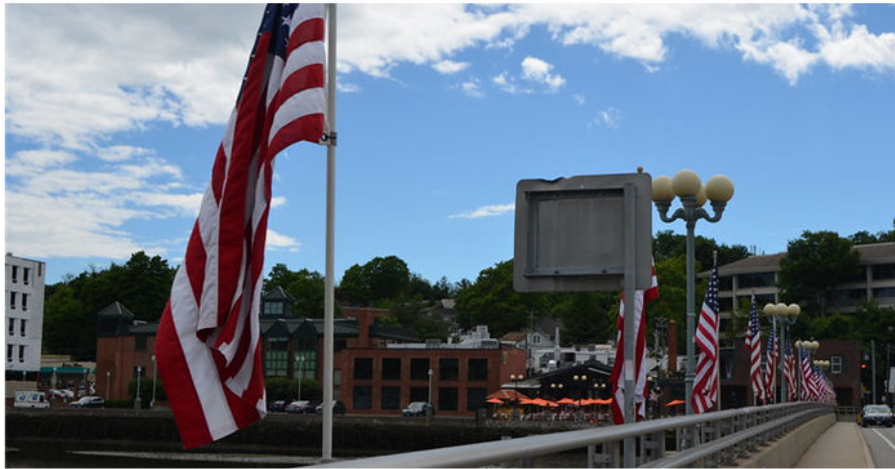


Western Connecticut

COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS



ANNUAL REPORT

For the fiscal year July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023

Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2022 – 2023

Western Connecticut Council of Governments

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

- Summarize the expenditure of such grant funds. **[See Section IX.]**
- Describe any regional program, project or initiative currently provided or planned by the council.
[See Sections II through XII.]
- Review the performance of any existing regional program, project or initiative relative to its initial goals and objectives.
[See Section I.]
- 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 I.]
- Provide recommendations for legislative action concerning potential impediments to the regionalization of services.
[See Section VIII.]

I. WestCOG in FY2022-2023

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 and have done so for over 50 years. At the direction of its board, and funding permitting, COGs can provide a range of services. COGs are now 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 improves the relevance and usefulness of Census data to COGs, providing the informational basis needed for the data-driver regional planning, policy, and programming of the 21st century.

Members

WestCOG consists of eighteen member municipalities that collectively account for approximately 620,550 residents, making the Region the second most populous in Connecticut. (*Source: 2020 census redistricting data*)

Municipality	Chief Elected Official	COG Office
Bethel	Dan Carter	
Bridgewater	Curtis Read	
Brookfield	Tara Carr	
Danbury	Dean Esposito	
Darien	Monica McNally	
Greenwich	Fred Camillo	
New Canaan	Kevin Moynihan	Secretary
New Fair-	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

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
Transportation Director	Kristin Hadjstylianos
Senior Project Manager	Kevin Mahoney
Senior Project Manager	Charles Vidich
Project Manager	Betsy Paynter
Principal Planner	Todd Fontanella
Senior Planner	Kristin Floberg
Senior Planner	Mike Wilson
Planner	Nicole Sullivan
Data Scientist	Nick Trabka
Data Scientist	Tucker Beckett

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). All current FY projects are on track and, barring unforeseen disruptions, expected to meet targets. Descriptions of specific projects may be found in the following pages.

Primary Challenges

Limited Access to Grant Management Employees. A surge in federal grant activity has spurred a large demand for grant writers and grant management staff to navigate the increased funding opportunities. WestCOG has made efforts to acquire additional grant staff without any meaningful developments.

Resource limitations. The larger and more complex the region, the broader and deeper the opportunities for service sharing are, as are the analytical and logistical challenges in evaluating, preparing for, and launching such services. Under normal conditions, resources would suffice for gradual development of shared services; a faster approach would require significantly more. Given the urgency associated with new federal opportunities (deadlines are aggressive), WestCOG anticipates that the largest growth in its regional programs in the current fiscal year will be in coordinating the response to these opportunities.

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:

- Grant Support Services
- 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
- 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

II. 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. The viewer is enhanced annually with updated datasets and features, this year emergency management layers were added.

