grant the region is eligible for, will require additional resources (2-3 dedicated regional grant coordinators/managers).

Startup delays aside, projects have run according to schedule and are expected to meet targets. Descriptions of specific projects may be found in the following pages.

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 and public health coordination
- Economic development and recovery
- Public safety services and facilities
- Infrastructure finance
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and IT architecture
- Broadband network
- Animal control
- Waste management
- Drinking water quality assistance
- Housing affordability planning
- Sustainability planning
- Grant funding report
- Strategic planning
- ARPA project coordination
- Flood Grant Services
- Fee Schedule

As noted in the following pages, all of these activities have made progress over the last fiscal year.

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:

- Tax and fee portal, enabling payment bundling across local departments and municipalities and automatic billing, with a shared payment processor (for lower interchange rates)
- 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

2 Regional Services

Regional Viewer

WestCOG provides an interactive, online regional GIS web viewer for municipalities and members of the public. The viewer maps property boundaries, property data, and a variety of planning data. 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, query/search tools, as well as a link to assessor property cards. Parcel and property data are updated at least annually. The viewer can stand in for or substitute for a municipal GIS viewer.

WestCOG is planned to enhance its web viewer in the next year with an advanced search tool to allow for property search on property attributes beyond street address (e.g. “select all properties with two stories off of main street”).

★ [WestCOG's Regional Viewer](#)

Regional Firing Range Implementation Plan

In conjunction with Winbourne Consulting LLC, WestCOG has been coordinating efforts among local Police Departments and elected officials to implement recommendations to construct a regional Firearm Training Facility. These efforts are based off of the Regional Public Safety Study to evaluate options for the sharing of public safety facilities and/or services. Progress in the implementation process is provided in WestCOG's Firearm Training Facility Blueprint. WestCOG continues to pursue grant funding to support this endeavor.

★ [Western Connecticut Firearm Training Facility Project Blueprint](#)

Regional Waste Management

WestCOG retained the services of Barton & Loguidice Engineers (B&L) to develop a Regional Waste Management Study. The study involved interaction with an advisory committee consisting of people with expertise in the respective area and/or responsibility for implementation. Recommendations for implementation were developed with consultation of and involvement of the committee and of WestCOG. Responsibility for implementation of the recommendations will be a local responsibility, with WestCOG playing a supporting role if requested. The study was released in July 2021.

★ [Regional Waste Management Study](#)

Regional Animal Control

WestCOG, in partnership with RFA LLC, evaluated the potential for sharing of animal control facilities and services in Western Connecticut. Based on analysis of existing facilities and operations, the study provided a list of recommendations for adoption. The study was released in August 2021.

★ [Regional Animal Control Study](#)

Municipal Data Tool

WestCOG worked with consultant Axiomatic to develop a framework for web tools for access to and visualization of municipal data. This project is now in cooperation with the State of Connecticut who will be building out visualization tools with Axiomatics' assistance. When complete, the tools will facilitate data interpretation and benchmarking so, for instance, communities can more easily see where they stand with respect to their peers. The data behind this project are derived from CAMA data collection and CAMA standardization efforts (also discussed in this report). WestCOG will provide coordination and guidance for the State of CT. This is expected to go live in FY 2023.

Regional Fee Schedule

The Regional Fee Schedule compiles the wide array of fees utilized by WestCOG municipalities into a single searchable database. The intention of this project is to allow municipalities to review and compare fees and to find best practices. WestCOG is now creating a study to identify trends and recommendations for communities and their corresponding departments. This data along with a summary report is planned to be updated annually.

★ [Fee Schedule Webpage](#)

★ [Fee Schedule Inventory](#)

Broadband Implementation

To address the demand for improved broadband infrastructure demands, WestCOG is exploring options to potentially adapt previously successful models, with the goal of providing fast, reliable, cost-effective Internet access to the region's residents and businesses. WestCOG, in partnership with EntryPoint is developing feasibility studies for member communities to prepare for expected federal funds for building fiber networks. Broadband Feasibility Studies are expected to be completed in FY2023.

★ [Broadband Implementation Webpage](#)

Flood Mitigation

The heightened intensity of storm events has led to an increase in property damages, particularly in coastal areas and along waterways. In an effort to reduce the vulnerability of communities to climate change effects, federal funding programs related to damages/losses have been expanded. However, resource limitations at the local, regional and state levels can hinder or prevent grant funding from reaching communities in need. WestCOG has contracted with Dewberry Engineers, Inc. to establish a Flood Mitigation and Project Management Assistance Program. This Program is a one-year pilot that is offering technical assistance to property owners in participating WestCOG communities.

