

# Economic Plan

WestCOG's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

2023 - 2027



# Downtown Westport



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## Notes for EDA Review

1. This document was prepared as directed by the US Economic Development Administration's (EDA) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) guidelines.
2. Where the term "Economic Plan" is found in this document, it is interchangeable with the term "CEDS." Economic Plan was selected to improve public consumption of this document.
3. The "summary background" is provided within the Regional Profile.
4. The findings from the SWOT analysis are depicted in the regional profile as well. Additionally, the entirety of the SWOT analysis can be found in Appendix B.
5. The "strategic direction/action plan" is depicted in the chapter titled "Strategic Plan"
6. The "evaluation framework" is included as its own chapter under a title of the same name.
7. Plan is active from January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2027.



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*Create a strong economy which generates long-term growth and prosperity, resilient to change with a well-educated, diverse workforce, living in affordable communities, supported by sustainable infrastructure.*

- Mission statement of WestCOG's Economic Plan

# INTRODUCTION

Western Connecticut Council of Governments' (WestCOG) Economic Plan also serves as the 2023-2027 Connecticut Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS, active January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2027), which is a five-year regional economic development plan for the Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD, the "District"). Note the boundaries of WCEDD and WestCOG are identical. A depiction of the planning region is depicted in Figure 1.

The CEDS acts as a 'playbook' to guide regional collaboration, expand opportunities, secure resources, and bolster resiliency in the face of economic disruptions whether they be driven by the market, climate, disease, or something else altogether.

The previous CEDS was developed to define the planning region and obtain an Economic Development District (EDD) designation. Now that the EDD status has been received, the District has changed its focus to execute the goals, objectives, and actions outlined in its CEDS. As the District moves forward through the next five years, the CEDS will provide an action plan for improving economic resiliency, building prosperity for all, and smart development throughout the District.

## Economic Plan Features

The Economic Plan is designed to be utilized by economic planners, leaders, and agencies motivated to improve their regional economy. As such the Economic Plan aims to...

- Serve as a benchmark by which a regional economy can evaluate economic development opportunities with other regions in the global and national economy.
- Highlight protocols for protective actions against natural and public health threats.
- Outline goals and objectives as part of a regional economic development action plan, considering preparedness for any disaster protection.
- Include annual progress updates regarding on the implementation of this Economic Strategy.
- Report progress in implementing the plan with annual progress reports.
- Stay relevant with a comprehensive update every five years.
- Guide stakeholders to craft, fund, and implement economic projects within the District.

The document is made up of five sections which are outlined below:

**Introduction.** To provide the purpose of the document, highlighting how it can be utilized and navigated.

**Regional Profile.** Depicts the current economic environment in Western Connecticut, including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats the District faces.

**Economic Strategy.** Outlines the Goals, Objectives, Actions and Projects for the WCEDD.

**Evaluation Framework.** Identifies indicators to monitor progress of the Economic Strategy

**Appendices.** A list of foundational content used to derive the

### COVID 19—The New Normal

The Covid-19 pandemic – which the previous CEDS did not anticipate – has fundamentally reshaped the environment in which the District operates. While the pandemic lockdowns may be past, the effects of the pandemic will be with us for many years and, in many cases, are expected to be permanent. This "new normal" includes:

- The increased need and added value of internet connections has grown exponentially within sectors of education, healthcare, business, and retail commerce.
- The pivoted business environment of remote working and flexible workstyles has businesses eliminating/downsizing office space. As employees work remotely, businesses can reduce office space overhead costs.
- Connecticut's valued "quality of life" has attracted employees from more densely populated communities to work from CT remote.
- Emergency management processes have strengthened within the District. Regional communication lines are established and networks for support are in place to assist during natural and public health disasters.
- Demand for housing has risen with the influx of new residents, workforce needs to fill open positions.
- New businesses opening or moving to the area from neighboring metropolitan regions.
- The growth of residents and businesses increases demand for infrastructure for transportation needs and public transit to move people throughout the District.

# The Planning Process

This Economic Plan includes input from seven business sector focus groups; arts and tourism, small business in northern subregion, small business in southern subregion, real estate, healthcare, agriculture/cannabis, workforce development and education, and a technology RSP (Regional Sector Partnerships). Contributors also include the CEDS working committee, the WCEDD Council, local Chief Elected Officials, and WestCOG staff who all contributed to the development of this plan (A detailed list of contributors can be found in the acknowledgments section in the front of the plan and in the appendices).

The plan also functions as a CEDS and lays out a mission, focus areas, goals, objectives, and actions set forth in accordance with the standards created by the EDA. With the Mission informing the goals, goals informing the objectives, and objectives informing the actions. Additionally specific projects identified by WCEDD member municipalities were also included.

**Mission.** Lays out the overarching target to be achieved through this plan. All goals feed into the mission.

**Focus Areas.** These are the key topical areas of Western Connecticut's economy identified by the WCEDD. They are directly related to the CEDS' goals and allow for easier communication of the CEDS goals. This plan has six identified focus areas, one for each of its six goals.

**Goals.** Strategic targets that help work towards the Plan's Mission. Each goal is associated to its respective focus area. Goals directly inform their objectives. This plan has six identified goals.

**Objectives.** Detailed targets that work towards their respective goal. There are nineteen objectives labeled A through S in this document.

**Actions.** Specific and implementable steps to achieve their respective objectives. Forty-nine actions are spread out among objectives A - S.

# WCEDD and its Council

WCEDD is a state and federally recognized economic development district serving eighteen municipalities: Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Norwalk, Redding, Ridgefield, Sherman, Stamford, Weston, Westport, and Wilton. The WCEDD was formed in 2015 and received federal designation in 2020. It has since been charged to develop and implement the CEDS strategies, goals and actions and hold quarterly meetings to discuss regional economic matters.

The WCEDD Council (hereafter referred to as the "Council") is the governing body that oversees the implementation of the strategies laid out in the CEDS. The Council is made up of public and private stakeholders that reflect the primary business sectors in the district. The members of the Council are appointed by the chief elected officials from the WestCOG Planning Region. The Council members consist of a range of business sectors representatives, educators, workforce development professionals, real estate developers, local economic development facilitators and chief elected officials. WestCOG staff, under the direction of the Council and in partnership with local partners, will pursue the goals, objectives, actions, and projects outlined in the CEDS. WestCOG and the Council are enthusiastic about bringing forth these initiatives to develop the local workforce, retain and grow existing businesses, construct resilient infrastructure, provide efficient transportation, attract a diverse portfolio of businesses, and create meaningful job opportunities for the residents and businesses within the District.

## Business Sectors involved with the Economic Plan

- |                           |                            |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Arts & Culture            | Labor and Under/Unemployed | Local Economic Development |
| Business Development      | Public Utilities           | Philanthropy               |
| Municipal Government      | Real Estate                | Press and Media            |
| Community Development     | Technology                 | Professional Services      |
| Chambers of Commerce      | Creative Economy           | Small Business             |
| Federal Legislators       | Higher Education           | State Government           |
| Finance                   | Biotech                    | Talent Acquisition         |
| Financial Tech            | Communities of Concern     | Tourism                    |
| Health and Human Services | Community Organizations    |                            |

**REGIONAL  
STRATEGY  
FOR A  
RESILIENT  
ECONOMY**

**REGIONAL  
COOPERATION**

**INFRA-  
STRUCTURE**

**WORKFORCE**

**BUSINESS  
DIVERSITY**

**RESILIENCY**

**ATTRACTIVE  
ECONOMY**



Bank Street, New Milford, CT

# REGIONAL PROFILE

This section outlines where the District's economic potential stands now (Strengths and Weaknesses); and what it might become in the near future (Opportunities and Threats). A short economic history on the challenges from the 2008 recession and the COVID 19 pandemic provides context for the Regional Profile.

## 2008, The Great Recession

In 2008, during the Great Recession, the District lost businesses and residents to warmer, lower-tax climates in the south and west. This affected housing, with home values falling and stagnation in residential building permits. However, the District was less impacted than the State overall. As the nation recovered economically, development began to pick up in Western CT, especially in the cities. The demand for smaller, often rental, properties grew, costing less to buy and maintain and perhaps more appropriate for shrinking households. Stamford, Norwalk, and Danbury have contributed more to rental unit developments in recent years, with building permits in these cities surpassing the number of building permits for the State as a whole. Today, we have recovered from the population lost during the 2008 recession.

## COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic brought the global economy to its knees, with major indicators – such as employment, travel, and consumer spending – in freefall. Governments addressed the crisis with sharp limits on economic and personal activity, as well as unprecedented levels of economic support and fiscal stimulus. In response, businesses accelerated to move online, work became remote, education went online, and telehealth became mainstream, and many of these adjustments have stayed in place as covid restrictions were relaxed. The District also saw residents relocating out of cities into less crowded environments, such as the suburban communities in Western Connecticut. Some notable impacts from the pandemic include:

**Increased Population.** The District saw a population influx, with permanent relocations from urban areas, as well as “day trippers” visiting charming New England communities in Western CT.

**Surge in Housing Demand.** Pandemic-induced lifestyle changes led to an explosion in home sales (and prices) in

many parts of the country, including Western Connecticut. Much of the existing housing stock was purchased which in turn created a sudden demand for residential development, all occurring during record costs and shortages for construction materials.

**Supply Chain Disruptions.** Many supply chains were operating as lean as possible with little ability to withstand disruptions. The lack of resilience in the supply chain played out across the globe, and Western Connecticut like much of the world suffered from limited access to goods, increased costs, and delays.

**Work Life Balance.** While the acute phase of the pandemic and federal stimulus support has passed, the experience has had lasting impacts on labor. Employees in numerous sectors have switched to remote work or hybrid work. Numerous employees left their jobs, began pursuing other job options, and have demanded increased pay and benefits (especially in many service jobs). A side effect of this has been a shortage in employees for service jobs.

**Stimulated Innovation.** During the pandemic, entrepreneurs emerged, new startups established, and “side-hustles” became main gigs. The District has seen increased collaboration amongst organizations and partners, sharing content, and assisting with resources. This is a strength the District wants to groom by providing resources for business development. Also, it appears that New York businesses have followed workers in

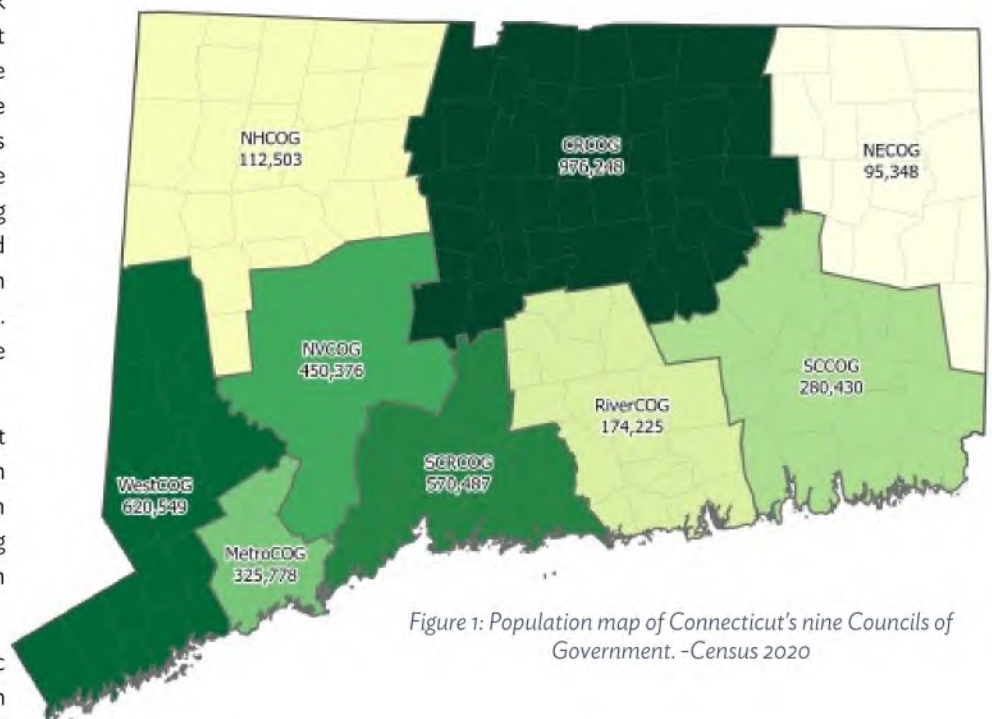


Figure 1: Population map of Connecticut's nine Councils of Government. -Census 2020

moving to Connecticut. This may be associated to the lower cost of doing business in Connecticut as compared to New York (this was mentioned during a Small Business Focus Group meeting).

**Digital Divide.** Additionally, much of the world went online which has stressed existing networks and intensifying the need for reliable, high-speed broadband connectivity. It also exposed what populations suffer the most with limited access to reliable internet connection. The rising demand for telehealth practices, e-commerce, online education, and remote work opportunities has made internet access a necessity for households.

In its own way the pandemic has come with some silver lining (at great cost) by bringing many of the District's economic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the spotlight. The Economic Plan takes into consideration these new business and lifestyle developments with goals to continue to strengthen and protect the Western CT region.

## Strengths and Opportunities

There are a lot of benefits to living and doing business in the Western Connecticut Economic Development District, all of which has been outlined in this section. The findings presented below were derived from the Strengths and Opportunities

portion of the SWOT Analysis performed as part of the CEDS update process. The complete SWOT Analysis can be found in the Appendix B.

### A Growing Population

The District's population has seen steady growth, adding almost 40,000 people in the last 12 years. The District's total population was 589,135 in 2010 and grew to 620,549 by 2020. WestCOG is now the 2nd most populous COG in the State of Connecticut as well as the fastest growing as depicted in Figure 2.

As seen in Figure 2, the District's population growth has mostly occurred within its three cities: Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford. Also, notable increases in population occur in Greenwich, Darien, and Westport. All of which are suburbs with quick commute access to NYC. The remaining suburbs observed minimal population growth, although it's worth noting the data does not reflect the surge of people moving into the District from metro areas.

Real estate activity has greatly increased for suburban communities reflecting an increase in new residents. A growing population offers opportunity for economic growth but currently census data is not available to estimate the economic potential. Also it is uncertain if these new residents are going to stay in western CT, as the District continues to evolve with

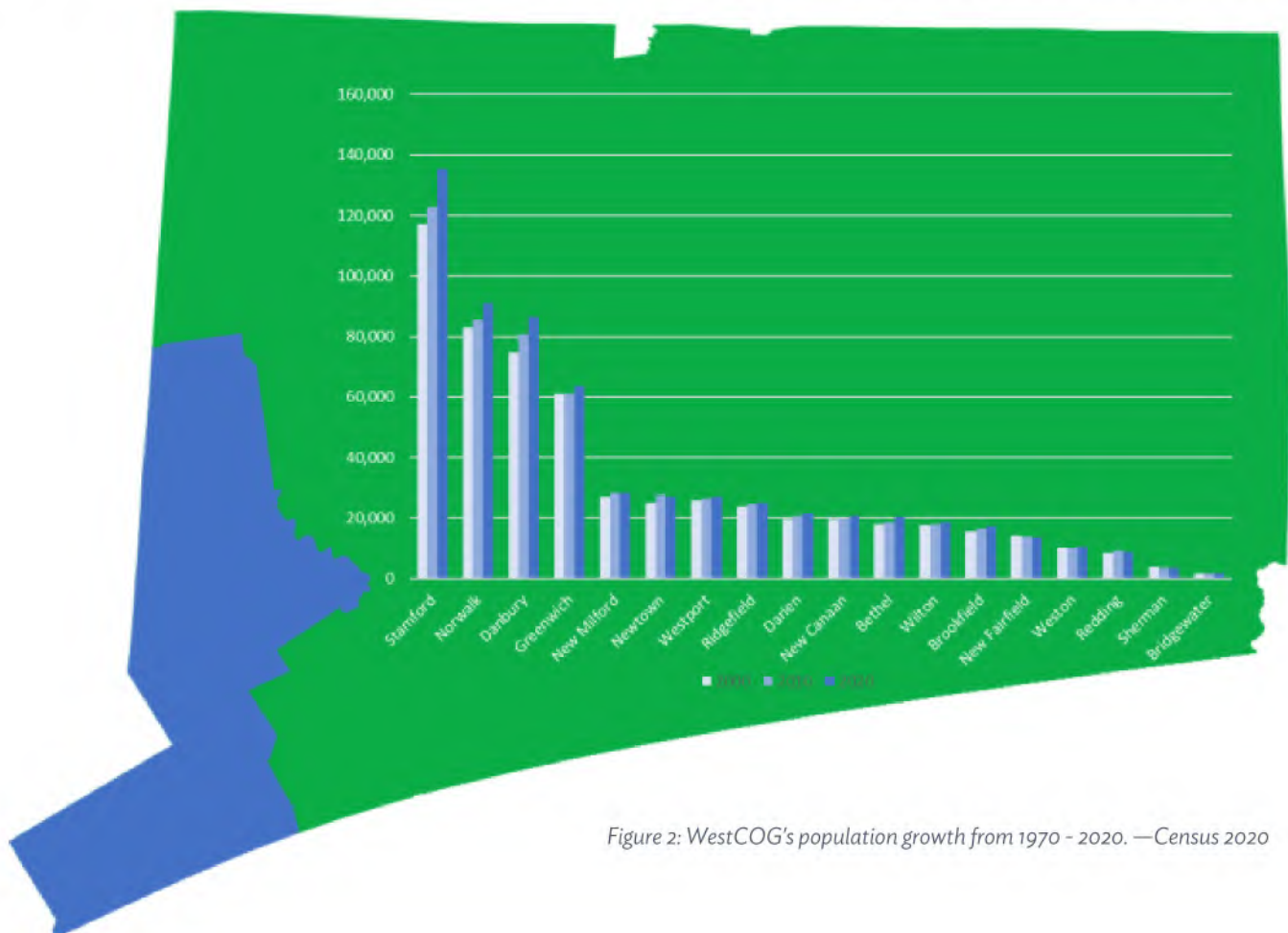


Figure 2: WestCOG's population growth from 1970 - 2020. — Census 2020



Image 9: Downtown CityCenter Green Amphitheater, Danbury, CT

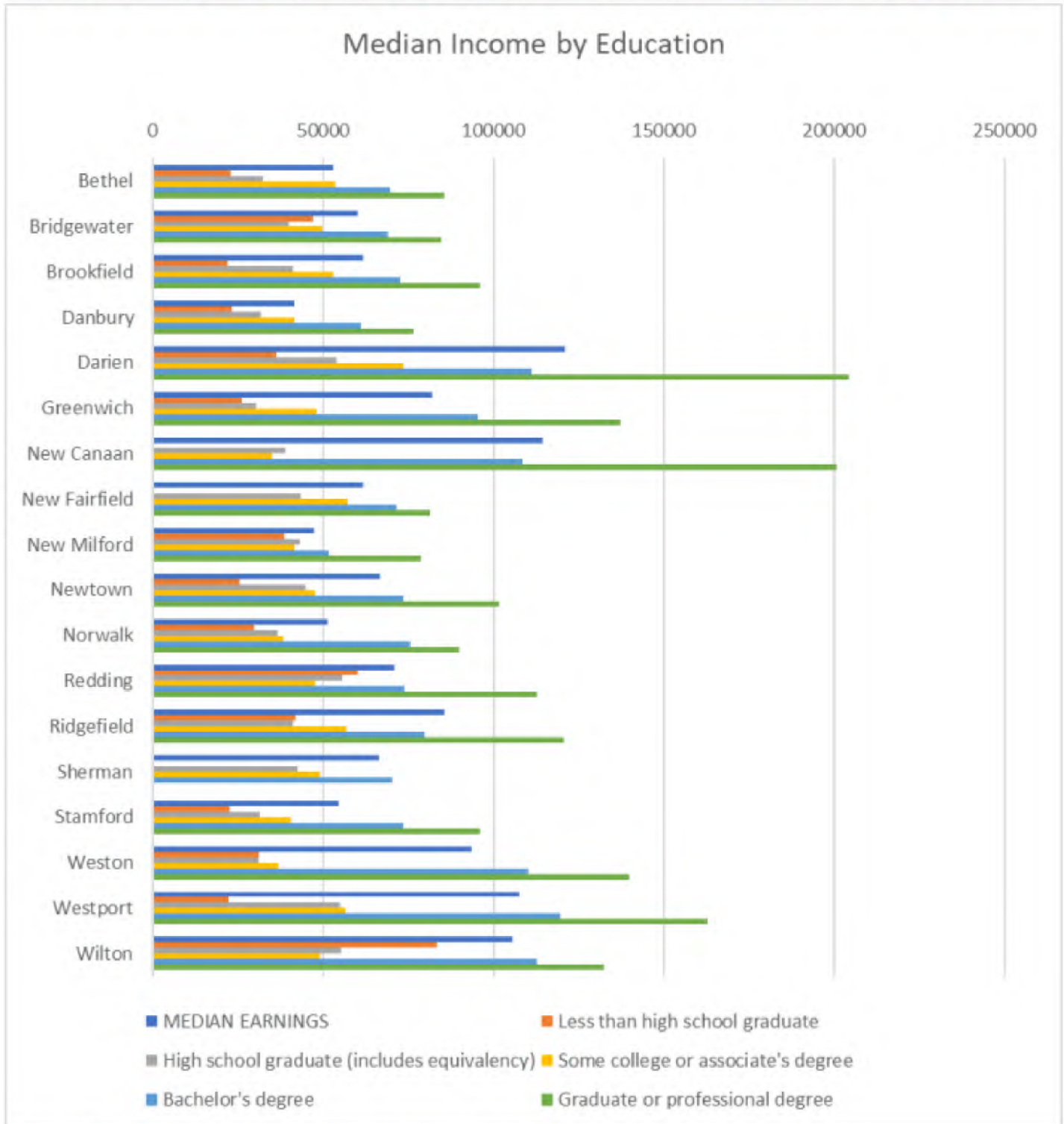


Figure 3: Median income by education within WestCOG communities.—Census 2020

infrastructure improvements and enhancements.