★ [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 Implementation Plan. WestCOG has secured grant funding and now is coordinating with communities to implement this project.

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

Structure and Improvement Description

WestCOG initiated an RFP to determine the property card attributes that pertain to the presence and dimensions, and as applicable, any other exterior characteristics, of structures and surfaces ("improvements") that have a material impact on assessments and may be accurately determined using the flyover data provided by the State of Connecticut and, as needed, any other information sources. WestCOG hopes to produce a report of estimated corrected values for each discrepant attribute, with the option to import or merge in selected or, as desired, all attributes into the respective property card and CAMA system.

Regional Waste Management

Following release of the Regional Waste Management Feasibility Study prepared by Barton & Loguidice Engineers (B&L) in 2021, the staff continued to monitor opportunities for implementation of its recommendations. Currently, the staff is participating in a multi-region Waste Movement (Transportation) Study being conducted by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC). The staff is also participating in CTDEEP's Connecticut Coalition for Sustainable Materials Management (CCSMM) initiative to stay informed

on statewide waste issues and applied for state grant funding to support administrative tasks associated with creating a waste authority for several communities in the southwestern portion of the WestCOG region.

★ [Regional Waste Management Study](#)

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 updates this fee data annually.

★ [Fee Schedule Webpage](#)

★ [Fee Schedule Inventory](#)

Flood Mitigation

The heightened intensity of storm events has led to an increase in property damage, particularly in coastal areas and along waterways. 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. In 2022, WestCOG contracted with Dewberry Engineers, Inc. to establish a Flood Mitigation and Project Management Assistance Program. This Program was a one-year pilot that, due to interest, has been extended to continue offering technical assistance to municipalities and 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](#)

III. Regional Planning

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 124 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:

- Flooding in Connecticut: A Status Report on Municipal Flood Prevention Standards
- 2023-2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan

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 2023, WestCOG issued 15 letters of support and consistency for:

- Norwalk Aquarium, ARPA Tourism Grant, January 2023.
- Bethel, Communities Challenge Grant, April 2023.
- Brookfield, Greenwich-Stamford, Newtown, Norwalk, Stamford, New Canaan, and Wilton: CTDEEP Recreational Trails Grant Program, February 2023
- Stamford, Ridgefield, Greenwich, New Canaan, and Norwalk: CTDOT Community Connectivity Grant Program, June 2023
- Stamford, and CTDOT: FTA Low or No Emission Grant Program, March 2023
- Norwalk: RAISE Grant Program, February 2023
- Bethel: CT Community Challenge Grant Program, April 2023
- CTDOT: USDOT Wildlife Crossings Grant Program, August 2023
- CTDOT: Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program, March 2023
- Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy: DEEP Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program, September 2022
- Norwalk Transit District: CTDOT Microtransit Pilot Program, April 2023

IV. 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 Plan (MTP) and a 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 2023-2050 MTPs (formerly known as the Long Range Transportation Plans) were endorsed on March 16, 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 the solicitations for FTA Section 5310 applications, Matching Grant Program, and corridor study applications.

Public Involvement Plan (PIP)

As host to the Housatonic Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (HVMPO) and South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (SWRMPO), WestCOG opened a 45 day public comment period for the draft Public Involvement Plan (PIP). Formerly known as the Title VI & Public Participation Plan, the PIP outlines strategies for public engagement in planning opportunities. The draft PIP was endorsed at the HVMPO and SWRMPO meeting on December 15, 2022.

Public comments on the draft PIP were accepted from October 29, 2022 to December 12, 2022 by mail, email, or telephone. Additionally, a public information meeting was held on November 8, 2022 at the Comstock Community Center in Wilton, CT. A virtual option was also provided to receive comments at the meeting. Legal Notices were issued in five

regional newspapers, two of which provided translations to Spanish and one to Portuguese. Press releases were forwarded to local papers, Municipal Clerks, and posted on WestCOG social media.