★ [Flood Mitigation Webpage](#)

Policy Priorities

Each year WestCOG coordinates with member municipalities to define policy priorities and develops a list of WestCOG's legislative priorities hosted on WestCOG's website. Also

included is WestCOG's testimony regarding various bills running through the house and senate. This service will be updated and maintained annually.

★ [Policy Priorities Webpage](#)

Data Science

WestCOG provides regional web-based analytics, mapping services, technical support, and training for WestCOG member communities as well for WestCOG's own planning initiatives.

Additionally, WestCOG develops and maintains 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

★ [Data Downloads Site](#)

★ [GIS Data HUB Site](#)

★ [Data Science Website](#)

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 2022. 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.

Photos of the Region

WestCOG began to host photos of the region on a FLICKR account in 2019. 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. Additional photos are added annually.

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

3 Regional Planning

WestCOG's Strategic Plan

WestCOG's Council adopted a five-year (2022-2027) strategic vision that outlines an expansive vision and mission with actionable strategies for achieving the organization's top-line goals. WestCOG will utilize the newly defined mission and vision to drive its efforts moving forward.

The Vision. Our communities work harmoniously to ensure all residents enjoy the highest levels of satisfaction for quality of life and economic prosperity in the Northeast.

The Mission. We work collaboratively with government and civic leaders to provide exceptional public services for Western Connecticut.

★ [DOWNLOAD | WestCOG Strategic Vision and Plan](#)

★ [WEBSITE | About WestCOG](#)

Regional Affordable Housing Toolbox and Municipal Annexes

In recognition of the regional nature of housing, WestCOG developed a comprehensive Regional Affordable Housing Toolbox. The Toolbox includes a review of the past efforts to address affordable housing in the region and state; a housing market analysis; housing needs assessment; review of incentives and disincentives; land and services availability; and portfolio of strategies that can be used to increase affordable housing developments in the region and state. Eight municipalities opted to have a specific municipal annex that outlines the strategies they are pursuing to increase affordable housing in town over the next ten years; the annexes and toolbox meet their requirements under CGS §8-30j.

★ [Affordable Housing Website](#)

★ [Western Connecticut Regional Affordable Housing Toolbox](#)

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 114 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:

- Public Act 21-29 Summary (September 2021)
- Regional Affordable Housing Plan (September 2021)
- Open Space Inventory (December 2021)
- Riparian Corridor Protections (December 2021)
- Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan (March 2022)

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. In FY 2021, WestCOG issued 15 letters of support and consistency for:

- Brookfield, Danbury, Norwalk, and Norwalk River Valley Trail: CTDEEP Recreational Trails Grant Program, October 2021
- Stamford, CTDOT: FTA Low or No Emission Grant Program, May 2022
- Stamford: CTDEEP Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program, October 2021
- Norwalk: RAISE Grant Program, March 2022
- Norwalk Maritime Aquarium: ARPA Tourism Grant, January 2022
- Norwalk: CT Community Challenge grant program, January 2022

4 Transportation Planning

Metropolitan planning, including MTP 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 Metropolitan Transportation (MTP) and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The two MPOs functionally operate as one region, with joint and concurrent meetings and shared documents. The federal FY2021-2024 TIPs for both MPOs were endorsed on October 15, 2020. The TIPs for Western Connecticut are programmed to deliver over \$2.7 billion in transportation investment during the federal FY2021-2024 period across the region. The federal 2019-2045 MTPs (formerly known as the Long Range Transportation Plans) were endorsed on April 18, 2019. The development of the MTPs for the 2023-2050 planning horizon started in January of 2022 and will be completed in the spring of 2023. The MTPs purpose is to identify what investments and strategies are needed to improve and balance mobility within the region.

WestCOG also plays a role in identifying and selecting projects under federal and state programs. Staff have provided technical support in grant programs including Congestion Management and Air Quality, Transportation Alternatives, Safe Streets and Roads for All, FTA Section 5310, Reconnecting Communities, and provided guidance on the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)..

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 \$109 million in LOTICIP funding (state FY14-23). WestCOG has committed to funding 48 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.