## Diverse Populations

The District contains a wide array of development patterns and population densities from the urban settings found in Stamford, Danbury, and Norwalk to the rural lifestyles of Bridgewater and Sherman. The District's diversity allows the Economic Plan to explore a variety of strategies to promote economic development and support economic resilience.

A diverse population and workforce can mitigate the impacts from shocks to the economy, assuming the shock does not disrupt all labor across all sectors. Western Connecticut has a variety of income levels with the southern communities averaging higher income residents. Income levels tend to decrease while moving north and east in the District (figure 3).

Figure 4 displays incomes earnings for each of WestCOG's communities and how it pertains with levels of education. The shoreline communities, with easy train to access NYC, have the highest levels of income such as Darien, New Canaan, Westport, Weston and Wilton. Income levels overall decline when heading north, Danbury and New Milford have the lowest income and education levels as depicted in Figure 4. While diverse populations and income levels can be a benefit, there are still distressed population in the District who would be served well by support services to lift their quality of life and income levels. This is discussed further in the Weaknesses and Threats section.

## Quality of Life & Metropolitan Access

The District touts a high quality of life including arts and culture, strong schools, thriving urban centers, historic New England villages and charming Main Streets all while providing easy access to NYC (and its market potential).

**Recreation.** Western CT has a little bit of everything, for everyone. Fine and diverse dining backed by the many cultures in the District. Easy access to outdoor recreational opportunities, including hiking trails, cycling, fields and sport courts, boating and serene open spaces. And an active arts community providing cultural benefits and offering a charming sense of place.

**Family Friendly.** Western Connecticut is also an ideal place to raise a family with a strong public education K-12, low crime, and multiple University System in place.

**Metropolitan Access.** New York City is only a short commute (60-90 minutes) with accessible transit options too. Air travel is also easy, for both domestic and international flights, utilizing airports in both CT and NY airports. Note, The economic conditions of Western Connecticut are affected by the ripples of economic conditions in New York City (good or bad).

## Art and Culture



*South Norwalk Metro North Train Station*

Connecticut, over the years, has been a weekend playground for many metro NYC residents. Many CT communities have summer theaters dating back to the 1800s which offered a summer relief for off Broadway performers and NYC summer residents. These theaters are still active and continue to bring arts and culture to the District.

There are two regional arts organizations supporting the creative economy within the District, in collaboration with WestCOG. Both Western Connecticut Arts Alliance and The Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County are valuable nonprofits, providing resources and support for working artists within a wide range of disciplines from theater to museums and graphic design studios. Most communities host a historic theater with seasonal productions, music, movies and cultural entertainment. The District is also home to multiple galleries, outdoor public art installations, artist organizations, and museums of all types; art, historic, educational, and family focused.

There are also opportunities to address needs in the Arts and Culture sector, such as providing artists' to have access to affordable housing and to studios and work spaces (potentially in unused large spaces), incorporate artists into makerspaces, and coworking spaces, and to market the District as a creative tourism destination which would increase awareness of the talented artist experiences in the District.

## Strong Technology Sector

Historically, business roots in the southern subregion were industrial manufacturing and energy production from the coal-fired powered plant in Stamford. Over the years, manufacturing has shifted away from region, beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the financial services industry began building a presence, with company interest and attraction to relocate from NYC, an aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This shift in economic recruitment strategy

Industry 2010	Workforce %
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	18.9%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	16.5%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	14.0%
Retail trade	10.5%
Manufacturing	8.9%
Construction	7.6%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	7.1%
Other services, except public administration	5.1%
Information	3.3%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	3.0%
Wholesale trade	2.8%
Public administration	2.1%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	0.3%

Industry 2020	Workforce %
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	22.1%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	18.6%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	14.5%
Retail trade	10.4%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	8.4%
Manufacturing	7.9%
Other services, except public administration	5.5%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	3.6%
Information	3.0%
Wholesale trade	2.7%
Public administration	2.4%
Construction	0.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	0.3%

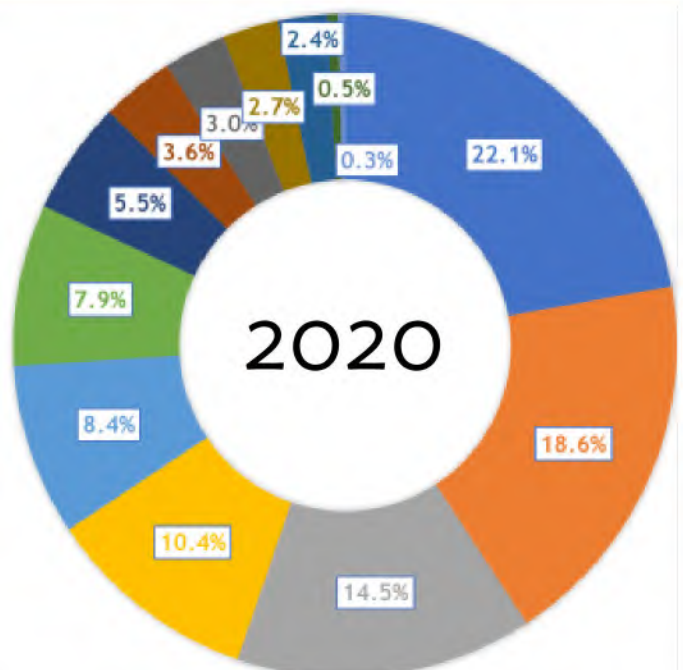
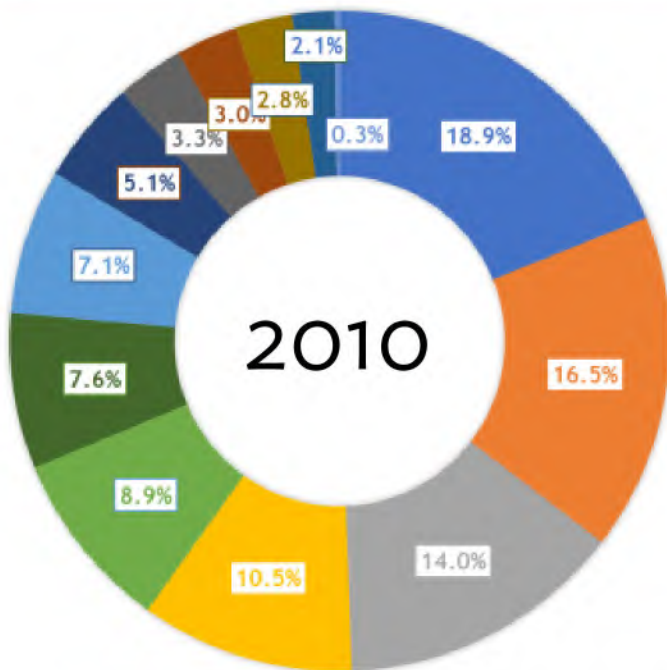


Figure 5: 2010 and 2020 Percentage of Jobs by Industry—2020 Census Data. Note the top 5 sectors did not change their order of activity. Construction had the most substantial change, by 7 points.—Census 2020

has developed a cluster of businesses that focus on technological innovation.

Large tech and data services firms headquartered in the District include Priceline.com, Synchrony, Harman, Deloitte, Indeed.com, Charter Communications, and Gartner. Additionally, the District's proximity to New York City and Boston positions this region to combine the global strength of

local companies with those based in the large urban centers. For example, tech firms such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook have expanding presences in the area that could be leveraged.

The state of Connecticut has launched the Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator, dedicated to the mission of advancing skills by fostering targeted, high-performing partnerships between business and higher education in emerging, high-demand tech

skills such as cybersecurity, virtual modeling, software development, and digital analytics critical to business growth. Finance/Insurance, Education/Healthcare/Social Services cover approximately 44% of the jobs offered within their region. Another 19% include other Professional services which include many technology industries. These high paid jobs are prevalent within the District.

## Major Employers

As stated in WestCOG’s Plan of Conservation and Development regarding major employers, there are twenty-three employers that employ over 1,000 employees in the District including Pitney Bowes, Gartner Inc., Deloitte, Stamford Hospital, Boehringer Ingelheim, Norwalk Hospital, Greenwich Hospital, and Danbury Hospital. At the next tier, there are thirty industries that employ from 500 to 999 employees including Western Connecticut State University, UTC Aerospace Systems, Kimberly Clark, New Milford Hospital, Synchrony Financial, Norwalk Community College, Poland Springs Water, Questcon Technologies, NBC Sports Group, and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The sixty-three largest employers account for an estimated 85,000 jobs, or nearly a third of all employment opportunities in the District. Health care, higher education, technology, entertainment services, and professional services are critical elements of the District’s economy.

WestCOG’s CEDS will continue to focus on planning for the growing technologies and enhancing the cluster’s ecosystem through the development of next generation of workers and companies to develop the Internet of Things (IoT), Autonomous Vehicle Technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning, Big Data, and Smart City Tech. As shown in Figure 5 reflect jobs by industry from the 2010 census data compared to jobs by the same industries from the 2020 census data. The categories of “Education services, healthcare and social assistance” and “Professional, scientific, management, administrative and waste management services” have shown steady, continuous growth over the last decade within the District.

These industries include jobs with colleges/universities, secondary/professional schools, medical providers, residential facilities, accounting/payroll services, computer systems, management, scientific research and other professional and



*Production Studio, Stamford, CT*

technical services. The arts, entertainment, recreation and accommodation/food services industries are growing which includes restaurants and breweries, performing arts companies and promoters, independent artists, museums, and galleries. Another indicator on the impact that the metropolitan region overflow brings into western CT. Many of the new film, TV production, and creative influences have helped to grow the arts business sector within the District. There’s also an increase in the “Finance, insurance, real estate, rental and housing” industries as well.

Lastly, the district is seeing a demand for makerspaces, product accelerators, and co-working facilities to bring people together and create new products, brands, businesses and ideas. Many professionals develop “side hustles” and are looking for spaces for like-minded creatives to gather and share ideas, receive resource.

## Educated Employees

The District has one of the most educated talent bases in the country with 30% of the total population holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. Within Fairfield County, 16% of residents hold a Master’s, 1.8x the national average. For the 32% of residents without a post-secondary education, of whom 39% are people of color, and 23% are immigrants with limited English skills, the median per capita income is \$58,815 and 9.1% fall below the poverty line.

To maintain and improve education attainment, the State has developed the Governor’s Workforce Council. Their mission is to ensure that Connecticut maintains the most accessible, equitable, aligned, and high-quality workforce pipeline in the country by providing curricula and programming that is responsive to the needs of the 21st century economy.

## Robust Resources for Businesses

All businesses should be aware of the range of support available for them including the WCEDD. WestCOG will work with chambers of commerce, local economic development



*Downtown Stamford Office Buildings*

professionals and community banks to provide valuable business resources to local entrepreneurs, small business owners know where to turn for resources to succeed.

WCEDD's objective is to leverage the CEDS with a range of participants in the District from nonprofits, municipalities, businesses, and educational facilities to bring forward projects and development opportunities. WestCOG staff will help facilitate access to grants and funding to support economically strong projects throughout the District by utilizing the CEDS and implement the work outlined to create a stronger, more resilient and prosperous District. A list of known resources is provided in the pop out.

Another resource is the Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs) which have been developed in the Technology, Healthcare and Advanced Manufacturing sectors, overlapping CT regions in efforts to grow connectivity between the business sectors and regional educational institutions. These relationships will help develop internship programs for high school and college students, create alignments to skills needed for our businesses to succeed and residents to develop career paths to support our businesses at an early age. Educational institutions help support regional businesses and develop career paths for young professionals, in efforts to retain them to stay within the region/state. CTSBDC, WBDC, SCORE and SBA along with state resources from DECD are readily available to support local small business owners from access to capital to operations to startups and entrepreneurs. These resources can provide small businesses with resources in operations and financial education. Promoting these resources widely is a goal for the District.

### Transportation and Transit Infrastructure

The District is connected by three major east-west highways that connect the District to both Boston and New York City. I-95 runs along the southern shoreline, the Merritt Parkways runs just North of I-95, and I-84 crossing through Danbury. US-7 connects the district from north to south and runs from Norwalk to New Milford and continues up into MA. Lastly US-1 runs east-west through all of WestCOG's coastal towns. These roadways have various choke points during high traffic times. Coordinating traffic lights through modern technology, leveraging solar where possible will help with vehicle movement and provide more resilient energy sources. These routes host bus and pedestrian traffic. Installation of safe pedestrian movement with crosswalk, additional sidewalks and enhancements to public transportation areas will be beneficial and provide additional transportation options.

From some points in the District, the train offers easy access to Manhattan: for example, it is possible to commute via a 40-minute ride from Stamford along Metro North's New Haven line into NYC. The northern subregion offers less frequent rail service on the Metro North Danbury Branch line which limits

### Partner Agencies of the Western Connecticut Economic Development District working towards implementing the Economic Plan

- Western Connecticut Council of Governments
- Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, Stamford Chamber of Commerce, Stamford Partnership
- Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board, The Work Place
- Western CT State Univ, UCONN Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Naugatuck Valley Community College, Danbury Branch
- WBDC, CTSBDC, SCORE, SBA
- Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut
- The Cultural Arts of Fairfield County
- Local Community Banks
- CT Department of Economic & Community Development (DECD)
- Local Economic Development Directors and Commissions
- CityCenter Danbury
- Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- New Milford Economic Development Corporation
- CT Office of Tourism
- UCONN Extension
- Hospitals, local nonprofits

potential ridership from these communities. Cars can access Manhattan along I-95 and I-84 (connecting to I-684). A commute from Stamford to NYC is approximately 60 minutes while a commute starting in the Danbury is around 90 minutes.

The passenger rail line is an asset in transportation for the District. Metro North's New Haven line runs along the shore from Greenwich to Westport and onward. This rail line provides an easy and timely connection to the metropolitan region of NYC. Metro North's Danbury Branch line currently runs north/south between Norwalk and Bethel. This line is not electrified like the New Haven line, therefore, speed and stop times are not maximized. There's opportunity to enhance this line and continue it through the District northward, along existing tracks to New Milford, CT. The opportunity to expand the line, increase the speed, and number of stops would bring an incredible economic impact to the District. Creating an alternate access to the northern region beside vehicles would open up opportunities for both businesses and residents alike.

## Support Resilient Technology

The District has a lot of potential to increase its energy resilience, through the use of renewable energy and its high volume of electric vehicles. (EV). Western CT, lower Fairfield County specifically, is home to the highest number of electric vehicles registered in the State as of the writing of this CEDS. Figure 6 represents the number of EV vehicles owned and registered by residents or businesses within WestCOG. This data reflects the volume of CT EV are located within the District. A public electric charging stations network exist within the District, with the need for expansion moving forward. Efforts to increase the EV charging network would be beneficial based on growing demand. The growth of alternative energy vehicles is encouraging, with increased efforts to combat climate change and reduce fossil fuels. Expanding the EV charging station network and encouraging charging stations in all new homes, private and public developments would potentially generate increased use of this alternate energy and reduce fossil fuel use for a cleaner environment.

Figure 7 represents the current EV charging station network within the WestCOG region. As CT is a pass-through state,

meaning it connects the large metropolitan states of NY, MA, and RI, the EV charging network would allow the District to become a destination for EV travelers to stay awhile during charging and patronize local small businesses. Increasing this alternate energy charging availability will help attract potentially younger families and businesses that are more environmentally conscious as climate change continues to threaten the world and the need to reduce fossil fuel use.