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, WestCOG received over \$130 million in LOTICIP funding (state FY14-25). 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 conducted a qualifications-based procurement for municipal "on call" assignments and released a Task Based Transportation Engineering Services - Municipal Guide (available on WestCOG's Transportation Resources webpage). This process allows municipalities to draw from a pool of regionally prequalified consultants for transportation engineering services, providing an option to save time and expense in contracting.

Congestion

A Congestion Management Process (CMP) is required for any Metropolitan Transportation Organization that includes

an urbanized area exceeding 200,000 people known as a Transportation Management Area (TMA). Areas of both Metropolitan Planning Organizations fall in the Bridgeport-Stamford Transportation Management Area along with the neighboring MPOs - Greater Bridgeport, Valley, and Central Naugatuck Valley. WestCOG, along with TMA partners, cooperatively developed a Congestion Management Process for 2023 that is consistent with guidance from FHWA and was done concurrently with the development of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan.

★ [2023 Congestion Management Process](#)

Congestion Reduction Study

WestCOG is conducting a study to identify the most congested locations on surface streets (non-freeways) and to evaluate potential mitigation projects that can be initiated and advanced either by municipalities or CT DOT.

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 40 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 have 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 (SS4A) Grant

In July of 2023, WestCOG staff submitted an application to the USDOT under the SS4A discretionary grant opportunity. The application requested federal funds to implement approximately 93 small-scale safety projects across the Region and include:

- Traffic Signal Retroreflective Backplates
- Installation of Dynamic Speed Feedback Signs
- Adding or Replacing Signage
- High Visibility Crosswalks
- Restriping Crosswalks
- Striping Edge Lines
- Adding or Restriping Pavement Marking

These projects were identified in the WestCOG Regional Transportation Safety Plan (RTSP), which was endorsed in June 2021. The purpose of the RTSP is to reduce fatalities and injuries by outlining effective safety measures to reduce potential future crashes.

★ [Regional Transportation Safety Plan](#)

Bicycle Planning

WestCOG developed a Regional Bicycle Plan that proposed a connected bicycle network in the region. The plan built on the recommendations from existing studies and supports regional corridors that will become the “spine” of a nonmotorized transportation network. The bike plan was completed and endorsed as part of the 2023-2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan on March 16, 2023.

★ [Regional Bicycle 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:

- Active Transportation Steering Committee
- Connecticut Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board
- Connecticut Association for Community Transportation
- Danbury I-84 Project Advisory Committee
- I-95 Stamford Planning and Environment Linkages Project Advisory Committee
- Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee
- Metropolitan Area Planning Forum
- Multi-State Freight Working Group
- Multi-State Resiliency Working Group
- Norwalk 7/15 Interchange Project Advisory Committee
- Safety Circuit Rider Advisory Committee
- Strategic Highway Safety Plan Steering Committee
- TRANSCOM

RAISE Grant

The United States Department of Transportation has awarded \$4,528,000 for the Western Connecticut Regional Trail Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Project through the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program. USDOT’s support will fund 80 percent of the total project cost (\$5,660,000). The project will complete planning and engineering work for numerous sections of an approximately 55-mile multi-use trail between Norwalk, Wilton, Redding, Ridgefield, Danbury Brookfield, and New Milford. Once complete, this will connect the Norwalk River Valley Trail to the Still River Greenway and the New Milford River Trail. An extension westward to the Maybrook Trail in New York State is also planned. The trail system will directly benefit underserved communities connecting urban and rural areas, shorelands and forest, and pedestrian and bicycle transportation to parks, schools, and community centers. The project will serve as a major catalyst for economic development in Western Connecticut, both by facilitating tourism and also by connecting underserved communities to employment opportunities. WestCOG is currently convening a working group of municipal representatives and other stakeholders to guide the development of the project. It is expected that a consultant will be engaged in early 2024; the study will take 30 months to complete.

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 procured a consultant team comprised of AECOM, Fitzgerald & Halliday and Goman+York and commenced work on the Study in Spring 2023; it is anticipated that the Study will be complete by the close of Calendar Year 2024.