WestCOG previously conducted a qualifications-based procurement for municipal Task Based Transportation Engineering Services (“on call” assignments). WestCOG maintains a process and guidance document (“[Municipal Guide](#)”, available on WestCOG’s Transportation Resources webpage) by which municipalities can draw from a pool of regionally prequalified consultants for transportation engineering services, providing an option to save time and expense in contracting.

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 9 turning movement counts this year that were used in project design and safety analysis for the municipalities in the region.

WestCOG has 3 trail counting infrared devices and a processing application. Staff 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 can be requested for specific studies by municipalities.

WestCOG also continued conducting quarterly utilization counts for commuter park-and-ride and rail station parking lots across the region. This data was made available to the public through an interactive web application which will be regularly updated with new data.

★ [WestCOG Commuter Lot Explorer](#)

Safe Streets and Roads for All Grant

In June 2021, WestCOG endorsed the Regional Transportation Safety Plan which identified locations in the region with higher frequencies of crashes involving fatalities, serious injuries, and non-motorized users. countermeasures were recommended for each location to improve safety. This September, WestCOG submitted a grant application to the Safe Streets and Roads for All program requesting approximately \$50 million in funding for systemic safety improvements across the region as well as two larger corridor projects in Stamford and Norwalk. If awarded, these projects will help develop a safer, more sustainable, better connected, and equitable transportation system in western Connecticut.

★ [Regional Transportation Safety Plan](#)

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.

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
- Multi-State Resiliency Working Group
- TRANSCOM
- Active Transportation Steering Committee
- Safety Circuit Rider Advisory Committee

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. Staff have continued coordination with FTA on the grant administration process and an RFQ seeking a consultant to complete the study was issued in September 2022. The study is expected to begin this winter and will take approximately two years to complete.

Rail Improvements – Quiet Zones

WestCOG has received approval to conduct the New Canaan Branch Noise Pollution Abatement Feasibility Study involving the municipalities of Stamford, New Canaan, and Darien. This study will 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. A consultant has been selected to conduct the study and is expected to begin this fall and will take approximately one year to complete.

Route 1 Corridor Master Plan Study

CTDOT has awarded funding for the Route 1 (Connecticut Avenue & Van Buren Avenue) Corridor Master Plan Study in the City of Norwalk. The purpose of the study is to provide a comprehensive transportation and land-use plan by identifying short-term strategies for implementation that will improve mobility, safety, and accessibility for all users and address all modes of transportation utilized within the corridor. Large scale, long-term improvements in the corridor will be identified and will include a design framework for future land use. WestCOG will oversee project management of this study in close coordination with the City of Norwalk. A scope of work has been developed and the study is expected to begin in 2023.

5 Environmental Planning

Zoning for Water Quality

Following an explosion in scientific evidence pointing to the importance of riparian buffers as a means to reduce nonpoint source pollutants, Public Act 21-29 expands the responsibility of zoning commissions in protecting the water quality of Long Island Sound from 24 coastal municipalities to all 169 municipalities of the state. In expanding local authority – and responsibility – over coastal water quality, the law requires broader development and implementation of zoning strategies to control the discharge of a wide range of water pollutants – including “dead zone” causing nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus.

WestCOG issued a comprehensive report to assist municipalities in meeting this new mandate. The report includes an extensive survey of current regulations among Connecticut municipalities and in peer states in the area of water quality and provides sample regulations for consideration. WestCOG presented the report publicly and distributed it to potentially interested parties.

★ [The Case for Riparian Corridor Protections: Zoning Strategies to Reduce Pollution of Inland Waters and Resultant Hypoxia of Long Island Sound](#)

Municipal Stormwater Support Service (MS4)

WestCOG provides MS4 compliance support services for interested municipalities in the region. This past year WestCOG performed a pilot study in Brookfield to develop a stormwater data collection process. The study surveyed 240 catch basins and mapped over 17,000 feet of drain line. WestCOG offers support for communities to set up their own data collection efforts. WestCOG is developing a website and resources to be hosted for municipalities to implement their own data collection program.

Open Space Inventory

WestCOG secured funding from The Nature Conservancy to develop an open space inventory with the intention to incentivize communities to utilize the data for the flood resiliency planning. Current inventories of open space are severely outdated and require substantial effort to update. Additionally, many open space inventories do not collect open space information with the detail necessary to document and verify properties within the FEMA’s Community Rating System (CRS) program, which gives discounts on flood insurance. The project will address this, creating a readily available and easily calculated estimate of CRS creditable open space in Western Connecticut and in Fairfield County. The plan is expected for completion in FY2022 and will include a process for regular updates.