## Opportunity for Open Access Fiber Networks

Internet connectivity is a necessary infrastructure as business, education and society needs evolve. While the majority of business districts have ample internet/broadband capacity and connectivity, fiber networks can establish the District as a leader in the technology sector and future proof communities for the ever increasing demand for data and everyday use. WestCOG is performing Broadband Feasibility Studies for member municipalities, which will lay out the steps and funding mechanisms to implement municipal wide Broadband. This will prepare communities for anticipated Broadband funds from the federal government. A fully connected open access fiber network has numerous benefits. Faster and more reliable internet (orders of magnitude faster), lower costs, free access

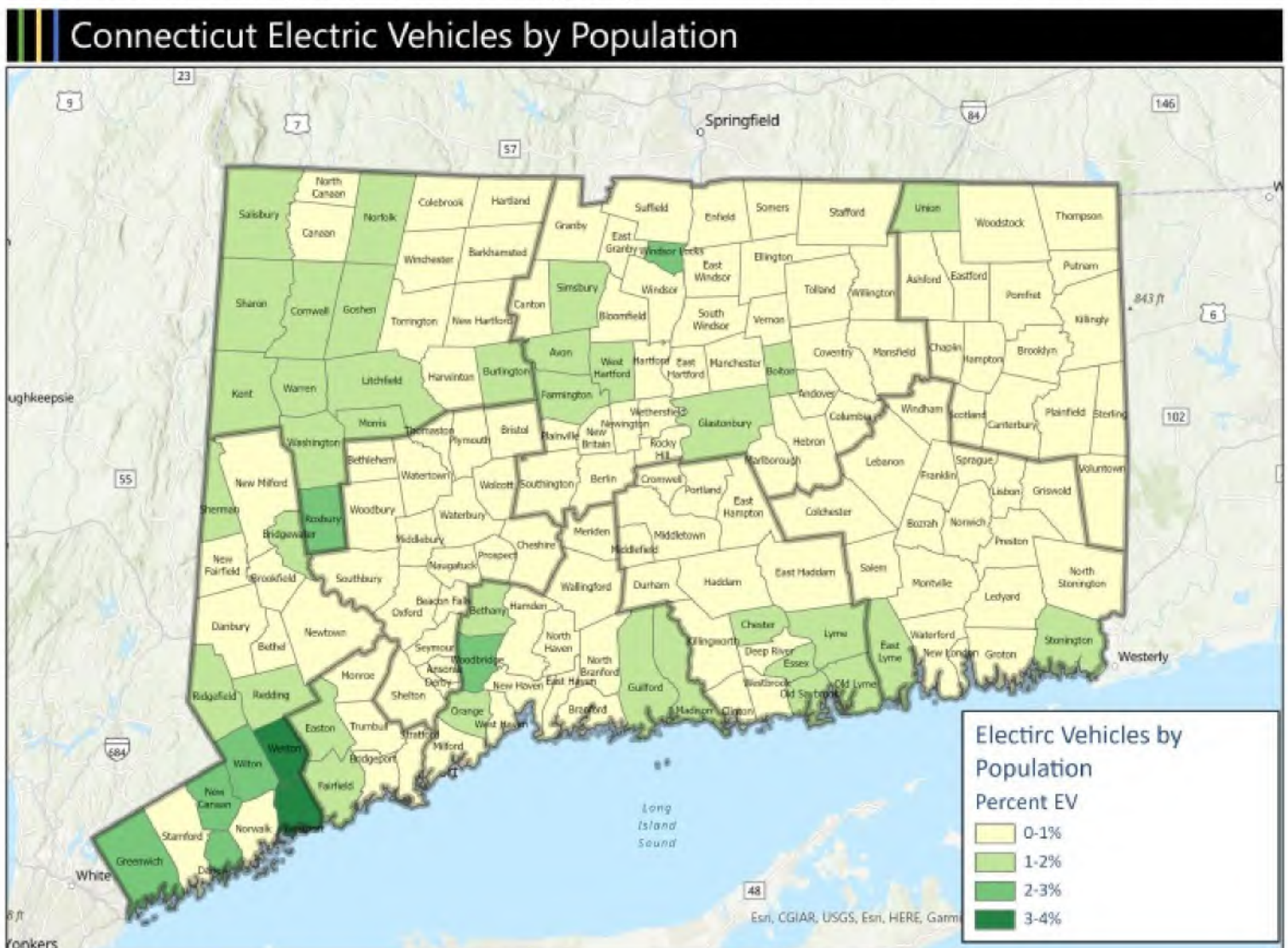


Figure 6: Electric vehicles registered in CT by population. –Census 2020, CTDEEP

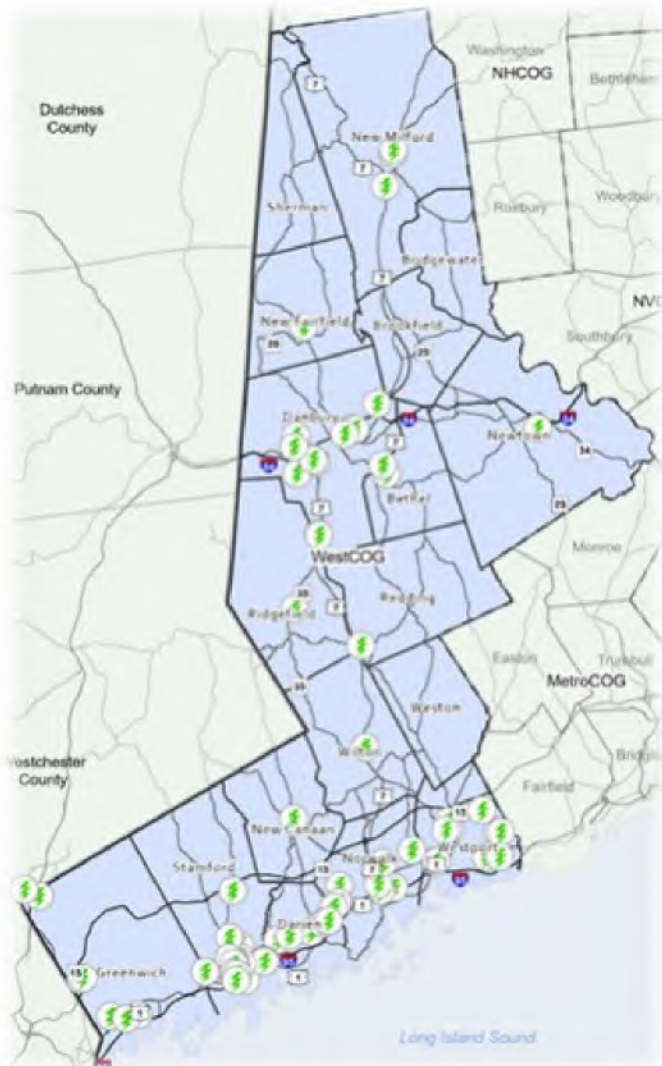


Figure 7. Electric charging station location in WestCOG. - CTDEEP

for, education, telehealth, and public safety applications. This also levels the playing field allowing everyone access web based businesses and closes the digital divide.

### Economic Resilience

This section provides a summary of strategic resilient highlights the District will plan for and implement through goals and actions.

**Emergency Planning Team.** DEMHS, Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, for the District, both region 1 & 5. They consist of a broad-based coalition of emergency responders, including fire and police officials, local emergency medical personnel and other partners. DEMHS meet regularly and provides education and a forum for first responders to discuss potential issues in emergency management. They are responsible for planning for coordinating emergency management planning in the region and overseeing Homeland Security Grant funds.

**Develop a resilient workforce.** The District will continue to collaborate with the Regional Sector Partnerships, The Work Place and Northwest Workforce Investment Board to provide opportunities and training unemployed workers to fill open positions. Continue to connect local education facilities to businesses to align curriculum needs for evolving industries. Also support in advancing and developing Makerspaces to elevate innovation and support workforce development is needed in region.

**Communication & networking.** WestCOG meets monthly to bring together the 18 chief elected officials to address issues and proactively plan for future needs and protections. The multiple chambers of commerce bring their members together representing the private sector of regional employers. The WCEDD meets quarterly, this group consists of a variety business sectors, nonprofits, economic development professionals and elected officials. This robust network works collaboratively to provide resources, information and coordinate assessment efforts as needed during an economic disruption.



Electric charging stations



Hayvn, Co working space, Darien, CT

# Weaknesses & Threats

Western Connecticut has a lot to offer current and future residents, job seekers, all business sectors, corporations, nonprofits, and entrepreneurs. There are also challenges the District faces which are outlined below. The findings in this section is derived from the SWOT analysis performed as part of the CEDS process. The full SWOT analysis is included in the Foundation Content chapter at the end of this document.

## Limited Agriculture

There's limited outdoor agriculture activity in the region. Most local farmers are small farmers, generating sales at farmers markets, local restaurant distribution and CSAs. Incorporating alternate farming practices such as hydroponic farming in local zoning, would help to increase locally grown food and generate a more sustainable farming environment in the region. Continue to encourage zoning to consider alternate means of farming, to encourage increased local food production and potential repurposing of buildings to support this effort.

Agriculture tourism is a growing business sector, creating tourism destinations and jobs at businesses like breweries and vineyards. These social gathering locations become a true destination in a community for visitors and residents. CT promotes the CT Brewery trail, highlighting the various breweries in CT. Many operations use locally sources products to create their final products which in turns supports ancillary business and job generation supporting the industry. Christmas trees, local honey production and maple syrup are additional organic small business farming industries in the region.

Education and research are encouraged regarding emerging agriculture businesses such as the recent State approved



Residential garden, New Milford, CT

cannabis industry. The State has approved the use of retail, production, and growth of cannabis with tax revenue percentages going to each community that holds permits for any cannabis operation. During focus groups and input from the neighboring state of Massachusetts, where the cannabis industry has generated multiple jobs, manufacturing and operations support businesses and retail sales generating an agricultural tourism business destination in that state. This rising industry has an opportunity to generate a substantial economic impact in western CT. Municipalities to continuously look at the various impacts of this growing industry and consider the benefits it could generate within their community.

## Workforce & Education Evolution

The local workforce is aging with the “baby boomer” population being the largest, entering retirement age with institutional knowledge. The “Trades” workforce is declining with a slow influx of young people committing to apprenticeships.

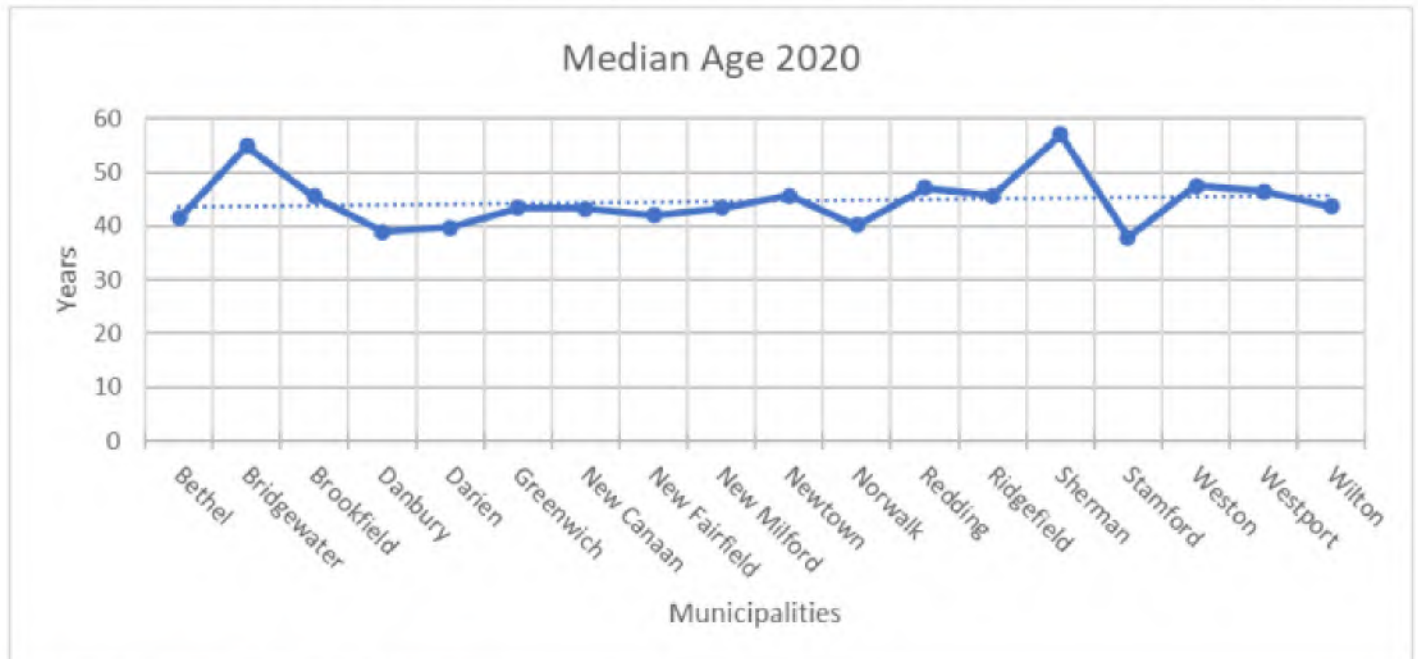


Figure 8. Median age of WestCOG –Census 2020

Education and training to fill the gaps may be needed in workforce development to support the demand for these skills. To counteract this trend, seniors could provide mentoring and/or part time opportunities to stay engaged and pass along their lifetime of career knowledge and skills. In addition, universities, colleges, the State could offer potential incentives for students to take employment in CT after graduation, helping to retain young professionals in region/state. Many of CT's students graduate from local universities and then move out of State to larger cities/areas for different environments of mountains and southern lifestyles. The region's high cost of living, housing options, lack of progressive amenities make it difficult to retain young professionals after their CT education to fill entry level positions. As reflected in Figure 8, the average age of the District is in the mid-40s, with the youngest community being Stamford, the largest city, with an average of age of 37 and Sherman, located in the northern subregion, is the oldest community with the average age of 57. Opportunity to increase marketing efforts, highlighting the cities and plentiful activities of music, outdoor activities, and access to culinary rich restaurants and culture that attracts young people.

All range of housing is needed for all range of jobs. Continue to build housing which is affordable for all levels of the workforce so residents can live and work in their communities. Transportation must also make it easier and more affordable for people to commute to jobs, education and other activities across transit districts and regions.

### Housing for All People

The western CT region offers a wide range of housing options and has been continuously adding units to its inventory. As business and population grows, as does the need for people to

live. The WestCOG region has outpaced the state of Connecticut in housing permits over the past fifteen years in bringing new housing units online as reflected in Figure 9. The cities, Danbury, Stamford and Norwalk, have been the Region's leaders on housing development in most recent years. There is a demand for smaller, less expensive rental units/homes, in most communities. As housing units are built, they fill up quickly, with waiting lists. In efforts to fill the gap of job entry housing, there's a need for affordable housing to attract and retain younger employees, to fulfill levels of current employment in the region, and affordable enough for them to stay over time. The need for young professionals to thrive and grow their careers in the region. Local businesses want to groom young professionals to fill the workforce demand and grow with their company. Housing is a large component to making the District attractive and for all levels of employment to be successful. The need for young, minimum wage, senior, and disabled employees to live where they work is necessary to creating a vibrant region.

The District will continue to work on developing housing as the population and demand requires. Developing an economically strong community demands collaboration with private public partnerships.

More employees need to commute into the District to fill positions, causing additional congestion on the roadways due to the inability for all people to live and work within the region. Figure 10 reflects the available number of vacant housing units in the District at the time of preparing this document. The data available shows housing inventory/vacant housing to be low in most communities, with slight inventory in the affluent, higher priced regions and in the northern subregion, further away from rail transit and high-density job markets.

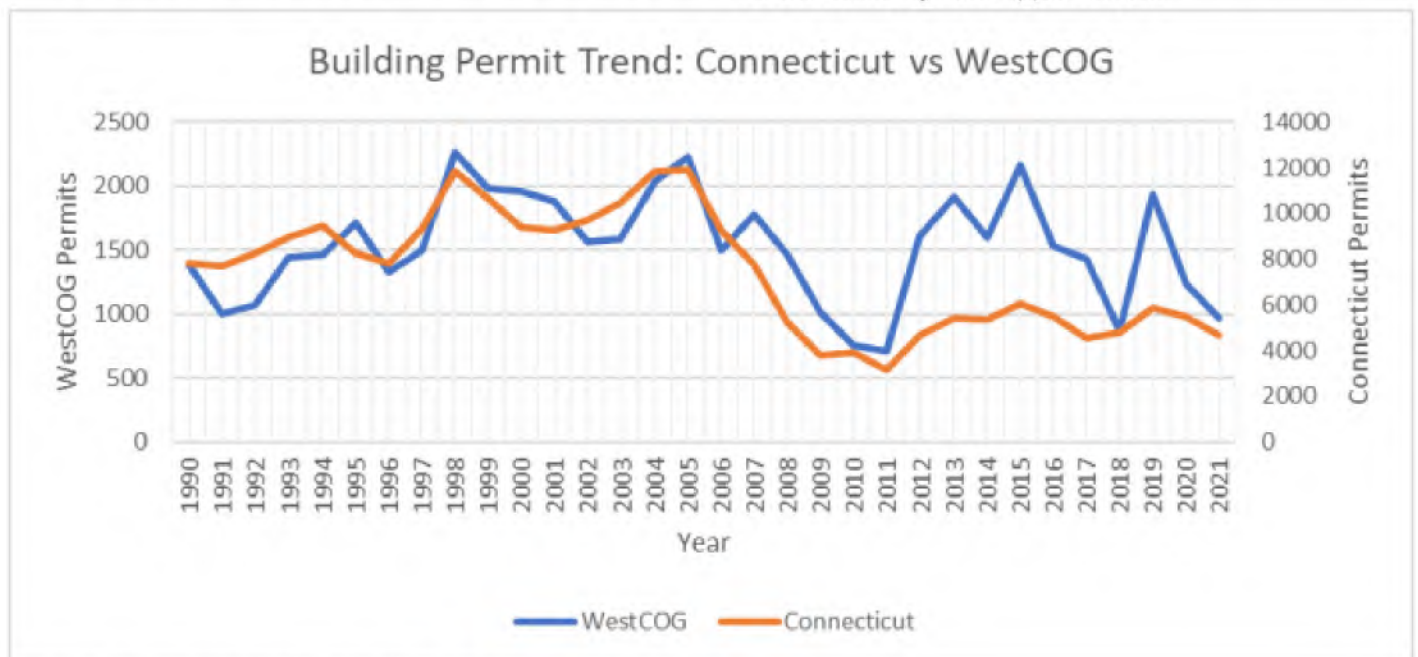


Figure 9. Building permits trends, State of CT vs WestCOG

# Vacant Housing Stock

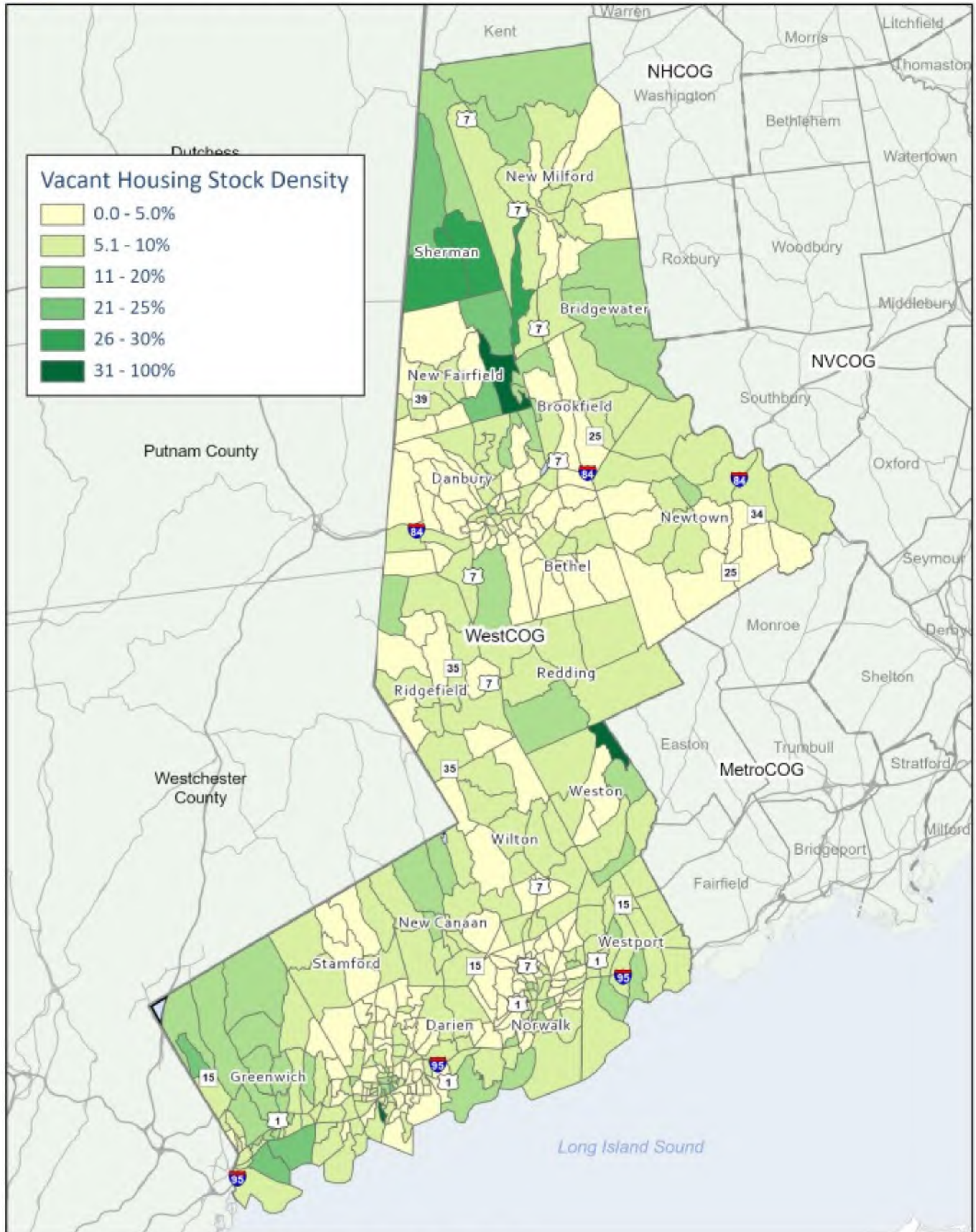


Figure 10. WestCOG vacant housing stock percentage by census tract.

WestCOG has developed an Affordable Housing Toolkit for municipality consideration of options to add more affordable housing units within their community, and CEOs have adopted this resource. There are additional valuable details found in the toolkit, such as, the demand for housing in proximity to New York City have driven up the cost of housing far beyond the span of control of municipal governments acting on their own.