Rail Improvements – Noise Pollution Abatement Feasibility Study

Following CTDOT approval, WestCOG hired SRF Consulting Group and began work on the New Canaan Branch Noise Pollution Abatement Feasibility Study. SRF is assisting with this three-municipality effort (Stamford, New Canaan and Darien) This study is analyzing existing rail line and grade crossing conditions, determining what infrastructure improvements may be required at specific grade crossings at which trains currently must sound their horns, and identifying 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 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.

V. Environmental Planning

Branchville-Georgetown Sewer Feasibility Study

The Towns of Redding and Ridgefield have periodically discussed the needs for wastewater collection and treatment in the Branchville section of Ridgefield, which abuts the Georgetown section of Redding. These needs are to support

existing development as well as to plan for Branchville's future. In addition, the Town of Redding has been managing its water pollution control facility since 1997 and desires to identify and implement improvements that depend upon increased utilization; at present, Redding's facility has significant unutilized capacity. Redding, like Ridgefield, is planning for current and future wastewater needs – in particular within the defined sewer district that is principally within Georgetown. WestCOG obtained a grant from the USEPA in 2022 to engage a consultant to assist the communities in evaluating current wastewater conditions and to plan for increased utilization of the Georgetown facility. WestCOG is working with the USEPA to finalize the grant terms; procure the consultant and manage a Project Advisory Committee to advance the Study.

Wetlands Administration Report

The reports reviews inland wetland ordinances, regulations, and commission meeting minutes for sixty municipalities in Connecticut to determine current practices. The results of this investigation provides insights wetlands commission's approval procedures, training requirements, the role of the inland wetland agent, wetland enforcement practices, meeting management practices, and the procedures for selecting volunteer commission members. The report also provides a variety of strategies to improve wetland management in Connecticut.

★ [An Investigation of Inland Wetlands Commission Practices in Connecticut](#)

Solar Zoning Strategies

The report provides a blueprint for developing solar-conscious land use practices to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. The report underscores the critical role of establishing solar access protections to ensure current and future investments in solar energy are not compromised by shadows cast by trees, buildings, and other objects. The report reviews a wide range of photovoltaic deployment strategies that fall within the authority of local governments through zoning and subdivision regulations. This is the first comprehensive analysis of existing Connecticut land use practices and their impact on solar-conscious patterns of development.

★ [Decarbonizing Land Development Practices](#)

Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG)

WestCOG in partnership with MetroCOG and NVCOG is developing Climate Action Plans for their COG member communities. The Climate Action Plans are part of the EPA

Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG) planning process. The process will develop a Priority Climate Action Plan (PCAP) due in March 2024 and a Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CCAP) for the Summer of 2024. The plans will include actions, strategies, and projects to reduce climate pollution at the COG and municipal levels, and in turn can potentially be funded through competitive CPRG funds (Up to \$4.6 billion will become available). WestCOG has worked with MetroCOG, the lead agency) on outreach and the RFQ process for a consultant to draft these plans.

Zoning for Water Quality

Following an explosion in scientific evidence pointing to the importance of riparian buffers as a means to reduce non-point 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 began a program to map MS4 infrastructure networks in our municipalities. WestCOG hired a seasonal team of field data collectors who surveyed 10,000 catch basins across the towns of Brookfield, New Milford, and Redding. The data collected will be used to create new GIS datasets that will be distributed to these towns.

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 provides recognition and access to grant funds towards sustainable activities. Sustainable CT Fellows also provide support for WestCOG related projects.

VI. 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.

★ [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, approved by the state and the Economic Development Administration (EDA). Progress is reported annually to the EDA. This report update was completed and approved in December 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 three-year 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.

Affordable Housing Research

WestCOG partner with the Princeton Fellowship program to work with a summer fellow this summer to develop a research paper to explore the components driving affordable housing challenges as well as practices utilized in other cities and countries to provide affordable housing solutions. The report is intended to inform decision makers on the causes to increased home prices and what solutions may be possible. The report is expected to be made available in the Fall of 2023.