Sustainable CT

WestCOG Hosted Sustainable CT Fellows providing office space, resources, and professional development. 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 related projects.

Open Space Inventory Completed

With funding from the Nature conservancy, WestCOG was able to collect open space data; modernize the data for Sustainable CT and FEMA's CRS Programs. The new form recognizes the variety of protection (and lack of protection) for around~15,000 open space properties in both the WestCOG Region and Fairfield County. This update arrives with an annual maintenance schedule to keep the data relevant moving forward.

WestCOG is also working to standardize the data schema used in this effort (originally created by Sustainable CT) as a statewide data standard. Approval of the Schema goes before the CT GIS Network during their February Meeting.

More information on viewing, downloading, and using the data can be found on the WestCOG website.

★ [Open Space Inventory Website](#)

6 Economic Development

Western Connecticut Economic Development District

The Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD) is a state and federally 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.

★ [WCEDD Annual Reports](#)

CEDS 2023 - 2028 Update

Every five years WestCOG, the housing agency for the Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD), is required to update its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The process reviews and updates the existing CEDS using a team of regional stakeholders from economic sectors across the WestCOG region. The new CEDS provides an updated list of goals and strategies aimed to foster sustainable and equitable economic development in the WestCOG Planning Region. The purpose of the CEDS is to direct and promote economic development funding through the EDA. By statute, the CEDS must be updated every five years and progress is reported annually to the EDA. This report is expected for completion by the close of 2022.

Next-Generation Regional Sector Partnership

In conjunction with the Stamford Partnership, WestCOG developed a partnership of “tech-enabled, data-dependent” businesses in southwestern Connecticut. The partnership will serve as a vehicle for businesses in this critical sector to address workforce and other competitiveness needs as a group, and in conjunction with institutions and organizations active in education, workforce development, and economic development. WestCOG's role in the Next-Generation Regional Sector Partnership is informed by the WCEDD's CEDS, detailed above.

EDA Planning Partnership Program

WestCOG's WCEDD was awarded a Planning Partnership grant through the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). The grant will provide annual funding to assist WestCOG in implementing and maintaining its CEDS. As part of the upkeep for this program WestCOG is required to maintain Annual Reports reflecting WCEDD performance.

EDA Awards CARES Act Funds

WestCOG applied through the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) for CARES Act funds to fund the continuation of Long-Term Recovery process, re-tooling of the CEDS to address economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, and development of a regional strategy for broadband networks.

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

WestCOG continued to provide COVID-19 support during FY2022. WestCOG staff coordinated with DEMHS and their Long-Term Recovery Program, convened regular meetings of the region's CEOs, and provided legal counsel to the region. These activities enabled the region's municipalities to coordinate their response to the emergency, providing them with consistent information, vital advice, a process to identify matters of shared concern, and to elevate them where needed for state action. This cooperation also resulted in cost savings using shared (rather than duplicative) resources such as a single attorney.

Hazard Mitigation Plan Update

WestCOG, along with its member municipalities, developed its first regional Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) for all eighteen members. This plan, which was developed from an extensive analysis and stakeholder consultation, identifies actions and strategies for communities to reduce impacts from various disaster scenarios. An HMP helps communities understand risks, take steps to reduce natural hazard impacts, and makes them eligible for certain FEMA funds.

WestCOG has also developed an 'HMP Web Application' which allows public access to visualize the extent of the natural hazards detailed in the HMP along with the location of proposed HMP strategies. The application is an extension of WestCOG's HMP and allows for engaged public activity. These modifications are integrated into WestCOG's Map Viewer.

★ [Multi-Jurisdiction Hazard Mitigation Plan Update](#)

★ [Hazard Mitigation Project Map Viewer](#)

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. This effort is aligned with the strategies outlined in WestCOG's Hazard Mitigation Plan. WestCOG will be working with CIRCA and partner COGs to coordinate efforts.

Emergency Service Function Transportation (ESF1)

As part of supporting the DEMHS regions, WestCOG coordinates with transportation planners from NHCOG, 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.