A recent analysis of the asking prices for land in Western Connecticut found the average asking prices for a single-family vacant lot exceeded \$1 million in five of the region's eighteen municipalities. At the other end of the spectrum, the lowest asking prices for vacant lots were found in Bethel, Brookfield, New Fairfield, New Milford, and Newtown with prices ranging on average from \$119,000 to \$183,000 per lot. Also reflected in the Toolkit, the demand for housing – caused by the relatively lower housing costs in Western Connecticut compared to New York – means that supply side initiatives (e.g., housing creation) developed by municipal governments will be highly dependent on direct financial assistance to low- and moderate-income households, as rental and mortgage subsidy, or income support, or as a combination of both, and income restrictions. Initiatives that result in new market-rate housing creation without no or low affordability requirements are unlikely materially to improve affordability in the region; even a 50% reduction in home prices in many communities – which would be a real estate crash of historic proportions – will not reduce home prices to a level that is commensurate with affordable or 'workforce' housing. Instead, it is not likely that new market rate housing will meaningfully address existing cost-burdened households in the District but instead will result in an intensification of the trends the District is already experiencing (migration from New York as well as purchase of second homes and investment properties). The Affordable Housing Toolkit can assist municipalities in adding the necessary units needed to attract the workforce businesses need, retain younger professionals entering the job market and support the seniors to downsize and stay in their communities with friends and family. See the Reference section for the WestGOG Affordable Housing Toolkit

### Distressed Population Support

WestCOG has pockets of distressed populations located mainly within the three large cities of Danbury, Stamford and Norwalk. However, there are low per-capita-income and high unemployment-rate pockets in suburban communities to, such as New Milford, Newtown, New Caanan, Darien and Westport. Figure 11, reflects the locations of the distressed populations. The green areas represent the populations with an unemployment rate of 4.7% or more, the yellow represents areas of per capita income below 80% of national average of \$28,537. The blue areas reflect populations that include both of these distressed measurements. The distressed pockets are prominently located in downtowns areas. It's within these areas

that resources are needed, workforce development to help with unemployment opportunities. Resources like an additional American Job center in the northern region in New Milford would be beneficial as the public transportation to move those in need of services south to Danbury is not seamless, timely or easy. Resources for multiple languages in schools, healthcare facilities, universities, within municipalities to support the range of residents that live within these distressed downtown pockets of population.

### Awareness Business of Resources

Many entrepreneurs, startups and small businesses are not aware of the multiple support resources available to them. The partners like the Small Business Development Center, SCORE, the Women's Business Development Center and local community banks, there's a robust network of business development resources. There are resources available like: business planning, attracting/training employees, access to capital or the process to start a business. Municipalities,

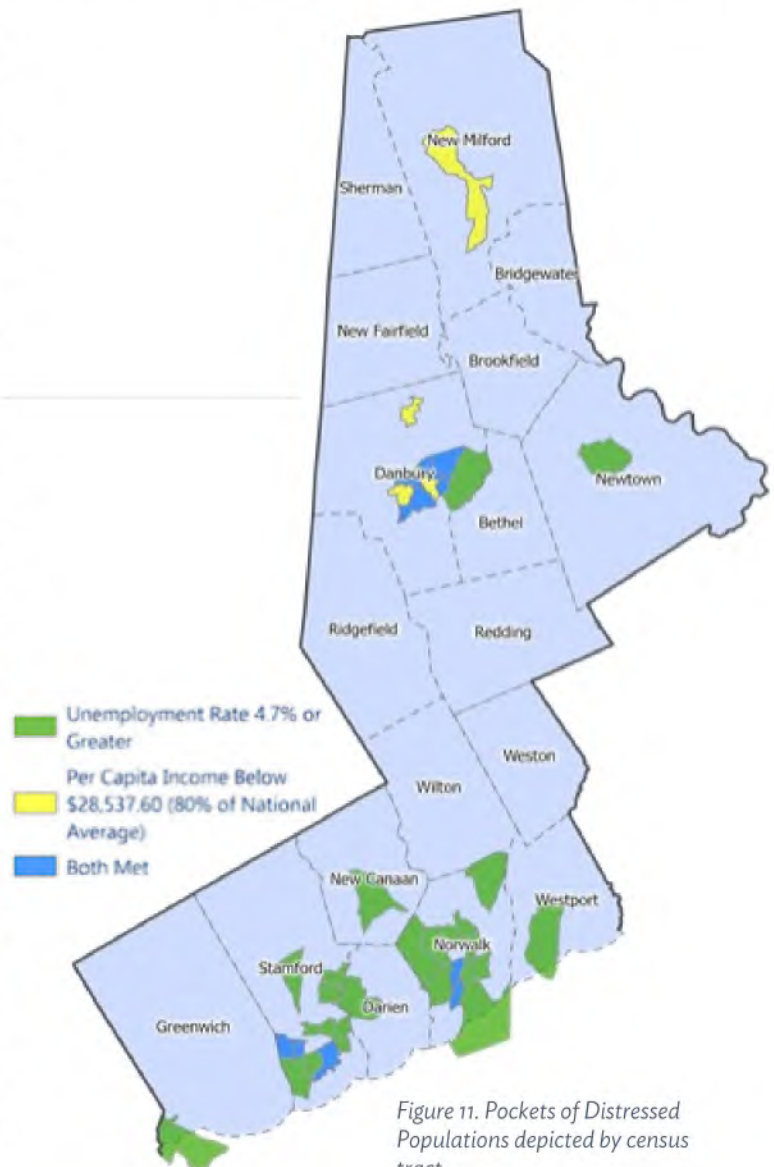


Figure 11. Pockets of Distressed Populations depicted by census tract.

economic development professionals, chambers of commerce, community banks and local partners could increase education and promotion of services available for these professionals. To allow starting and growing a business to be easy and encouraged within the region. Municipalities to offer resources and permitting of all types on their websites to allow residents, developers, and professionals to access forms and information needed, at any time, not limited to in person or municipal office hours. Electronic permitting allows business to continue during any interruption and be more efficient for those not in the community to do business easily with the municipality, conduct research and provide possible investment. Healthcare and childcare are expensive items for small businesses and local workforce. Look for ways to assist small businesses in reducing healthcare and childcare costs in the region. Work with the state and federal funding opportunities to provide relief for these high-cost expenses necessary for a successful workforce and business community.

### Vehicular Movement & Public Transportation

Parking scenarios, signage and wayfinding, and sidewalks are necessary within walkable downtown business districts. Parking scenarios of shared parking lots, incorporate municipal parking lots with directional signage so consumers can park easily to shop and eat in area downtowns. Consider creating micro transit services within an area around the downtown business districts. Traffic congestion can be an impediment to moving people and products throughout the region. Attention to choke points and congested areas would be beneficial to the flow of vehicles. Continue to evaluate these areas for traffic flow and pedestrian safety measures. Congestion on highways affects B2B product movement and travel for consumers and employees. Public transportation while essential, currently is unable to connect some communities together, particularly in the northern subregion. WestCOG to look at way to connect public transportation especially in growing areas, as new businesses open and their needs for workforce transportation. On-demand service is also desired, especially for the senior population.

### Climate Change

Climate change is a major threat to the local economy especially for coastal communities. Rising sea levels, increased storm intensities, and lingering drought conditions threaten to our natural resources and shorelines.

WestCOG is home to multiple coastline communities, along Long Island Sound. Their beauty and access to local ports are attractive for residential developments and current locations of historic downtowns near marinas and commercial development. Transportation access runs along the coastline, including I-95 and public transportation of Metro North tracks connecting access to metropolitan markets. As climate change

continues to threaten with rising seas and potential vulnerability of storms, an action plan to combat climate change and increase resilience needs to be continually addressed. WestCOG's Hazardous Mitigation Plan (HMP) layouts a robust array of actions to mitigate disaster and plan for resiliency. The HMP, is the region's action plan to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people, property and resources from natural hazards and their affects. The full HMP linked to our website can be found in the resources section at the end of the CEDS.



*Mural, Danbury, CT*



*Sculpture in Stamford, CT*



LIBRARY

Danbury Library

# STRATEGIC PLAN

This Strategic Plan contains overviews of the region's goals, objectives, actions all of which work towards the Economic Plan's mission.

## CEDS Mission

*“Create a strong economy which generates long-term growth and prosperity, resilient to change with a well-educated, diverse workforce, living in affordable communities, supported by sustainable infrastructure.”*

The six goals of Western Connecticut's CEDS are:

1. Build Out the Regional Economic Development Program
2. Improve Infrastructure
3. Cultivate and Support a Diverse Workforce
4. Cultivate and Retain Business Sectoral Diversity
5. Prepare the District for Resiliency
6. Promote the Region's Attractiveness

The goals, objectives and actions were created by WestCOG staff, members of the WCEDD and the CEDS Working Committee based on a thorough review of relevant data, regional studies, stakeholder focus group feedback, planning documents, and a project solicitation from municipalities. A more detailed description of each objective and action follows each goal overview. Goals, objectives, and actions do not appear in order of prioritization.

WestCOG has noted a priority objective for each of the six goals, that if it were fulfilled, would have the largest impact to fulfilling its respective goal. **Priority objectives** are denoted with a star ★.



Barn in Bridgewater, CT

# Goal I: Build Out the Regional Economic Development Program

Build a stronger regional economic development program that achieves closer coordination among municipalities within the Western Connecticut Region, the state of CT and other surrounding regions.

Objectives & Actions	Partners	Cost
A. Increase intra-regional cooperation and continue planning for the development of Western Connecticut's economy ★	Municipalities, Economic Development Directors and Commissions,	\$520,000
1. Incorporate dedicated WestCOG staff to guide and elevate economic development coordi-	WestCOG, CEOs	\$400,000
2. Establish quarterly meetings with economic development municipal representatives to strengthening regional collaboration	WestCOG, WCEDD, Municipalities	\$20,000
3. Continually update the regional plan, execute objectives and actions outlined in the CEDS	WestCOG, WCEDD,	\$100,000
B. Strengthen coordination and communication between Western CT and interregional plan- ning efforts	WestCOG, MetroCOG, NHCOG, NVCOG, MPOs	\$350,000
4. Strengthen the Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs), increase regional educational institu- tions partnerships with area businesses	Governor's Workforce Council, Universities, RSPs	\$100,000
5. Leverage shared resources and emergency protocols for resiliency, with nonprofits, munic-	Municipalities, WestCOG	\$50,000
6. Develop a grant coordination team that strategically plans for, develops, and manages feder-	WestCOG, Municipalities	\$200,000

## Objective A: Increase intra-regional cooperation and continue to planning for the development of Western Connecticut's economy ★

Continued development of Western Connecticut's economy will require a cooperative planning effort with multiple partners in the Region. Rapidly changing economic conditions, evolving economic environment, and various demands from businesses and residents require economic development planning be a continuous activity. The activities undertaken as a result of this Plan should be measured against updated data and adjusted where necessary. The WCEDD will work to secure continued support from residents to businesses and elected officials to support economic development initiatives. Continued outreach and regional cooperation will help sustain interest and encourage implementation.

*Action 1: Incorporate dedicated WestCOG staff to guide economic development coordination with the District and with various support partners*

Incorporate dedicated WestCOG economic development staff to lead and assist regional partners with economic development opportunities from federal, state and regional funding opportunities. The WCEDD members to continue CEDS implementation projects and updates as data demands and opportunities become available.

*Action 2: Establish quarterly meetings with economic development municipal representatives to strengthen regional collaboration.*

Create a regional network of economic development professionals to work collaboratively, moving intra-municipal projects forward. Bringing the Region's economic development professionals together quarterly, for ideation, content sharing, and networking, will strengthen the Region's economic development efforts. Communities of similar profile can learn from each other to develop "best practices" efforts in planning and execution.

*Action 3: Continually update the regional economic development plan, execute objectives and actions outlined in the CEDS.*

Annually, WCEDD, will evaluate the organization's progress in implementing the CEDS initiatives. Newly available data will be analyzed, completed projects and efforts will be examined, and new projects will be considered as opportunities become available.

## Objective B: Strengthen coordination and communication between Western CT and interregional planning efforts

WestCOG to work in concert with federal and state governments, regional, private and public partnerships to assist with economic development efforts throughout the region.

*Action 4: Strengthen the Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs), increase regional educational institutions partnerships with area businesses.*

Continue to develop and strengthen the Regional Sector Partnerships, increasing corporate partners to help advance workforce/internship opportunities and develop education curriculum within the Region's key educational institutions. Create an economic environment conducive to grow business sectors, continue to develop the Region's talented workforce, and attract/grow ancillary businesses to support an ecosystem of innovation.

*Action 5: Leverage shared resources and emergency protocols for resiliency, with nonprofits, municipalities, regions, and state organizations.*

Identify opportunities with neighboring regions, municipalities and nonprofits to formalize lines of communication for information sharing, disaster preparedness, and relationship building. As residents often live in a different community than they work, movement and communication throughout the District is necessary. WestCOG to act as hub for information dissemination from Federal and State organizations to the Region's municipalities. Develop database of organizations providing resources and support within the District for residents and businesses to benefit during a time of disaster and/or resources needed for advancement.

*Action 6: Develop a grant coordination team that strategically plans for, develops and manages federal, state, and foundation grant opportunities.*

Within the WestCOG economic development team, dedicated staff to coordinate grants within the District to leverage all opportunities from the State and Federal governments and nonprofits regarding funding opportunities. Utilize the Federal Infrastructure Bill opportunities to position the District for flexible and resilient growth and recovery preparation.



Main Street, Newtown, CT

# Goal II: Improve infrastructure

Maintain, improve, and develop the region’s infrastructure and transportation conditions to encourage robust equitable economic development through the movement of goods and people.

Objectives & Actions	Partners	Cost
C. Provide reliable, fast, and affordable broadband and mobile communication services for all residents and businesses	WestCOG, CTDEEP, regional providers	\$20,000,000
D. Generate reliable, resilient, affordable and adequate electricity access and service	Eversource, partners	\$400,000
7. Advance Distributed Generation, including residential and business solar, alternate energy sources	CTDEEP, Eversource, municipalities	\$200,000
8. Energy storage (batteries and thermal mass) and generators for all critical needs. HVAC (heat pumps) and vehicle fleet electrification, including, upgrades to the electric grid, service to homes and businesses, and charging infrastructure. Modernize and build redundancy into electric grid	CTDEEP, municipalities, Eversource	\$200,000
E. Improve transportation systems and resources to support local economies ★	WestCOG, CTDOT,	NA

## Objective C: Provide reliable, fast, and affordable broadband and mobile communication services for all residents and businesses

Connectivity enables economic growth as the global economy relies more and more on broadband and internet connections for success. As technology continues to advance, internet and electronic data sharing will continue to be pillars for economic development and future growth. WestCOG will advocate for broadband and 5G within the Region, ensuring all households and business districts are connected via strong internet to move data seamlessly. Key partners such as municipalities, private developers and local broadband providers will help to determine gaps for smooth, unerrupted coverage. Continue to allow for adaptability and growth opportunities within the District to ensure connections strengthen for communications and internet access. Continue to advocate for a high-tech infrastructure to help position businesses for resiliency and strengthen their competition. This effort will position the District to attract more businesses as technically strong digital communication. The attractive flexible “work from home” has grown within the Region, increasing the value of quality of life with smooth internet connection for personal, business-to-business and educational needs. The Cloud and internet connections bring resiliency to keep business moving forward in times of resiliency and disaster. Protecting companies and their data through cyber security is needed as cyber-attacks are an existing threat to the increase data movement over the internet. This is an area to focus resilient practices and prepare for cyber-attacks moving forward.

## Objective D: Generate reliable, resilient, affordable and adequate electricity access and service

With increased concern regarding climate change and the unpredictability of natural disasters, a resilient electric grid is necessary for a thriving economy and community safety. Energy backups and storage and alternate energy sources are vulnerable to climate change driven natural disasters. The effects of unpredictable climate change disasters continue to be a threat to the region. Collaboration with local energy providers is needed to determine vulnerable conditions and strive to increase strength of the backups and alternate energy options.

### Action 7: Advance Distributed Generation, including residential and business solar, alternate energy sources

Work with municipalities, federal and state governments to increase solar generated power and install solar panels to feed the grid on most public buildings. Increase building alternative energy, encourage/incentivize private development to incorporate alternate energy sources such as solar, wind, new technologies, and resiliency strategies.

### Action 8: Energy storage (batteries and thermal mass) and generators for all critical needs. HVAC (heat pumps) and vehicle fleet electrification, including, upgrades to the electric grid, service to homes and businesses, and charging infrastructure. Modernize and build redundancy into electric grid.

As natural disasters occur, the disruption they cause has a negative impact on the economy. The region, particularly property owners and utility providers, will move to modernize

and build redundancy into electric grid, consider burying electric lines, increase alternate energy sources in public transportation vehicle fleet electrification, upgrades to the electric grid, service to homes and businesses, and charging infrastructure.

### Objective E: Develop efficient, resilient, uncongested transportation infrastructure ★

The movement of people and products are necessary for the local economy to be successful, and this Economic Plan defers to the planning strategy outlined in WestCOG's adopted Transportation Plans\*. These plans serve as a guide for developing a transportation system that is not only accessible, safe, and reliable, but also contributes to the economy and to a high quality of life for residents. The Plans will reflect the region's current conditions, identifies future transportation needs, and recommend projects to meet those needs.

While the entirety of WestCOG's Transportation Plans are integral to the Economic Plan's strategy, the following transportation topics were raised in the CEDS Update Planning Process:

**Highway.** Collaborate with partners to address infrastructure challenges on major highways such as I-95, I-684, and I-84 interchange project to reduce congestion connecting CT to NY

**Bus.** Public transportation is valuable to a strong economy, moving workforce and consumers throughout the region. Increasing connectivity to create a seamless travel network and alternate transportation option. Continue to look for alternate energy options of solar, electric, and beyond within the public transportation arena.

**Passenger Rail.** Improvements in rail trip times, reliability, transfers, and connectivity are important for workforce, tourism, and business potential.

**Safety.** Safety is an integral component of transportation planning and is considered for all modes such as pedestrian, bicycle, vehicle, and transit. Safety is necessary for public transportation to be fully adopted by the general public as an attractive transportation option.

**Pedestrian.** Create streets that are safe and comfortable for all users. When utilized in downtowns and mixed use areas, sidewalks encourage pedestrians to frequent local businesses and promote a healthy lifestyle.

**Bicycle.** Developing a bicycle route network could provide alternate options to various routes and reduce vehicular dependency and road congestion. The region does attract cycling enthusiast as a tourist destination, for the District's natural beauty and pleasing cycling experience.

**Electric Vehicles.** Continue to add to the electric vehicle recharging network as it's necessary to support the many electric cars registered the region (WestCOG has the most in the state). An improved EV charging station network can also assist electric vehicles traveling between New York and Massachusetts .

**Freight.** Increased rail freight can reduce freight demands on already congested roadways. Low railroad bridge heights currently limit underutilized commercial and industrial land.

**Trails.** Connect and extend trail networks.



Traffic on the Merritt Parkway

\* WestCOG's Transportation Plans refers to Housatonic Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization's (HVMPO) and South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization's (SWRMPO) Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and its anticipated updated version under the new name, the Metropolitan Transportation Plan)

# Goal III: Cultivate and Support a Diverse Workforce

Attract, retain, and develop a skilled and diverse workforce that meets the needs of existing employers and is attractive to new firms providing high quality careers.

Objectives& Actions	Partners	Cost
F. Develop and improve human capital. ★	Workforce Development organizations, Schools	\$650,000
9. Expose middle school/high school students to full range of employment opportunities, future job openings, earnings potential, educational and experience requirements, with career progression.	Schools, BOE, DOE	\$500,000
10. Provide high school students with the opportunity to obtain summer internships with local	RSPs, Universities,	\$50,000
11. Provide training, both educational and experiential, needed to support a sectoral diverse and	Workforce Development	\$100,000
G. Integrate economically under involved groups.	Workforce Development organizations, Schools	\$100,000
12. Support the under skilled, seniors, handicapped, those with criminal records for an oppor-	Nonprofits, municipali-	\$100,000

## Objective F: Develop and improve human capital★

Attract and train new and existing populations to engage in the district's economy.

*Action 9: Expose children and young adults to teach them about the full range of employment opportunities, including future job openings, earnings potential, educational and experience requirements, and career progression*

Work to incorporate early in the school curriculums, education on various business industries, skills needed, resume creation, resources available for job seekers, and career path exploration. Financial and technology education are valuable in most forms of business and should be continually taught in K - 12.