Regional Affordable Housing Financing Study

The study will analyze and evaluate the range of methods to create housing units that qualify under §8-30g. The analysis and evaluation shall provide, for WestCOG members, thorough and actionable responses to understand cost-effective ways to expand the supply of §8-30g units and approaches to achieve §8-30g compliance. The output of the project shall be a comprehensive report providing the following information. WestCOG initiated the process by putting the project out to RFQ and convening a project advisory committee.

Broadband Implementation

To address the demand for improved broadband infrastructure demands, WestCOG partnered with EntryPoint to conduct municipal broadband feasibility studies for Ridgefield, Wilton, Brookfield, and New Fairfield. Plans for Ridgefield, Brookfield, and New Fairfield were completed. Wilton is still in development. The goal of these plans is to inform decision makers on their options to provide fast, reliable, cost-effective Internet access to the region's residents and businesses. These municipal plans are intended to be expanded for a regional overview document based on the local findings.

★ [Broadband Implementation Webpage](#)

VII. Public Safety

Through regional partnership, WestCOG works with the Division of Emergency Management 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. Staff take part in Steering Committee and Regional Emergency Planning Team (REPT) meetings.

Covid-19 Pandemic Response and Recovery

WestCOG continued to provide COVID-19 support during FY2023. WestCOG staff coordinated with DEMHS and their Long-Term Recovery Program, convened regular meetings of the region's CEOs. These activities enabled the region to focus on resilience and recovery.

Hazard Mitigation Plan Update

The Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) is a regional plan for the eighteen member municipalities. This plan, developed from 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.

The 'HMP Web Application' is an extension of WestCOG's HMP and provides visualization of the proposed HMP strategy locations. These modifications are integrated into WestCOG's Map Viewer.

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

★ [Hazard Mitigation Project Map Viewer](#)

Emergency Support Function 1- Transportation (ESF1)

As part of supporting DEMHS Regions 1 and 5, WestCOG coordinates with NHCOC, NVCOG, and MetroCOG quarterly. Strategies to improve transportation planning issues, related to emergency support functions, are discussed. WestCOG and MetroCOG staff serve as Co-Chairs of ESF1.

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](#)

VIII. Recommendations for Legislative Action

In WestCOG's view, the following recommendations would advance service sharing and delivery cost savings. These are largely carried over from last year's report, but where 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.

Remove barriers to shared departments

State law stipulates that a single person be appointed to certain municipal positions, including the fire marshal, building official, and zoning enforcement officer. This structure makes it difficult for municipalities to share personnel and to take part in regional departments where multiple persons may carry out a job function. To correct this, state law should waive appointment requirements when municipalities jointly or regionally contract to perform the functions of these positions.

Remove barriers to shared commissions

State law provides for that municipalities convene and support commissions. For commissions that do not allow for local policymaking and whose primary purpose is to implement state law – such as Inland Wetlands and Fair Rent – state law

should allow municipalities to set up and join a shared commission. Such a commission will reduce the challenge of finding qualified volunteers in every municipality and achieve efficiencies in supporting these commissions.

Allow municipalities to require land use applications to be submitted digitally

Many land use applications include surveys, parcel maps, and site plans. These documents are generally prepared on a computer but often printed out. Municipalities should be able to require that spatial documents be submitted in their original digital form (not a print and scan or PDF), so that they may be imported into municipal data systems and without the expense of re-digitization.

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 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.

Reform the land use referral process

Under state law (CGS §8-3b), COGs review local land use proposals against their regional plans. However, this process (known as a “referral”) by statute is only invoked when a proposal affects land within 500 feet of a neighboring Connecticut municipality. This arbitrary threshold produces situations where a 500 sq. ft. home addition may be reviewed, but a 500,000 sq. ft. project is not. To improve the utility of the referral process, this threshold should be replaced with rational criteria that determine whether a project is of regional significance and merits regional review, much as the referral process in New York State operates.

IX. 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	Expenditure
Municipal Technical Assistance	\$103,753.85
Regional Services	\$324,727.19
Comprehensive Planning	\$42,949.40
TOTAL	\$471,430.44