A Status Report on Municipal Flood Prevention Standards

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requires local governments to participate in a federal flood prevention program to make homeowners eligible for federal flood insurance. All of Connecticut's municipalities have adopted some form of flood prevention regulations – either as ordinances adopted by their legislative bodies or as zoning and subdivision regulations adopted by their planning and zoning commissions. WestCOG developed a report that summarizes all municipal flood prevention regulations in Connecticut to identify best practices and areas where municipal regulations have failed to keep pace with rapidly changing meteorological and climate change conditions. This report reviews current flood prevention administrative practices, the degree to which compensatory flood storage policies have been adopted consistent with a 2004 state law, current municipal base flood elevation standards, and policies governing septic system leaching fields within the 100-year floodplain and near watercourses.

★ [Flooding in Connecticut Flood Prevention Standards Report](#)

8 Recommendations for Legislative Action

The following recommendations would advance service sharing and delivery cost savings. Where recent legislative action has been taken, it is so demarked.

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

The Local Transportation Improvement Program (LoTCIP) has been a success, delivering projects via the COGs more quickly than was possible through the state. Other programs may benefit from and should be considered for a similar approach. The 2021 budget implementer included an option for the devolution of the Small Town Economic Assistance Program, Main Street Investment Fund, Intertown Capital Equipment, and Local Capital Improvement Program to the COGs; Connecticut should take advantage of this option.

Lower self-imposed hurdles to obtaining federal funds

Recent federal legislation (IIJA and IRA) vastly expands federal grant funding. Most of these grants require a nonfederal cost share (aka ‘match’) of 20%. Finding a matching funds for federal grants will be a limiting factor on the state’s ability to benefit from these investments. To maximize the state’s access to these opportunities, the state should lower internal hurdles to federal grants. These include actions to:

- Allow federal funds to meet local match requirements on state grants. Doing so will encourage applications to federal grants, bringing new money into Connecticut, and multiply the ROI for state funds (\$4 federal for each \$1 state is a better deal than 50¢ or less local for each \$1 state).
- Align state definitions of economic disadvantage and distress with federal ones. Conflicting definitions make state applications uncompetitive or ineligible under federal funding sources, thus limiting application to – and funding from – federal programs.
- Permit in-kind (non-cash) matches. State agencies at times attach a condition to federal funds that flow through them disallowing in-kind matches. This prevents funds recipients from counting existing, in-kind expenditures as matches and forces them to dedicate a cash match, reducing the funds available for other uses (such as matching additional federal grants).

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.

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.

Expand digitization of building records to property records

Special Act 22-14 established a working group to advance the digitization of records associated with the State Building Code. Moving to digital workflows can reduce the costs, delays, and errors associated with paper-based processes, while enabling the data produced to be used by building officials and departments to be used for new purposes (e.g., to create high-resolution geospatial databases and to support comprehensive analyses/modeling).

This modernization effort should be expanded to cover property records, such as paper deeds. Digital land records reform, where it has been implemented, has yielded substantial improvements in records administration (including elimination of municipal vaults) and in property sales, where it has decreased the cost associated with property sale – significantly reducing the closing costs that are often a financial barrier for families looking to buy a house.

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.

Facilitate consolidation of 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.

New for 2021: Special Act 21-12 begins to address this by studying the consolidation of fire districts.

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.

New for 2021: PA 21-2 (the budget implementer) requires the state to establish a commission to study remote learning and to plan to implement a statewide remote school. Positive as these developments are, they will underdeliver on their potential if they fail to consider the remote and hybrid learning as a means to provide opportunity for learning individualized to students' needs, aptitudes, and interests beyond what traditional, in-person can feasibly offer.

Make the sharing of noneducational services the default

Local governments and school districts can realize savings through sharing noneducation services, e.g., finance, HR, IT, facilities maintenance. However, sharing remains the exception rather than the rule. This is because services are not shared by default. Reversing this assumption, so that intramunicipal sharing of noneducation services is the default unless both the local legislative body and school board agree not to, would accelerate service consolidation and deliver savings. (That is, Connecticut should require an 'opt-out' rather than 'opt-in'.)

9 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 2022 version of which is summarized below. WestCOG is on track to carry out its RSG Spending Plan for state fiscal year 2023 within the fiscal year, assuming no interruptions to funding or process.

Task	Cost
Municipal Technical Assistance	\$76,633.77
Regional Economic Development	\$51,949.28
Regional IT/Systems Architecture	\$39,451.65
Regional Land Use	\$130,266.30
Regional Environmental Quality and Public Health	\$53,330.17
Administration and Misc.	\$13,003.49
TOTAL	\$364,634.66