*Action 10: Provide high school students with the opportunity to obtain summer internships with local employers*

Regional Sector Partners can work closely with high schools along with universities to expose students at a younger age to a range of workforce development opportunities. Exposure to a range of business environments, working with mentors to grow interest and help guide students into the career paths will help develop a more experienced, nimble workforce.

*Action 11: Create and expand workforce retraining, upskilling, and "career ladder" programs*

Developing a path for training, education for specific skills, will enable many opportunities for all residents to be gainfully employed in the region. Engage and promote the workforce development regional resources, The Work Place and Northwest Regional Workforce Board. They offer certification programs to support multiple sectors from culinary to medical to CDL drivers. Municipalities and Chambers to share these resources with their businesses and residents.

## Objective G: Integrate economically under involved groups

Encourage opportunity for all residents to be included in the regional workforce, obtain training and skillsets to support local businesses, nonprofits and municipalities.

*Action 12: Support the under skilled, handicapped, seniors, ex-convicts and those with criminal records.*

Inclusive workforce training is necessary to ensure the under skilled, seniors, ex-cons, and the disabled can actively participate in the local economy and workforce. Provide training, both educational and experiential, is needed to support sectoral diversity and a resilient regional economy.





*Out for dinner, Norwalk CT*



*Norwalk Art Space, Norwalk, CT*



*Business opening, Ridgefield CT*

# Goal IV: Cultivate and Retain Business Sectoral Diversity

Foster an environment that is conducive to creativity and innovation, while helping to strengthen existing business clusters and growing entrepreneurs and start-ups

Objectives& Actions	Partners	Cost
H. Diversify the regional economy ★	WestCOG, regional partners, municipalities	\$650,000
13. Create and leverage a regionally prominent tech sector, with an emphasis on data science	RSPs, Chambers of Commerce, private sector, economic de-	\$100,000
14. Broaden the Region’s financial sector into new lines of business (e.g., cryptocurrency)	Private sector, econom-ic development	\$100,000
15. Support business formation/growth and consider incentives for business attraction	Economic develop-ment, municipalities	\$50,000
16. Expand local production of food and goods	Municipalities, non-profits, DOA	\$200,000
17. Develop a Regional Agricultural Viability Study	WestCOG, DOA, DEEP	\$150,000
18. Develop educational forum for municipalities/partners on emerging business industries	WCEDD, WestCOG, Chambers of Com-merce, State of CT	\$50,000
I. Improve start-up, business development experience for business owners	Municipalities, Cham-bers of Commerce	\$350,000
19. Communicate business creation process and support resources available for small busi-ness owners	Municipalities, Cham-bers of Commerce	\$50,000
20. Implement online permitting for municipalities, creating an easy access digital govern-ment	Municipalities	\$100,000
21. Reduce health care costs for small businesses	State of CT, Federal government	\$200,000
J. Make the District a leader in innovation	Municipalities, WestCOG, state	\$750,000
22. Create and support coworking, makerspaces, business incubators, and other entrepre-neur, small business support resources in every municipality	Municipalities, WCEDD	\$500,000
23. Make Connecticut a telework center, leveraging quality of life benefits	DECD, Tourism, mu-nicipalities, Chambers of Commerce	\$50,000
24. Improve local land use regulations and streamline permitting processes to promote flexible reuse of underutilized office and retail properties post-pandemic.	Municipalities, Land Use Departments	\$100,000
25. Consider the approved emerging cannabis business sector to bring investment, tax revenue and jobs to the region	Municipalities	\$100,000

## Objective H: Diversify the regional economy ★

Encourage development and creation of new, supporting and expanding business sectors to represent a wide range of products and services.

### Action 13: Create and leverage a regionally prominent tech sector, with an emphasis on data science

Data Science is a growing sector which provides support to many financial and technology businesses in the region. The southern subregion is home to many tech and financial businesses and jobs. By attracting ancillary business sectors who provide supportive resources such as data science, will

provide a resilient ecosystem for workforce and Technology cluster growth and expansion in the region.

### Action 14: Broaden the region’s financial sector into new lines of business (e.g., cryptocurrency)

Benefits of the proximity to the financial headquarters of NYC, the District continues to be a financial sector cluster. With an educated and financially skilled workforce, attracting, evolving new financial sectors such as cryptocurrency and others can be realized. Leveraging relationships with the Chambers of Commerce and economic development professional for outreach and business expansion and attraction.

*Action 15: Support business formation/growth and job creation in underrepresented sectors*

Support makerspaces, libraries and universities to help develop underrepresented business sectors. Innovation and access to technology and equipment along with collaboration, help generate and influence business creation. Work with RSPs to identify supportive industry which would help with supply chain access in effort to bring these resources closer in proximity to reduce interruption of production and progress in times of stress.

*Action 16: Expand local production of food and goods*

With climate change upon us, food production is essential. WestCOG to work to encourage urban farming, land leases to farmers, and hydroponic gardening to increase crop production within the region. Assist manufacturers in developing essential products closer to reduce transport of goods distance and obtain easier access to goods in times of stress.

*Action 17: Develop a regional Agriculture viability study*

Many of the communities in Western CT developed around farming, however over time there has been a steep decline in the sector in the region. Before this sector is lost in the Region, WestCOG will conduct a study of regional agricultural viability. This study will determine what types of agriculture and what techniques (i.e. biotech, conventional, organic) can be economically viable in this unique area, where land values— but also disposable income and interest in healthy and local food— are high, and markets are close.

*Action 18: Develop educational forum for municipalities/partners on emerging business industries*

Provide education regarding emerging industries and how communities and local business can benefit. Work with economic development professional and chief elected officials to understand legal issues, revenue benefits, and job generation on evolving business sectors to encourage execution where it makes sense.

## **Objective I: Improve start-up, business development experience for business owners**

*Action 19: Communicate business creation process, and support resources available for small business owners*

Municipalities to provide business creation and support services online for easy access for entrepreneurs and small business owners. Encourage networking events and speaker engagements with local chambers to educate communities on development of business and resources available.

*Action 20: Implement digital government for online permitting*

Municipalities to provide online permitting for efficient ease of access for residents and businesses so all schedules are able to participate in a timely manner. Online services allow governments services to be accessed during natural disasters and other distributions where in person processing is difficult.

*Action 21: Reduce health care costs for small businesses*

Increasing cost of healthcare for small businesses and their employees create financial difficulties for small businesses. Work with state legislation as an issue within the District to consider relief programs where it's possible.

## **Objective J: Be a Region a leader in innovation**

By providing the environments needed for innovative businesses to flourish Connecticut can become a leader in innovation.

*Action 22: Create and support coworking, makerspaces, business incubators, and other business support resources in every municipality*

Entrepreneurs thrive where there's creativity, businesses can blossom, patents are developed and like-minded entrepreneurs gather. Having access to tools, computers, space can develop new business sectors, manufacturing innovation and job generation with skill development. Encourage the development of these hubs in most communities.

*Action 23: Make Connecticut a telework center*

Promote and highlight the quality of life, broadband infrastructure, resilient practices and protections that make up the region's reliable eco system for "work from anywhere". The connectivity environment for data movement along with family benefits of strong schools, access to metropolitan area when needed, charming communities with attractive amenities make the District desirable for a telework workforce.

*Action 24: Improve local land use regulations and streamline permitting processes to promote flexible reuse of underutilized office and retail properties post-pandemic.*

The pandemic brought many changes to society, including how to do business. With companies using less office space, consideration for land use repurposing of building space will evolve moving forward. Considerations of flexible zoning to pivot the vacant space and buildings to accommodate the communities needs and market demand such as housing, warehousing and distribution centers.

*Action 25: Consider the new addition of the approved, emerging, and lucrative cannabis industry to bring investment, tax revenue and jobs to the region*

Many states have approved retail, manufacturing, and production of cannabis. Neighboring state of Massachusetts business representatives shared the success of job generation and tax revenue they have seen over the last three years during the agriculture focus group. Communities within WestCOG to consider the benefits this emerging business sector. WestCOG to provide education and market updates to CEOs overtime to provide knowledge and consideration.

# Goal V: Prepare the District for Resiliency

Promote responsible strategies that contribute to economic development disaster preparation and sustainability

Objectives & Actions	Partners	Cost
K: Employ hazard mitigation strategies to reduce District’s exposure and increase resiliency ★	WestCOG, municipalities, property owners, DEMHS,	NA
L. Build for a changing climate	Municipalities, State	\$10,800,000
26. Insulate buildings to reduce HVAC loads, use passive heating and cooling, and promote water efficiency	Municipalities, Private sector, State of CT, WestCOG	\$10,000,000
27. Harden digital systems against cyberthreats, preparation against cyber attacks	Municipalities, Private sector, State of CT, WestCOG	\$500,000
28. Reduce use of fossil fuels for transportation and space heating	CTDOT, Municipal-	\$100,000
29. Shorten supply chains, increase food production within 100 miles, manufacture more products within 500 miles, particularly those addressing critical needs	DOA, municipalities, private sector, State of CT, WestCOG	\$200,000
M. Reduce risk of outages of electricity, internet, supply chain and overall disruptions	Building officials, utility companies, municipalities	\$100,000
N. Create mutual aid agreements for critical but non-emergency services	WestCOG, Municipi-	\$25,000
O. Increase alert/notification systems and public information throughout the region	DEMHS, Municipali-	\$50,000
P. Provide businesses resources for disaster recovery	Municipalities,	\$200,000
30. Educate municipalities and businesses about disaster preparation and recovery	WestCOG, Chambers of Commerce, DECD	\$100,000
31. Work with municipalities to make recovery centers for businesses	WestCOG, Workforce Boards, Chambers of Commerce	\$100,000
Q. Diversify revenue sources	Municipalities,	\$250,000

## Objective K: Employ hazard mitigation strategies to reduce the District’s exposure and increase resiliency. ★

Natural hazards and disasters cause immediate suffering for those impacted as well as lingering impacts through the economy as a region recovers. The Economic Plan defers to the strategies outlined in WestCOG’s Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP)\*. The HMP aims to reduce loss of life, damage to property and infrastructure, costs to residents and businesses, and municipal service costs because of natural hazards and disasters.

While the entirety of WestCOG’s HMP is integral to the Economic Plan’s strategy, the following resiliency topics were raised in the CEDS Update Planning Process:

**Stormwater Systems.** Increased flood events and extreme weather events can be mitigated with improvements to stormwater systems. Upgrades to culverts and drainage can mitigate high volumes of rainfall and overflowing rivers which in turn reduces impact on residents and business districts.

**Dams.** Strategic planning to determine which dams can be removed and which require fortification. A dam poses a risk to residents and business districts downstream and should only be utilized when necessary.

**Green Infrastructure and low impact development** provide options for development in business districts that also work to mitigate flood events and increased impervious surfaces, inherent in development.

**Rising Sea Level.** Coastal property provides benefits and risks

\* WestCOG’s Hazard Mitigation Plan is refers to Western Connecticut Council of Governments’ Multi-Jurisdiction Mitigation Plan Update for 2021-2026 or the next plan that supplants it. The plan also include individual municipal annexes providing specific strategies for respective communities.

for communities; the locations are highly desirable for real estate, can open new markets, and allows the use of coastal ports. And on the other hand, are inherently at risk to coastal flooding and storm surge.

### Objective L: Build for a changing climate

#### *26. Insulate buildings to reduce HVAC loads, use passive heating and cooling, and promote water efficiency*

Encourage building codes to incorporate resilient energy practices. Provide education to land use professionals and residents on technology and alternate energy and water efficiency behaviors and options.

#### *27. Harden digital systems against cyberthreats, preparation against cyber attacks*

Develop communication on cyber security protocols for residents and businesses to protect their data and information from cyber-attacks.

#### *28. Reduce use of fossil fuels for transportation and space heating*

Encouraging alternate energy in the transportation arena. Incorporate more electrical vehicles in public transportation and municipal fleets. WestCOG to promote incentives from CTDEEP to residents and businesses to consider alternate energy vehicles and best practices.

#### *29. Shorten supply chains, increase food production within 100 miles, manufacture more products within 500 miles, particularly those addressing critical needs*

Producing essential goods, food and reducing supply chain connections will create a more resilient community. Local food productions would allow self-sufficiency.

### Objective M: Reduce risk of outages of electricity, internet, supply chain and overall disruptions

Engage local energy and communications providers such as Eversource, Spectrum and Frontier to maintain their equipment and lines for resiliency against natural disasters. Open internet access will provide relief of communication and business during interruptions. Flexible transportation of supply chain from trucks, rail and air for flexibility to move products as needed during times of interrupted services.

### Objective N: Create mutual aid agreements for critical but non-emergency services

Support promoting regional services such as Health Departments, Fire and Police if the communities agree and will obtain economic relief on local municipal budgets.

### Objective O: Increase alert/notification systems and public information throughout the region

State DEMHS groups have been established to move pertinent emergency communication to the nine COGs in the state who then push out to the state municipalities. Municipalities host

red alert sign ups on their website for businesses and residents to register. WestCOG to communicate these emergency tools through newsletter and social media.

### Objective P: Provide businesses resources for disaster recovery

#### *Action 30: Educate municipalities and businesses about disaster preparation and recovery*

Promote the SBA, SBDC and WBDC tools for emergency preparedness especially prior to hurricane season, giving time for action prior to season. Utilize Chambers of Commerce and economic development professionals to communicate these value tools to their business networks.

#### *Action 31: Work with municipalities to make recovery centers for businesses*

Be sure municipalities have the information and tools to support business prior to interruptions so they are able to prepare and recover as needed.

### Objective Q: Diversify revenue sources

Create a range of revenue sources for municipalities from fees, tax income and consideration to incorporate new emerging business to assist with local tax revenue.



Flooding in Norwalk

# Goal VI: Promote the Region’s Attractiveness

Forge a favorable regional entity that is well known globally and inspires pride in residents, offering desirable living and business environments, strong educational options, educated workforce and natural beauty

Objectives & Actions	Partners	Cost
R. Provide amenities that attract and keep employees in the District through all career stages ★	Art Councils, municipalities, WestCOG, State	\$2,950,00
32. Support a strong and diverse arts community (audio, video, physical, digital)	Chambers of Commerce, Municipalities, Arts Councils	\$1,500,000
33. Develop and maintain abundant outdoor spaces	Municipalities,	\$500,000
34. Create and maintain a vibrant economy with a full range of restaurants and entertainment	Municipalities,	\$200,000
35. Create diverse housing options at low, medium, and high price points	Municipalities, Private	\$300,000
36. Support quality education and health care	Municipalities, State of	\$50,000
37. Support Municipal Revitalization		\$300,000
38. Plan for Sustainable Waste Disposal Services		\$100,000
S. Develop a digital reputation and presence that is positive and aspirational	WestCOG, State of CT,	
39. Work with regional marketing partners, Visit Western CT, through CT Tourism to promote	WestCOG, Municipali-	\$50,000
40. Encourage all businesses to have an Internet, social media, online presence	Municipalities, Cham-	\$50,000
41. Ensure all destinations are listed on ctvisit.com to leverage the state resources	Municipalities, Non-	\$25,000
42. Lead a campaign to pursue national/international awards and recognition	WestCOG, Art Councils	\$50,000

## Objective R: Provide amenities that attract and keep employees in the District through all career stages ★

The district intends to capitalize on many of its quality of life features in arts, nature, and community and to expand on those benefits where possible.

### Action 32: Support a strong and diverse arts community (audio, video, physical, digital)

The arts a robust business sector within the region. Attracting talent from nearby NYC, artists naturally are part of eco system. Arts include Fine arts within galleries, but also off-Broadway productions, television and movie production teams, digital arts, marketing and advertising agencies as well. There’s a growing need for artists’ lofts and studios at affordable rates. The arts generate many jobs of all levels.

### Action 33: Develop and maintain abundant outdoor spaces including interconnected regionwide trail systems

Town Greens were historically gathering places for community residents for gathering. The need for community events and public outdoor spaces exists today more than ever. The pandemic saw people flocking to outdoor trail systems and community spaces. These amenities are attractive to residents.

### Action 34: Create and maintain a vibrant economy with a full range of restaurants, entertainment, and nightlife. Promote local character and unique experiences

Quality of life for young professional includes entertainment, social gathering locations, a range of restaurant food options and nightlife. A strategy for retaining young people would be to continue to incorporate these vibrant destinations to attract a diverse population. Local character provides a unique charm, the District to promote the quality of life and benefits the historic yet modernized communities have to offer new residents and businesses.

### Action 35: Create a diversity of housing options at low, medium, and high price points

Local planning and zoning to consider regulations that incorporate a range of housing types for all levels of employment and family considerations. Housing for all people in all jobs is needed for success and vibrancy within the Region. Attracting a diverse community to satisfying all workforce needs.

### Action 36: Support quality education and health care

Continue to support local educational operations and healthcare facilities in their development and evolution needs to support the community at large. Tighten relationship and encourage collaboration within these sectors.

*Action 37: Support Municipal Revitalization*

Municipalities in the district have access to existing resources and amenities, with investment, can be revitalized and spur economic activity. This may include areas near train stations, riverfront downtowns, or brownfield properties. Investment in these resources can allow communities to repurpose buildings, maintain historic character, and reclaim contaminated property.

*Action 38: Plan for Sustainable Waste Disposal Services*

The District is facing municipal waste challenges from transport, disposal, and recycling. Implementing a plan for sustainable waste solutions can be an attractive amenity for prospective residents and businesses.

**Objective S: Develop a digital reputation and presence that is positive and aspirational**

The District's brand aims to reflect the opportunities and strengths of the region's economy through marketing and technology.

*Action 39: Work with regional marketing partners, Visit Western CT, through CT Tourism to promote our region's highlights*  
WestCOG to work with state tourism channels to encourage marketing efforts and promotion of the region's assets, businesses and community benefits. Consider grant funding for brand development and campaign for the region, utilize to promote the region's assets and recruit business and residents.

*Action 40: Encourage all businesses to have an Internet presence*

SCORE, SBDC and WBDC and libraries work with local small businesses to assist with your marketing tools necessary. Online ecommerce, social media marketing and selling and websites are necessary for most businesses.

*Action 41: Ensure that all destinations are listed on ctvisit.com*

Provide instructional information to region economic development contacts for local business distribution on the process of obtaining a business listing on the state tourism sites. Share and promote hashtags and marketing strategies with WCEDD and Chambers #visitct.

*Action 42: Lead a campaign to pursue national/international awards and recognition*

WestCOG and WCEDD to participate in national and international award opportunities.



Top. Horses sculpture at Brookfield Town Hall. Below, the Maritime Aquarium



CT Visit Advertisement



CANNONDALE GENERAL STORE

DRY GOODS & VARIETY - Est. 1789

THOMAS K. LIBBY  
ANTIQUE - CERAMICS

ONE WAY  
NO LEFT  
TURN

Cannondale Station, Wilton

# EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

WCEDD Council understands that for a plan to be implemented effectively, it must be monitored and evaluated. As the CEDS is a five-year economic development plan, each year we are required to submit an annual progress report to the U.S. EDA. WestCOG will report on our ability to raise funding needed to execute out our goals and objectives and to make progress on the actions listing within the proposed timeframe. The WCEDD will present their annual progress of the CEDS activities to the Council of Governments annually.

## Performance Measures

With the data collection complete, the strategic plan developed, and regional project concepts prioritized, The Western Connecticut Economic Development District Council will implement this plan and measure its progress continually. A performance measure has been generated for each of the Objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan. They are provided detailed below.

### Goal I. Build Out the Regional Economic Development Program

**Objective A.** Percentage of objectives and actions from the Economic Plan that are completed, in progress, and inactive.

**Objective B.** Count of meetings, number of attendees, and represented agencies.

### Goal II. Improve Infrastructure

**Objective C.** Percentage of households with access to fiber, split up by households.

**Objective D.** Count of buildings per day without electricity access.

**Objective E.** Percentage of objectives and actions from the Transportation Plans that are completed, in progress, and inactive.

### Goal III. Cultivate and Support a Diverse Workforce

**Objective F.** Statistics on education attainment of the district's population.

**Objective G.** Statistics on unemployment.

### Goal IV. Cultivate and Retain Business Sectoral Diversity

**Objective H.** Statistics on businesses by sector.

**Objective I.** Count of new businesses by sector.

**Objective J.** Count of new businesses by sector, emphasis on technology sectors.

### Goal V. Prepare the Region for Resiliency

**Objective K.** Percentage of objectives and actions from the Hazard Mitigation Plan that are completed, in progress, and inactive.

**Objective L.** Percentage of climate related objectives and actions from the Hazard Mitigation Plan that are completed, in progress, and inactive.

**Objective M.** Count of buildings per day without electricity access.

**Objective N.** Count of municipalities with mutual aid agreements for non-emergency services.

**Objective O.** Count of municipalities utilizing alert/notification systems.

**Objective P.** Count of municipal websites with a link or dedicated page to disaster preparation and recovery for businesses.

**Objective Q.** Count of revenue sources per municipality.

### Goal VI. Promote the Region's Attractiveness

**Objective R.** Count of workers living in the District and by municipality.

**Objective S.** Count of outreach efforts, and where possible statistics on interaction.



Shortt's Organic Farm at Farmer's Market

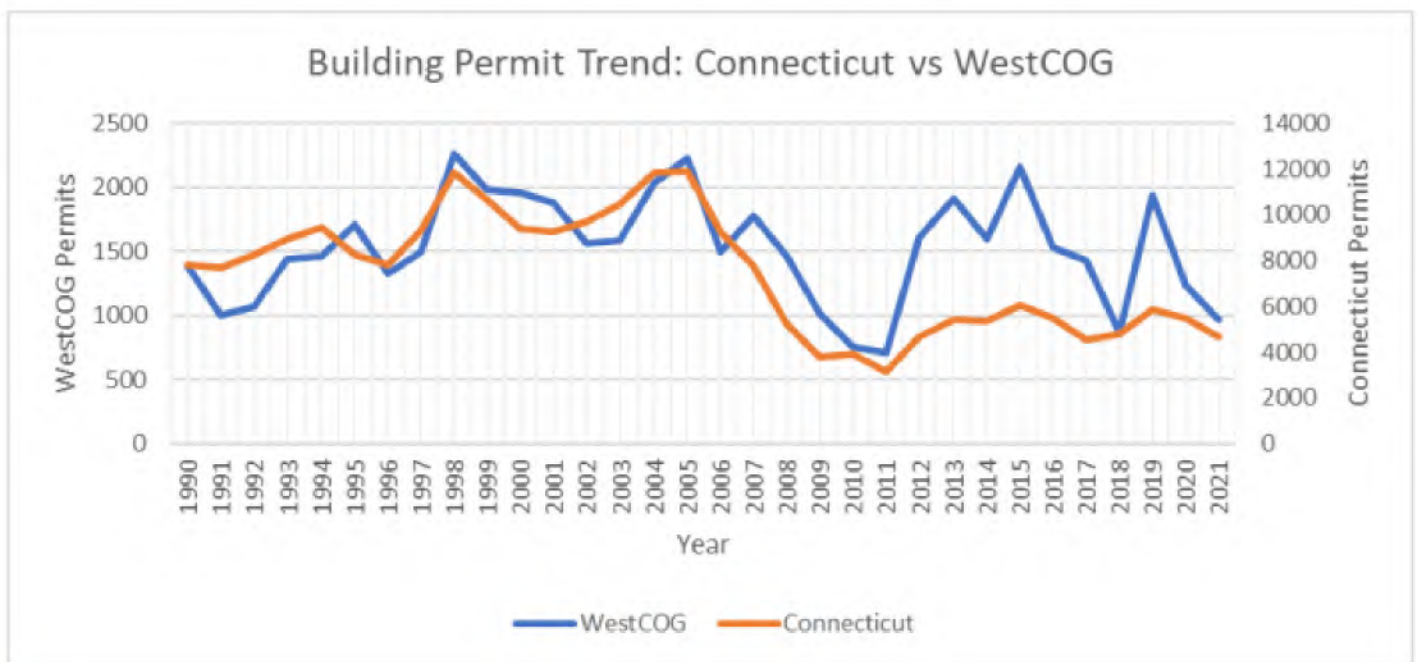
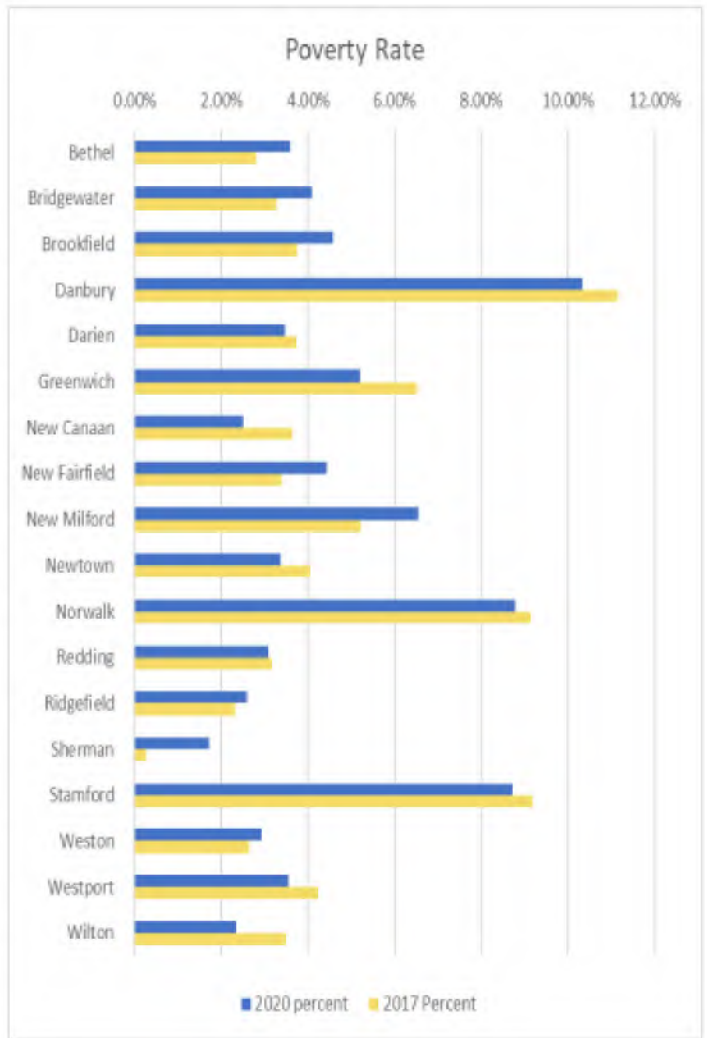
# Annual Performance Reports

WestCOG is required to submit an annual performance report to the EDA reflecting the activity executed to date on the various CEDS initiatives. This is an opportunity to provide an update on the progress made within the District and to consider developments to the projects. Any updated CEDS Performance report resulting in a major change to the project list will be made available for public comment. The WCEDD will review the CEDS and action plans during their meetings to guide efforts of implementation of the CEDS. A sample of potential data visuals that will be used for annual reports are provided.

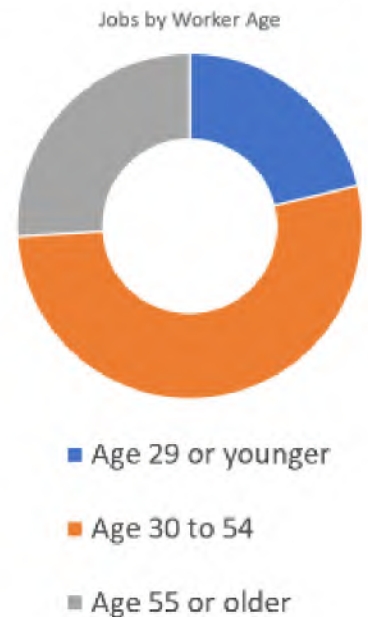
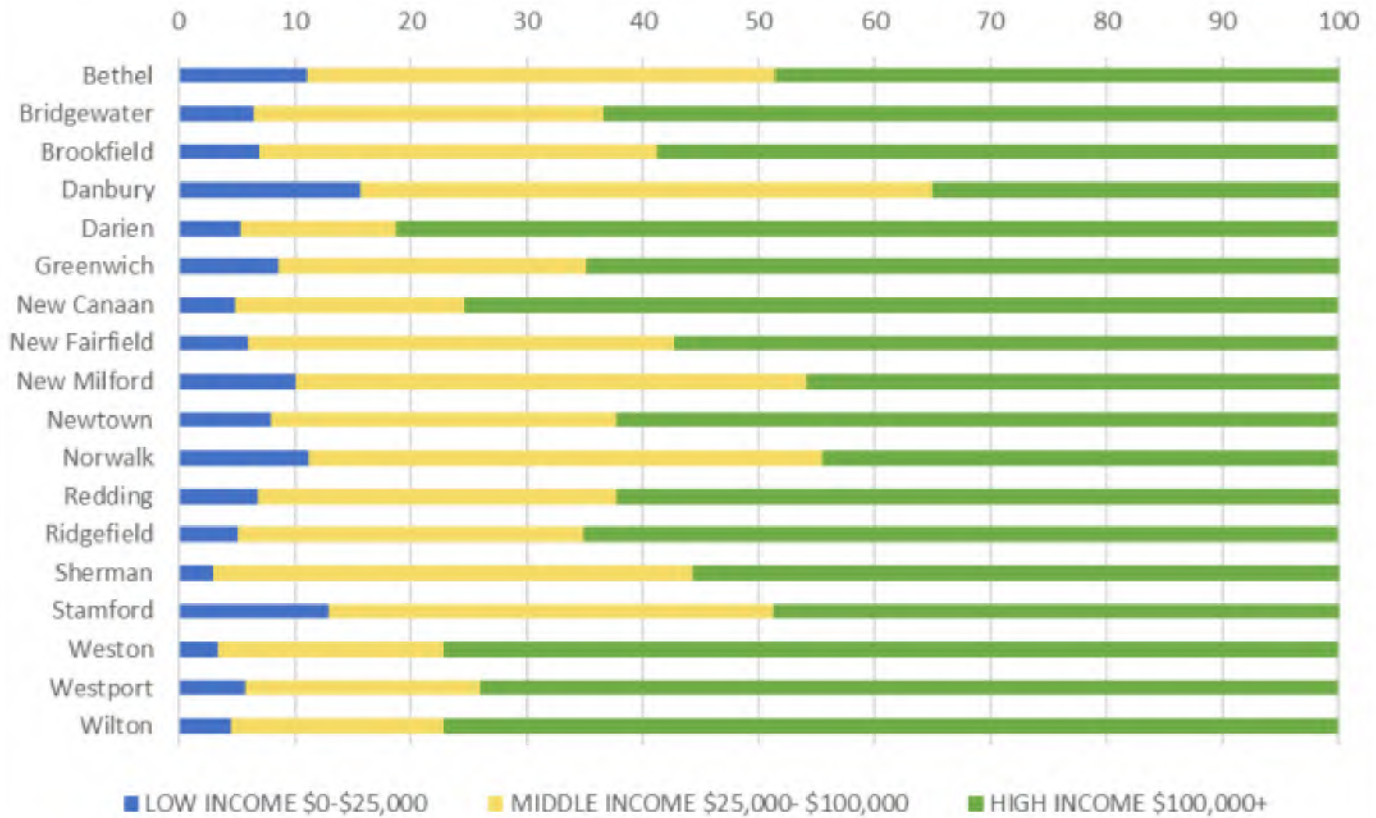
## Implementation

The success of this CEDS will ultimately depend upon the coalition of businesses, elected officials, local governments, non-profit organizations, and individuals who have worked to create the plan, to continue to work together to update the plan as needed.

Leveraging resources and the influence of both the public-private sector partnerships will be critical in the implementation of the Region's goals and develop protections against disasters in all forms. Developing the political support and obtaining the funding necessary for investments will require the business community and the public to be vocal for their support of key regional projects and needs. Also, projects spearheaded by nonprofit and for-profit organizations may require the support of elected officials and perhaps legislative changes at the local or state level. Only by working together can all groups achieve their goals and preparations needed for growth, protection, and advancement.



## Income Distribution 2020



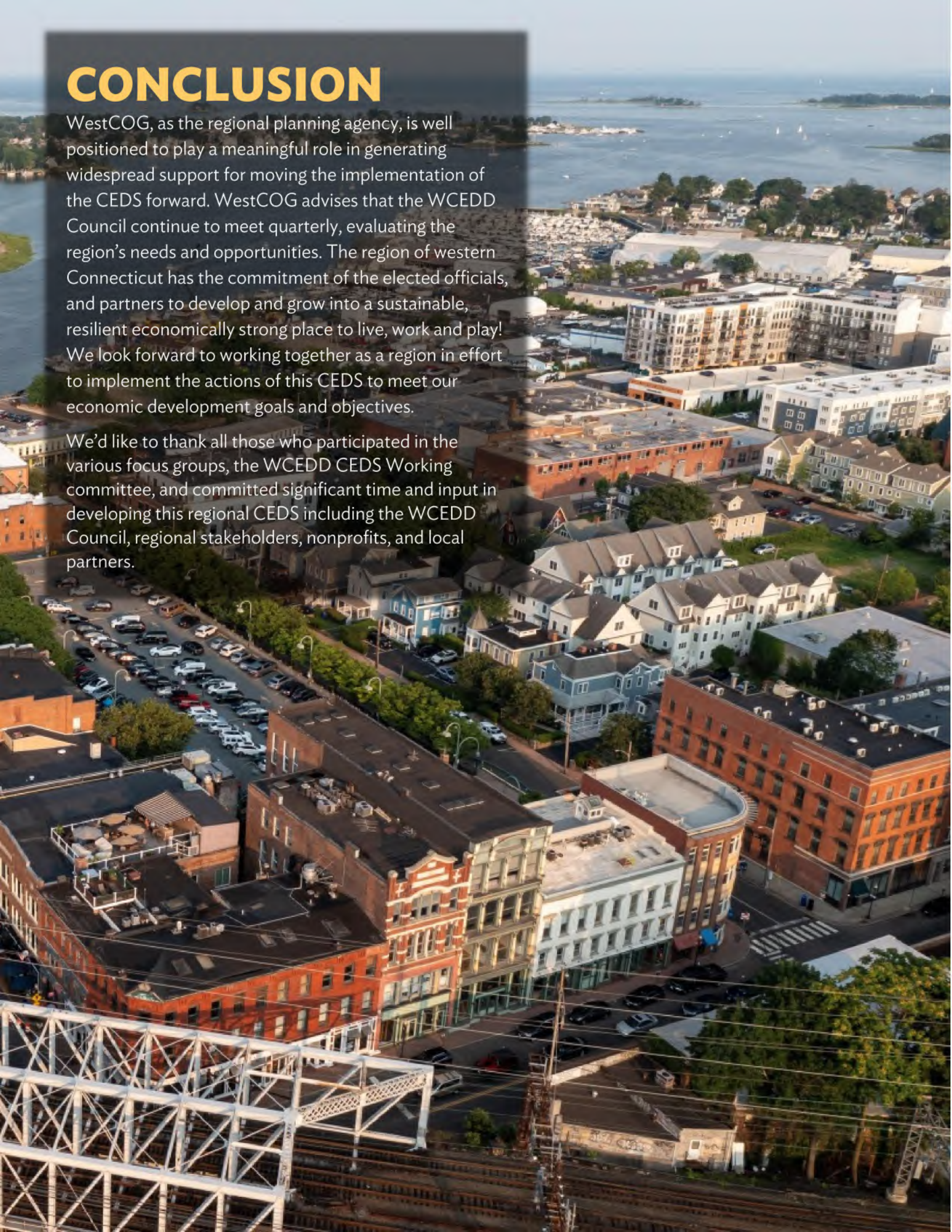


South Norwalk

# CONCLUSION

WestCOG, as the regional planning agency, is well positioned to play a meaningful role in generating widespread support for moving the implementation of the CEDS forward. WestCOG advises that the WCEDD Council continue to meet quarterly, evaluating the region's needs and opportunities. The region of western Connecticut has the commitment of the elected officials, and partners to develop and grow into a sustainable, resilient economically strong place to live, work and play! We look forward to working together as a region in effort to implement the actions of this CEDS to meet our economic development goals and objectives.

We'd like to thank all those who participated in the various focus groups, the WCEDD CEDS Working committee, and committed significant time and input in developing this regional CEDS including the WCEDD Council, regional stakeholders, nonprofits, and local partners.



# APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUPS

## Sector Focus Groups

Created from the research conducted during the preparation of this CEDS, a summary listing of Western Connecticut’s primary Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) as a location for business was prepared below. The strengths and opportunities help to identify attributes that support business retention, attraction, creation, expansion and transition. The weaknesses and threats help to identify community and regional attributes that may require attention to improve Western Connecticut’s competitiveness. Both provide a foundation for important goals, objectives and actions contained in the CEDS.

The CEDS development process included input from seven business sector focus groups including Arts & Tourism, Small business in northern subregion, Small Business in southern subregion, Real Estate, Healthcare, Agriculture/Cannabis, Workforce Development & Education, Technology RSP (Regional Sector Partnerships) WCEDD Council, CEDS Working Committee and the Region’s Elected Officials.

The following sector focus groups meetings were held:

Focus Group	Date	Attendees
Arts & Tourism	February 9, 2022 via Zoom	John Rudolph, Small business owner, The MAP Agency Sandy Pelletier, Gallery owner, Sorell Gallery Tatiana Mori, Member, Greenwich Arts Council Duvian Montoya, Artistic Director, The Norwalk Marti Etter, Director, The Ballet School of Stamford Foundation Allison Gray Sander, Director, Wilton Historical Society Maura Newell Juan, Business owner, 72 Architects Jayson Roberts, Director, New Milford Village Center for the Arts Allison Stockel, Executive Director, Ridgefield Playhouse Gregory Wencek, Chair, Danbury Cultural Commission Howard Lasser, Executive Director, Brookfield Craft Center Lauren DiMartino, Business Mgr, Newtown Edmond Town Hall Janice Chrzescijanek, Bethel Economic Development Director, Town of Bethel David Green, Executive Director, Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County Lisa Scails, Executive Director, Western Connecticut Cultural Alliance
Real Estate	February 23, 2022 via Zoom	Hal Kurfehs, Vice President, Scalzo Commercial George Walker, Broker, Advantage Realty Greg Steiner, property owner, Berkshire Corporate Park Win Baum, Owner/broker, WEB Realty Bryan Atherton, Broker/owner, Atherton & Associates Maura Ruby, General Manager, Danbury Fair Mall Matthew Seebeck, General Manager, General Manager, SONO Mall

Small Business North	March 9, 2022 via Zoom	<p>Erica Sullivan, Small business owner, Castle Hill Chocolates</p> <p>Brooke Wyatt, Small business owner, Miss Confident Boutique</p> <p>Valerie Fallon, Small business owner, Indigo Blue retailer</p> <p>Mike Gallop, Small business owner, Twins BBQ</p> <p>Alice Hutchinson, Small business owner, Byrds Books</p> <p>Helen Brickfield, Events &amp; Membership Director, Danbury Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Mike Kaltschnee, Executive Director, Danbury Hackerspace</p> <p>Peter Gerald, Branch Manager, Newtown Savings Bank</p> <p>Rich Reynolds, Real estate agent, Reynolds Real Estate</p> <p>Glori Norwitt, EDC chair, Ridgefield Economic Development Commission</p>
Small Business South	March 16, 2022 via Zoom	<p>Brian Griffin, Executive Director, Norwalk Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Jennie Ripps, Small business owner, The Owl's Brew</p> <p>Jason Patlis, Executive Director, The Maritime Aquarium of Norwalk</p> <p>Sabrina Church, Norwalk Business &amp; Tourism Manager, City of Norwalk</p> <p>Felicia Rubinstein, Small business owner, HAVYN Coworking</p> <p>Layla Lisiewski, Small business owner, Greenwich Moms Group</p> <p>Fred Dimyan, Small business owner, POTOO Solutions</p> <p>Jarrett McGovern, Small business owner, Rise Brewing Company</p>
Workforce & Education	March 23, 2022 via Zoom	<p>David Souder, Interim Campus Director, UConn Stamford</p> <p>Joe Carbone, President &amp; CEO, The Work Place</p> <p>Tom Long, SVP Communications &amp; SCSEP Operations, The Work Place</p> <p>Pam LaRosa, Director One-Stop Workforce Operations, NWCT Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Rocky Young, CT Department of Labor</p> <p>John Kelly, Small business owner, Kellys Four Plus Granola</p> <p>Cathy Awwad, President &amp; CEO, Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board</p> <p>Kathleen Lindenmayer, Director of Career Success Center, Western Connecticut State university</p> <p>Patricia Smith, Small business owner, Carefinders</p>
Agriculture/Cannabis	March 30, 2022 via Zoom	<p>Adan Wood, Executive Director, CT Cannabis Chamber of Commerce</p> <p>Fred McKinney, Small business owner, BJM Solutions, LLC</p> <p>Ginnie Rae Clay, Executive Director, CT Office of the Social Equity Council</p> <p>Daniel Glissman, lawyer, CT Chamber of Commerce legal contact</p>
Healthcare	April 6, 2022 via Zoom	<p>Karen Gottlieb, Executive Director, AmericCares</p> <p>Cindy Lacouer, Candlewood Valley Health &amp; Rehabilitation Center</p> <p>Joann Elser, Executive Director, Village of Brookfield Commons</p> <p>Andrea Rynn, Assistant Vice President, Community Government and Public Relations, Nuvance</p>

# APPENDIX B: SWOT ANALYSIS

## SWOT Analysis – Key Findings

An analysis of the Region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) was conducted among the multiple business sector focus groups, chief elected officials, and the CEDS Working Committee. This analysis exercise contributed to forming the Region's vision, goals, objectives and actions included in the CEDS. The major subjects discussed in the analysis included workforce development, local education and their relationships with local businesses, broadband, transportation, public transportation, infrastructure, housing, resiliency, existing quality of life and benefits of living and working in Western Connecticut

### Strengths/Opportunities:

- Perfect place to open a business; the District is less expensive to run business than competitive nearby regions of New York and Massachusetts. There's easy access to these neighboring urban markets, an educated workforce, and business resources/support services.
- Region touts natural beauty with a variety of landscapes, trail systems, parks, rivers, beaches, hills, lakes, valleys, and open space.
- The District residents and workforce are highly educated, including a creative and culturally diverse workforce, education institutions support regional businesses and develop career paths for young professionals, in efforts to retain them to stay within the region/state.
- Great quality of life, ideal place to raise a family with strong public education K-12, multiple university systems.
- There are active workforce boards, workforce training programs, supporting local business sectors to help train unique skill-sets.
- Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs) have been developed for Technology, Healthcare and Advanced Manufacturing, in efforts to grow curriculum needs and internships for high school and college students.
- Location connection to NYC (rail and highway) provides vital links for businesses. Opportunity for improvements to the I-95/ New Haven rail line corridor, I-84, Danbury and New Canaan branch lines and increase public transportation routes/availability.
- Public electric charging network exist within region, future expansion of Electric Vehicle charging stations planned. The District has the highest number of electric cars registered in the state of Connecticut.
- Majority of business districts have ample internet/broadband capacity. Broadband connection is necessary, the internet has created global competition; all businesses need online presence.
- Telecommunication and utilities are reliable, there's a need to develop alternate energy sources, increasing resiliency through development of solar and wind energy generation.
- The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) has developed a Regional Plan of Conservation & Development, Regional Transportation Plan, Long Range Plan and a Regional Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan to prepare for disasters, assist with "land use integration" of regional economic development and other land use strategies.
- The region of Western, Connecticut is an established Economic Development District recognized by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the state of Connecticut.
- Our region is geographically situated to capitalize on positive trends in arts and culture, tourism, technology, healthcare and manufacturing as neighboring Westchester and Putnam counties.

There are many strong partner organizations in the District that offer collaboration to make progress on the CEDS priorities, such as:

- Western Connecticut Council of Governments
- Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, Stamford Chamber of Commerce, Stamford Partnership

- Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board, The Work Place
- Western CT State Univ, UCONN Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Naugatuck Valley Community College, Danbury Branch
- WBDC, CTSBDC, SCORE, SBA
- Cultural Alliance of Western Connecticut
- The Fairfield County Culture of the Arts
- Local Community Banks
- CT Department of Economic & Community Development (DECD)
- Local Economic Development Directors and Commissions
- CityCenter Danbury
- Norwalk Redevelopment Agency
- New Milford Economic Development Corporation
- CT Office of Tourism
- UCONN Extension
- Hospitals, local nonprofits

### Weaknesses/Threats:

- Aging workforce, a large portion of the population is retiring with institutional knowledge. The “Trades” workforce is declining with a slow influx of young people committing to apprenticeships. Education and training to fill the gaps will be needed in workforce development to support the demand for these skills.
- Often young professionals leave the state after education. Difficulty retaining young talent to fill entry level positions. High cost of living and housing options make it difficult for young professionals to choose jobs in the region.
- Fill the gap of Job entry housing, need for all types of housing to attract younger employees into the District to stay.
- Inventory of housing that is affordable to existing workforce for all job levels. More employees need to commute into the region, causing congestion due to the inability to live and work within the region.
- Many small businesses are not aware of support resources available for business planning, attracting/training employees, access to capital or the process to start a business.
- Municipal digital permitting needs to support remote access for building/development and business startups.
- Traffic congestion can be an impediment to moving people and product throughout the region. Attention to choke points and congested areas would benefit to the flow of vehicles.
- Rising cost of healthcare and childcare for small businesses. Increase in inflation puts additional pressures on residents and business owners.
- Aging infrastructure: bridges, roadway infrastructure and utilities are impediments to growth.
- Public transportation while essential, is unable to connect some communities together, particularly in the northern subregion. On-demand service is also desired.

## Sector Group SWOT

### Arts and Culture

Stakeholders at this session included regional Cultural Alliance groups, local artists, theater directors, gallery directors, small business owners and municipal economic development directors. Attendees were prompted to discuss the challenges and opportunities for

their organization/sector within the District and propose specific project or action to develop for the next five years to elevate their business and attract more people to the District and grow jobs within this industry. Below is a summary of the action steps recommended by attendees. Develop a marketing strategy for the region, highlighting tourism destinations, cultural events and opportunities while visiting, consider living and/or running a business. Collaborate with the state tourism boards to align marketing initiatives and capture the character of the region.

- Housing and lofts for artists to live/work within the District are needed. Consider downtown housing options to be converted to artists' lofts to be shared, work with property owners to develop a creative area in a downtown.
- Communication tool for artists to connect, share grant opportunities, develop collaboration and networking. Strengthen communication of funding opportunities within the creative, tourism and cultural sector.

## Business Sector Focus Groups

Business sector focus groups were held with stakeholders. The following summary describes what these stakeholders believed the District should invest in to grow jobs in their sector and retain/support the region's existing businesses.

### Small Business (Northern & Southern Subregions)

Two small business focus groups held, one included small business representation in the northern subregion, Housatonic Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization, and the other included representation from the southern region, Southwestern Region Metropolitan Planning Organization. The stakeholders included retail, small manufacturers, co-working facilities, economic development professionals, real estate representatives, and chambers of commerce. These subregions are different in ways of population income, as the southern subregion reaps the benefits of proximity to the metropolitan area of NYC, workforce development and resources. The northern market area is connected by I-84 and US-7 corridors, the southern region is connected by the Merritt Parkway, US-1 and I-95 corridors. Much of the feedback was similar, however, the subregions' perspectives on transportation and public transportation were major differences. Connectivity and networking of small businesses within the District is beneficial. Recommendations from the focus groups included:

- Municipal websites to promote small business resources allow for easy to find information for startups, entrepreneurs, and small businesses. Make starting and growing a business easy within the region.
- Parking scenarios in walkable business districts. Consider parking scenarios of shared parking lots, incorporate municipal parking lots with signage and wayfinding so consumers can park easily in downtowns. Consider micro transit services within an area around the downtown business districts
- Increase passenger rail between the northern and southern subregions, connecting the entire region to NYC markets. Additional stops, higher speed of travel and increase availability. Rail will help reduce travel congestion on roadways at key choke points and create easy access to and from metropolitan centers.
- Workforce inclusivity for all ages. Seniors are retiring from the workforce in large numbers as they are the largest population group currently. They are not being replaced in the workplace at the same volume. To counteract this trend, provide mentoring and/or part time opportunities to keep the seniors engaged to pass along their lifetime of career knowledge. In addition, offer potential incentives for students to take employment in CT after graduation, retaining young professionals is needed in region/state.
- Encourage community development to attract younger families. Develop day trips, work with state marketing efforts to promote community events happening for young families to move to the region. Highlight affordability of the region, reducing the stigma that Fairfield County is expensive to live, but is attainable for all to live, work and play in the region.
- Encourage entrepreneurship and develop co-working spaces, incubators and makerspaces in all communities. Providing a space for entrepreneurs to meet and innovate would be beneficial for the startups and entrepreneurs within the region. Many professionals develop "side hustles" and are looking for spaces for like-minded creatives to gather and share ideas, receive resources.

## Workforce & Education

This focus group included stakeholders working within the education and workforce development realm within the region, such as workforce development boards, CT Department of Labor, university and college career center leaders, and small business owners.

- Technology needs to be taught at all levels within the education system to create a diverse and nimble workforce. Computer skills are incorporated in all industries and almost all position levels. An understanding of standard software of Microsoft programs will be necessary moving forward in industry development.
- Employers will need to invest in training their workforce for unique skills and attract workforce. Unique skills and education are needed for changing industries. Many large companies are incorporating inhouse education and training systems to ensure their workforce can focus on their specific needs.
- CT state universities to consider offering instate tuition for neighboring states. This will attract more students to the regions universities and hopefully gain employment with businesses in the region. A tool to attract and retain younger professionals.
- Address housing and transportation to retain workforce and flow of people and products. Continue to build affordable housing for all levels of the workforce so all residents can live and work in their communities. Transportation must also make it easier and more affordable for people to commute to jobs, education and other activities across transit districts and regions. Congestion on highways affects B2B product movement and travel for consumers and employees.
- Healthcare and childcare are expensive for small businesses and workforce needed. Look for ways to assist small businesses in reducing healthcare and childcare costs in the region. Work with the state and federal funding opportunities to help assist these high-cost expenses necessary for a successful workforce.

## Healthcare Providers

This focus group consisted of regional healthcare partners including local hospital representatives, senior living facilities, and small business medical providers. The general feedback included the stress on the industry from the demands during the pandemic. Workforce in this industry has declined, it's been difficult to find the employees needed to accommodate the demand during and post the pandemic.

- Increase in demand for mental health services, especially school age children. Since the pandemic, there's been an increase in mental health demands on the healthcare industry. Telehealth has been a growing healthcare tool, as providers have been able to connect with patients more often and some patients are now able to access the healthcare needed without much disruption to their lives. Before the pandemic, patients would have to find childcare, take public transportation to access the care they needed. It's easier and less of a burden to obtain the healthcare needed today for many, especially the marginal and vulnerable populations. Broadband connections are necessary for this affective healthcare tool and necessary for resiliency for residents and the industry.
- Workforce needs for Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) and Nurses, especially bilingual. The healthcare industry has seen an increase of need during and after the pandemic, especially to staff vaccination sites and to handle increased patient demands. Since the pandemic has slowed, patients are returning in large numbers for the preventive care that they didn't receive during the two years of the pandemic. Some facilities have a CNA training course within their organization, offer incentives to retain staff. The District has 28+/- languages spoken; healthcare providers take care of all of them. Consider growing the internship connectivity of nursing schools with local health providers to assist in the gap of healthcare coverage needed for the general population.
- Increase public transportation connectivity to help patients and staff. Currently, some patients and employees are walking to healthcare facilities not served by public transportation. Some facilities have a contract with Uber to help clients get back and forth from healthcare facility since the bus doesn't go directly to the healthcare location. This is also an issue for seniors who need to access medical facilities in adjoining regions, i.e. New Haven or other.
- Need for senior housing within the region. As the baby boomer population, the largest demographic at this time, are retiring and downsizing, there's a demand for senior living facilities. Most seniors want to age in place, they have their friends and doctors in the region, but need to retain housing that is affordable and accommodate their needs.
- Technology training for geriatric patients is needed for future telehealth needs. Once the pandemic hit, the senior population was not able to get up on telehealth as quickly. Younger family members had to get involved. Seniors can contribute to the workforce, especially learning computer skills. Technology education can be taught at senior centers and libraries as a priority.

## Agriculture and Cannabis

This focus group included representatives from CT and MA representing the new emerging cannabis industry, including CT's Social

Equity Council Executive Director, CT’s Cannabis Chamber of Commerce and Massachusetts’ business owners and legal support.

Municipalities to consider emerging business sector industries. CT has legalized and allowed for cannabis business development in retail, production and manufacturing industries. Meeting with the CT Cannabis Chamber of Commerce and representatives from Massachusetts representing the industry, it was acknowledged the number of jobs, increased investment and revenue which has been generated in CT’s neighboring state of Massachusetts.

## SWOT Analysis – Summary

Based on the business sector focus group feedback and the, CEDS Working Committee evaluation, the below SWOT analysis was developed. Weaknesses and threats were considered to develop plans to combat against potential challenges and issues. The District will leverage their strengths and opportunities to elevate the region’s unique benefits and attractiveness. The following categories were highlighted for discussion as SWOT subject areas: Business Climate & Support Services, Workforce & Education, Transportation, Infrastructure, Primary & Secondary Education and Quality of Life

<b>Business Climate &amp; Support Services</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Range of business support services exist for startups and existing businesses, SCORE, CT Innovations/Next, WBDC, CTSBDC, etc.</li> <li>• Municipalities are supportive of small business development, in general</li> <li>• Majority of business districts have ample internet/broadband capacity</li> <li>• Less expensive to run business than in nearby New York and Massachusetts</li> <li>• Dynamic business sectors ie: finance and tech, are lucrative, profitable and national leaders</li> <li>• Close to markets in NYC and Boston for B2B, workforce, resources</li> <li>• Growing clusters of business sectors</li> <li>• Local business banking is plentiful</li> <li>• Office space has become more affordable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permitting process can be slow, lack of digital permitting in all municipalities</li> <li>• Lack of communication and compilation of business support resources available for small businesses and start ups</li> <li>• Employee salaries have increased 20% to retain employees since pandemic</li> <li>• Internet has created global competition; all businesses need online presence</li> <li>• Downtown parking is limited in several downtowns.</li> <li>• Increased traffic congestion and reduced truck drivers slows down product delivery</li> <li>• Difficulty retaining young talent to fill entry level positions</li> <li>• Public transportation does not cover town to town, there are gaps, especially in the north</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Municipalities to have and promote a Small Business Resource section on their websites</li> <li>• Promote the “business friendly, diverse/educated workforce, quality of life to live and work in region”</li> <li>• Research public transportation gaps for workforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inflation post pandemic</li> <li>• Competition with large chains</li> <li>• Rising costs of employee healthcare benefits</li> <li>• Global world, economy becoming less global</li> </ul>

# Workforce & Education

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The region residents are a highly educated, creative and culturally diverse workforce</li> <li>• There are active workforce boards, providing extensive workforce training programs</li> <li>• Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs) have been developed for Technology, Healthcare and Advanced Manufacturing</li> <li>• Close to metropolitan areas to recruit additional workforce</li> <li>• Strong public education, K-12, University systems in place</li> <li>• Businesses are willing to train employees, invest in them to learn company's trade</li> <li>• Abundance of entry level positions available</li> <li>• Development of the Governors Workforce Council</li> <li>• Region state university offering state tuition to neighboring state residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large portion of the population is retiring with concurrent loss of institutional knowledge</li> <li>• The "Trades" workforce is declining with time, and there is not an influx of young apprenticeships</li> <li>• Younger employees are hard to keep in CT and region for entry level jobs</li> <li>• There are many jobs' openings</li> <li>• High cost of living yields higher salary demands burden for employers and employees</li> <li>• Metro-North Railroad: Danbury Branch moves slowly, for employees accessing north and south of region</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grow the RSPs and Secondary Education connection with internship programs</li> <li>• Public transportation to be available throughout the region</li> <li>• Municipalities to increase downtown density and focusing on transit-oriented development</li> <li>• Fill the gap for the need of Job entry housing</li> <li>• Municipalities to promote workforce training programs to their residents</li> <li>• Technology skills to be incorporated into all training</li> <li>• Companies to invest in their employees with training and benefits to retain them</li> <li>• Attract more younger employees into the region/stay in the region</li> <li>• Retain retirees part time as mentors/educators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High cost of living, housing, and student loan burdens make it difficult for young professionals to choose jobs in the region</li> <li>• Retires leaving positions with institutional knowledge</li> <li>• Rising costs of employee benefits</li> <li>• Childcare costs are expensive</li> </ul>

# Transportation

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection to NYC (rail and highway) provides a vital link for businesses</li> <li>• Multiple international airports are accessible</li> <li>• Density for ridesharing platforms and other apps (Uber, Lyft, ect.)</li> <li>• Public electric charging stations exist within the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic congestion inhibits the flow of goods, workforce and consumers</li> <li>• Congestion is a bad impression for incoming businesses looking to come to the area</li> <li>• Slower speed of rail transportation north/south</li> <li>• Perception of bus travel as only for the poor</li> <li>• Lack of “Complete Streets” with safe bike lanes and pedestrian walkability</li> <li>• lack adequate public transportation throughout the region, including on demand transportation</li> <li>• Provide shelter from weather at bus stops</li> <li>• The State of CT owns many of the local roads</li> <li>• Some seniors have voiced concern for lack of transportation to medical facilities, shopping and cultural facilities</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve connections between Danbury and Stamford – US-7, Danbury Rail Branch</li> <li>• Improvements to the I-95/New Haven rail line corridor and I-84</li> <li>• Increase complete streets, safer bike lanes, walkable communities</li> <li>• Flexible remote work to reduce commuter traffic congestion</li> <li>• Stronger connection to Long Island</li> <li>• Development/ expansion of the Danbury Airport and others nearby (Stewart, Oxford)</li> <li>• Expansion of electric vehicle charging stations</li> <li>• Research turning lanes and traffic lights in congested areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High cost of living/housing difficult for many professionals to live in the region, causing lack of employees, longer commutes and increased traffic congestion</li> <li>• Increased traffic accidents, road safety</li> <li>• Locations with stronger public transit are attracting young talent</li> <li>• Aging bridges and transportation infrastructure</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Infrastructure	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality aquifers</li> <li>• Telecommunication and utilities are reliable</li> <li>• Broadband is accessible in all communities</li> <li>• Few cellphone “dead zones”</li> <li>• Surface Water Impoundments: Candlewood Lake, Margerie Reservoir</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy costs are high – electric, oil, gas</li> <li>• Limited competition/choice between energy providers.</li> <li>• Infrastructure is old and needs maintenance – bridges, culverts, dams</li> <li>• Most main roads are state owned, adding complexity to local project execution</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase solar and wind energy opportunities, increase resiliency</li> <li>• Identifying and developing “complete streets” for every municipality</li> <li>• High speed Wi-Fi in public spaces like libraries</li> <li>• Leverage Federal Infrastructure grants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waste removal is becoming difficult</li> <li>• Climate change and increasingly severe weather patterns</li> <li>• Outdated electric grid</li> <li>• Sewer capacity may be reached or exceeded</li> </ul>

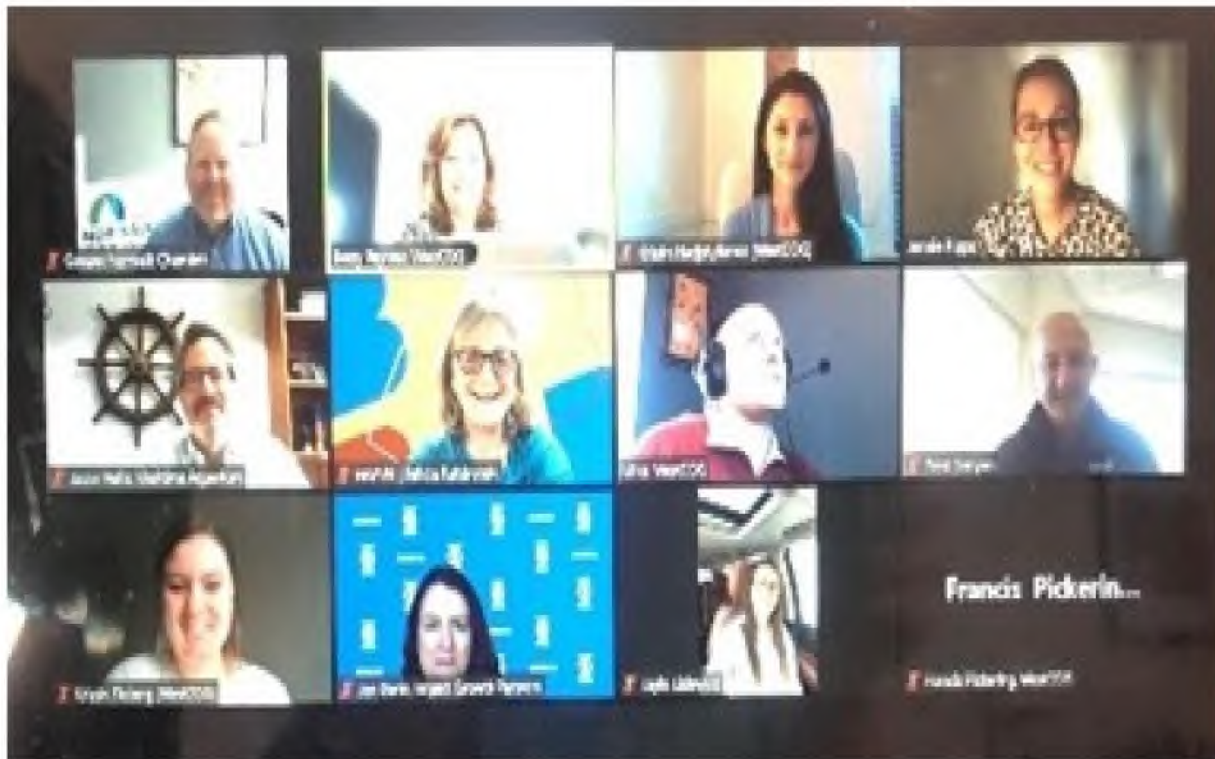
Primary (K-12) & Secondary Education	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality public and private education</li> <li>• Many students are prepared for college</li> <li>• Two vocational high schools</li> <li>• Influx of families during pandemic</li> <li>• Colleges of different “calibers” and focuses - Norwalk Community College, University of Connecticut - Stamford, Naugatuck Valley Community College - Danbury, Western Connecticut State University</li> <li>• Regional Sector partnerships are growing with local colleges/universities to generate internships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• K - 12 experience varies by community, some schools, especially in urban areas, are underserved</li> <li>• Less students going into the Trades/Vocational training</li> <li>• Students may have suffered during pandemic with education strength</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include education that supports regional businesses and develop career paths for young professionals</li> <li>• Create paid internship opportunities at the high school during summers so students learn industries</li> <li>• Increase integration with local universities and community colleges with business sectors</li> <li>• Expanding vocational training</li> <li>• Incentivize graduates to stay in CT, apprenticeships and internships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers’ salaries</li> <li>• Lack of bus drivers currently</li> <li>• Graduates from CT schools leaving the state</li> <li>• Overcrowding in some communities in region</li> <li>• Schools are aging and expensive to maintain</li> <li>• Inconsistent technology for students and broadband in homes</li> <li>• Inconsistent curriculum for Pre-K – 12</li> </ul>

# Quality of Life – Livability

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality of life</li> <li>• Desirable communities people want to live in and maintain, great place to raise a family</li> <li>• Plentiful outdoor recreation, nature trails, and water access</li> <li>• Cultural diversity</li> <li>• Historic charm, unique traits a tourism destination</li> <li>• Easy access to metropolitan areas; Boston and NYC</li> <li>• Educated population and good public and private schools</li> <li>• Public transportation is available in the region</li> <li>• Safe and clean communities</li> <li>• Strong arts community, local theater, music venues and performance centers</li> <li>• Opportunities for business networking and community engagement</li> <li>• Climate is manageable, 4-seasons and few severe storms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High cost of living including housing, taxes and energy</li> <li>• All communities not evenly serviced by public transportation</li> <li>• Traffic and congestion on roadways</li> <li>• Much of the region is car dependent</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market the region re: it's benefits for families and young professionals to live and to run a business</li> <li>• Wealthy population with disposable income creating a demand for specialty goods</li> <li>• Young people and retirees want to live in walkable communities</li> <li>• Develop marketing of business sector attraction</li> <li>• Increase public transportation routes/availability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of range of housing is causing issues for entry level/lower paying jobs in region</li> <li>• Young professionals may no longer choose the Region, travel to cities and southern and western US</li> <li>• Cost of region livability</li> </ul>

# Image & Visibility

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Image of region is clean, beautiful, charming and safe area to live and run a business</li> <li>• Contains natural beauty with a variety of landscapes, hiking trails, parks, beaches, hills, lakes, valleys</li> <li>• Jobs are available at all levels</li> <li>• Great place to raise a family with strong public education</li> <li>• Great place to open a business</li> <li>• Easy access to metropolitan cultural, workforce and amenities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roadways are congested, main arteries of 84 and 195</li> <li>• Reputation of Fairfield County as exclusively wealthy and lacking diversity</li> <li>• Fairfield County has the highest income disparity in the US</li> <li>• CT has fewer trending businesses, events, and highlights that attract young professionals</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote cultural diversity &amp; educated workforce, the region as a place to live, work and play</li> <li>• Continue to develop walkable communities with sidewalks connecting residential to commercial districts</li> <li>• Develop a range of housing so all job levels can live in communities</li> <li>• Create branding/marketing campaign for region to attract young professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of affordable housing</li> <li>• Aging infrastructure</li> <li>• Cost of living is expensive from taxes, housing costs, and energy</li> <li>• Lack of exciting activities/destinations for the younger professionals</li> </ul>



Focus Group Zoom Meeting

# Resiliency

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resourceful and determined health support programs such as ACA and AmeriCares.</li> <li>• Large population of electric cars registered in region</li> <li>• State incentive program to encourage electric car ownership</li> <li>• Ports are protected within the sound vs open ocean</li> <li>• Established DEMHS programs at the state and regional levels.</li> <li>• Resiliency planning efforts integrated across COG program.</li> <li>• Education – tech schools, variety of skills/careers</li> <li>• WestCOG flood mitigation program implemented</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grid is vulnerable</li> <li>• Government Cyber Security is not coordinated or standardized</li> <li>• CT does not pursue many FEMA resiliency grants.</li> <li>• Outdated FEMA flood Maps</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase local food farming, indoor/outside, encourage through local zoning</li> <li>• Prepare stock pile of medical supplies</li> <li>• Increase manufacturing of local supply chain medical needs</li> <li>• Address zoning to encourage energy efficiency in home development</li> <li>• Municipalities/state to provide incentives for residential solar installation, energy efficiency in home development, electric vehicles</li> <li>• Research reservoir capacity</li> <li>• UConn CIRCA's Resilient CT Program</li> <li>• Develop and implement HMP Identified projects funded through FEMA grants and resiliency funded sources</li> <li>• Zoning considerations re: hydroponic grow opportunities</li> <li>• Encourage community gardens</li> <li>• Incorporate microgrids and renewable energy options</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of affordable housing</li> <li>• Aging infrastructure</li> <li>• Cost of living is expensive from taxes, housing costs, and energy</li> <li>• Cyber Security Attacks</li> <li>• Climate Change and extreme weather events</li> <li>• Rising Sea Levels.</li> <li>• Pandemic Fatigue</li> <li>• inflation</li> <li>• food sourcing</li> </ul>

# APPENDIX C: COMMENTS

This section includes a collection of quoted statements from the CEDS review committee as well as collected public comments.

## CEDS Review Committee Statements:

- “Working from home is increasing and desired, this is seen in new house designs”* = Hal Kurfehs, EVP, Commercial and Development, Scalzo Real Estate
- “Municipal restrictions can be cumbersome and confusing especially for mobile business”*, Mike Gallop, small business owner, Twins BBQ, Brookfield
- “Healthcare costs are increasing which is a difficult cost for small businesses”*, Fred Dimyan, small business owner, POTOO Solutions, Norwalk
- “Parking is limited in suburban downtowns”*, Alice Hutchinson, small business owner, Byrd Books, Bethel
- “Housing that is affordable is needed for all levels of workforce”*, Christal Preszler, Newtown Economic and Community Development
- “Western CT State university is offering state tuition to NY & NJ residents, which is helping the university and potentially the local workforce.”*, Kathleen Lindenmayer, Director, Career Success Center at Western Connecticut State University
- “The arts provide mental health resilience during the pandemic, people turned to the arts for mental support”*, Howard Lasser, Exec Director, Brookfield Craft Center, Brookfield
- “Western Connecticut is more affordable than NYC to run your business”*, Jarrett McGovern, small business owner, Rise Brewing Company, Stamford
- “The region of western Connecticut is attractive for young families, good schools and quality of life”*, Jennie Ripps, small business owner, Owl’s Brew, Stamford

## Public Comment:

WestCOG provided a 30 day public comment period and received the following comments.

Date	Comment	Comment solution
11.5.22	One comment received stating the value of bicycle infrastructure and funding to expand	Goal 2, action 12 and 13 and Goal 6, action 42 address the need to increase bicycle trail infrastructure within the region
11.11.22	Comment received recognizing businesses need for affordable energy and water within the region	Goal 2, objective D addresses the need for affordable and adequate electricity access and service
11.11.22	Comment received about expanding rail within region, connecting to NY, Brookfield and New Milford	WestCOG’s MTP Plan addresses transportation within the region
11.11.22	Comment received regarding electrification and rail extensions of trains and cell communication to eliminate “dead zones”	WestCOG’s MTP Plan addresses transportation within the region. Goal 2, objective C outlines the need for reliable mobile communication
11.11.22	Comment received regarding housing and how it affects workforce and the need to increase public transportation, especially the bus routes	The WestCOG’s Affordable Housing Tool Kit provides in-depth housing strategies. Goal 2, action 11 speaks to high quality bus service needs,

# APPENDIX D: CONTACT INVENTORY

## WestCOG Council Members

Name	Title	Organization
Don Lowe	First Selectman	Town of Sherman
Peter Bass	Mayor	Town of New Milford
Pat Del Monaco	First Selectman	Town of New Fairfield
Tara Carr	First Selectman	Town of Brookfield
Daniel Rosenthal	First Selectman	Town of Newtown
Dean Esposito	Mayor	City of Danbury
Richard Straiton	First Selectman	Town of Bethel
Rudolph Marconi	First Selectman	Town of Ridgefield
Julia Pemberton	First Selectman	Town of Redding
Lynne Vanderslice	First Selectman	Town of Wilton
Jennifer Tooker	First Selectman	Town of Westport
Samantha Nestor	First Selectman	Town of Weston
Kevin Moynihan	First Selectman	Town of New Caanan
Fred Camillo	First Selectman	Town of Greenwich
Harry Rilling	Mayor	City of Norwalk
Monica McNally	First Selectman	Town of Darien
Curtis Reed	First Selectman	Town of Bridgewater
Caroline Simmons	Mayor	City of Stamford

## WestCOG Staff

Name	Title	Organization
Francis Pickering	Executive Director	WestCOG
Michael Towle	Deputy Director	WestCOG
Victoria Ricks	Financial Director	WestCOG
Cricket Carpenter	Office Manager	WestCOG
Kristin Hadjstylianos	Transportation Director	WestCOG
Todd Fontanella	Senior Planner	WestCOG
Kristin Floberg	Senior Planner	WestCOG
Nicole Sullivan	Planner	WestCOG
Kevin Mahoney	Senior Project Manager	WestCOG
Charles Vidich	Senior Project Manager	WestCOG
Betsy Paynter	Project Manager	WestCOG
Nicholas Trabka	Senior Data Scientist	WestCOG
Tucker Beckett	Data Scientist	WestCOG

## WCEDD Council Members

Name	Business Sector	Organization
Rudolph Marconi, First Selectman	WCEDD Chair	Town of Ridgefield
Lynne Vanderslice, First Selectman	WCEDD Vice Chair	Town of Wilton
PJ Prunty	Chamber of Commerce	Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce
Robert Malozzi	Finance	Bankwell Financial Group, LLC
Andrea Rynn	Healthcare	Western Connecticut Health Network
Tom Long	Workforce Development	The Workplace
Brian Griffin	Chamber of Commerce	Norwalk Chamber of Commerce
Tracey Alston	Energy	Eversource
Hal Kurfehs	Commercial Real Estate	Scalzo Realty
Janice Chrzecijanek	Economic Development	Town of Bethel
Jessica Vonashek	Economic Development	City of Norwalk
Lisa Mercurio	State of CT	AdvanceCT
David Souder	Interim Director	Uconn Stamford campus
Jennie Ripps	Small business owner	The Owl's Brew
Zayed Rodrigues	Chamber of Commerce	Norwalk Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Jon Winkel	Economic Development non-profit	The Stamford Partnership
Lisa Scails	The Arts	Western Connecticut Cultural Alliance
Jason Patis	Tourism	The Aquarium at Norwalk
Loren Nadres	Economic Development	City of Stamford
Christal Preszler	Economic Development	Town of Newtown

# APPENDIX E: REFERENCES

The development of the CEDS incorporates extensive learning and concepts from various focused regional plans. Transportation, housing, infrastructure, and environmental factors affect economic development as much as workforce development and business support. It's the details within these focused plans that can be referenced to further emphasize the Region's needs within these areas. The below plans provide details into these specific areas of focus, outlining necessary actions needed for resiliency and development of the region.

## [WestCOG Affordable Housing Toolkit](#)

[westcog.org/regional-planning/housing-plan/](http://westcog.org/regional-planning/housing-plan/)

## [WestCOG Hazard Mitigation Plan](#)

[westcog.org/emergency-management/hazard-mitigation/](http://westcog.org/emergency-management/hazard-mitigation/)

## [WestCOG Plan of Conservation and Development](#)

[westcog.org/regional-planning/pocd/](http://westcog.org/regional-planning/pocd/)

## [WestCOG Regional Waste Management Project](#)

[westcog.org/regional-services/regional-waste-management/](http://westcog.org/regional-services/regional-waste-management/)

## [WestCOG Regional Flood Mitigation and Project Management](#)

[westcog.org/regional-services/flood-mitigation/](http://westcog.org/regional-services/flood-mitigation/)

## [HVMPO Long Range Transportation Plan](#)

[westcog.org/meetings/mpos/hvmpo/](http://westcog.org/meetings/mpos/hvmpo/)

## [SWMPO Long Range Transportation Plan](#)

[westcog.org/meetings/mpos/swrmpo/](http://westcog.org/meetings/mpos/swrmpo/)

# APPENDIX F: APPROVAL LETTERS

**Western Connecticut**  
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS



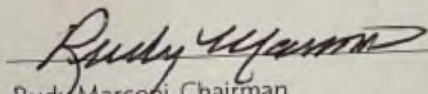
**CERTIFIED RESOLUTION OF THE  
WESTERN CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS  
TO ADOPT THE ECONOMIC PLAN, A COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (CEDS) FOR 2023-2028**

Ridgefield, Connecticut

I, Rudy Marconi, Chairman of the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (hereinafter "WestCOG") certify that the following is a true copy of the resolution adopted by WestCOG at its meeting on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022 in Ridgefield, Connecticut, a quorum being present:

Resolved that WestCOG adopts the Economic Plan, A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for 2023-2028; and furthermore, authorizes Chairman Rudy Marconi or Executive Director Francis Pickering to submit the CEDS to the State of Connecticut and the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA).

This resolution is in full force and effect as of November 30, 2022.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Rudy Marconi, Chairman  
Western Connecticut Council of Governments

Date



1 Riverside Road, Sandy Hook, CT 06482

Visit us online at [westcog.org](http://westcog.org)  
Telephone/fax 475-323-2060



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
OFFICE OF POLICY AND MANAGEMENT



December 15, 2022

Francis Pickering, Executive Director  
Western Connecticut Council of Governments  
1 Riverside Rd.  
Sandy Hook, CT 06482

**Re: 2023 – 2028 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the WestCOG  
Economic Development District**

Dear Mr. Pickering:

Thank you for submitting the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) request for approval from the State of Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM) and Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) for the 2023-2028 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD) (the “2023-2028 CEDS”). On December 22, 2017, the State of Connecticut approved WCEDD’s status as an Economic Development District, and in 2022 WCEDD received a federal designation in 2020. The WCEDD region includes the following eighteen municipalities: Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Norwalk, Redding, Ridgefield, Sherman, Stamford, Weston, Westport, and Wilton. The region conforms to the boundaries established by WestCOG and approved by OPM.

DECD and OPM finds that pursuant to Sec. 32-741 of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.), WestCOG is a Council of Governments entity, established under the C.G.S. Sec. 4-124i to 4-124p and 8-31 to 8-37a, and is eligible to prepare and request approval for the 2023-2028 CEDS. Both OPM and DECD reviewed the 2023-2028 CEDS and find the following:


- The 2023-2028 CEDS was prepared in a manner consistent with C.G.S. Sections 32-741 - 32-743.
- The 2023-2028 CEDS plan includes
  - An analysis of the community, including an economic overview of WestCOG
  - A regional background and demographic review
  - Specified goals and objectives
  - An action plan or improving the region; and
  - Performance measures to review progress
- The 2023-2028 CEDS is generally consistent with the plan of conservation and development strategies of the statewide comprehensive economic development strategy.

The Commissioner of DECD and Secretary of OPM are hereby pleased to inform you that the 2023-2028 CEDS is approved. WestCOG may submit the 2023-2028 CEDS to the United States Economic Development Administration (USEDA) for approval pursuant to 42 U.S. Code § 3121.

We sincerely hope that WestCOG can maximize the implementation of this plan to make your region and the State of Connecticut a better and more prosperous place to live, work, and play. Congratulations to you and your team on a job well done.

Sincerely,

  
David Lehman  
Commissioner, DECD

  
Jeffrey R. Beckham  
Secretary, OPM

cc: Alexandra Daum, Deputy Commissioner, DECD  
Martin L. Heft, Undersecretary, OPM  
Rebecca Augur, Policy Development Coordinator, OPM  
Binu Chandy, Deputy Director OBRD, DECD  
William Wallach, Project Manager OBRD, DECD



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
Economic Development Administration  
Philadelphia Regional Office  
Robert N.C. Nix Federal Building  
900 Market Street, Room 602  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107

**\* REVISED**

February 2, 2023

Francis Pickering, Executive Director  
Western Connecticut Economic Development District  
1 Riverside Road  
Sandy Hook, CT 06482

Dear Francis,

Thank you for the recent submission of your CEDS document. EDA appreciated the opportunity to review your CEDS document for the period of \* **January 1, 2023, through December 31, 2027.**

We are pleased to inform you that EDA's review of your CEDS document and process align with the regulatory and programmatic requirements and your CEDS has been accepted by EDA. The priorities and focuses outlined within your CEDS document will help form the foundation of how EDA reviews applications for Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Programs from your region.

We greatly appreciate the work of the Western Connecticut Council of Governments Board and CEDS Committee to develop this innovative, regionally-driven economic development strategy. EDA looks forward to continuing to work with you to help support the goals and priorities outlined in your recently submitted CEDS.

Sincerely,

DEBRA BEAVIN Digitally signed by DEBRA  
BEAVIN  
Date: 2023.02.02 13:15:43  
-05'00'

Debra Beavin  
Economic Development Representative  
Philadelphia Regional Office

# Growing an economy regionally

WestCOG's Economic Plan is an essential collection of regional strategies, project concepts, and actions for the Western Connecticut Economic Development District (WCEDD).

Use this plan to align your economic interests and take the next step of securing funding support from the Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDA grants are available to make your economic dreams come together.

WestCOG is a council of governments serving eighteen municipalities in a variety of regional planning initiatives including economic planning. If you have an economic project concept don't hesitate to reach out.

Want to learn more about WestCOG planning efforts? See our full suite of planning activities at [www.WestCOG.org](http://www.WestCOG.org)



@WesternConnCOG



@WestCOG

**Western Connecticut**  
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

This plan is active from January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2027