

Community Planning & Capacity Building/Infrastructure Working Group

Meeting Notes

Recordings and additional information can be found at www.seccog.org/recovery and www.neccog.org/demhs-recovery-work

Date/Time: April 20, 2021, 9:00am.

Location: Zoom teleconference/videoconference.

Members in attendance: Sandra Allyn-Gauthier (Town of Preston), Jennie Arpin (Town of Willington), Cheryl Blanchard (Town of Sprague), Burton Cohen (Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel), Sheri Cote (seCTer), John Covey (Norwich Public Utilities), Dan Daniska (City of Norwich), Tracey Hanson (Town of Voluntown/DEMHS Region 4 Regional Recovery Steering Committee Co-Chair), Carly Holzschuh (SCCOG/Town of Franklin), Teresa Jackman (Eversource), Chris LaRose (Norwich Public Utilities), Chris Lippke (Town of Canterbury), Steve Sinko (Norwich Public Utilities), Melinda Wilson (seCTer), Dawn Works-Dennis (U.S. Naval Submarine Base New London).

Staff in attendance: Sam Alexander (SCCOG), James Butler (SCCOG), Amanda Kennedy (SCCOG), John Filchak (NECCOG), Darlene Richards (DEMHS Region 4).

1) Call to Order.

Sam Alexander (Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG)) called the meeting to order at 9:01am. Mr. Alexander thanked those in attendance.

2) Roll Call.

All members in attendance stated their names and affiliations.

3) Review of Meeting Notes from 3/16/21.

All meeting notes of past meetings can be found at seccog.org/recovery.

4) Speaker: Burton Cohen, Staff Attorney & Broadband Policy Coordinator, State of Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel. Attorney Cohen will speak about the steps the State of Connecticut is taking to address broadband disparities, which have been identified as an Unmet Need by this Working Group.

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Community Planning & Capacity Building/Infrastructure Working Group
Economic/Natural & Cultural Resources Working Group
Health & Social Services/Housing Working Group

Burton Cohen of the State of Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel introduced himself and spoke about his background as an attorney in cable, telecommunications, and broadband matters, and since May 2020, with the State of Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel. Mr. Cohen reviewed actions by State government aimed at addressing internet-access disparities.

- The Everybody Learns Initiative (Summer 2020) appropriated \$43.5 million toward purchase of 50,000 laptops for students, 12-months of at-home internet access for 60,000 students, and creation of 200 community wifi “hotspots”.
- House Bill 6442 is aimed at equitable broadband coverage and includes a goal of universal gigabit-speed internet access to Connecticut residents by 2027.

Mr. Cohen answered questions from members of the Working Group. There may be additional opportunities available to internet service providers and municipalities aimed at building out infrastructure, provided by American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding, but exact details are not available at this time. The U.S. Treasury Department may be interpreting a section of the ARP in such a way that would provide a major influx of capital funding for broadband projects.

Mr. Cohen mentioned that regional priorities for improving broadband access should be communicated to the Governor’s office. Mr. Cohen will provide information related to the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program through the Federal Communications Commission. The EBB is aimed at helping households pay for internet service during the Pandemic.

The State of Connecticut has few restrictions, compared to other states, on municipalities competing with private internet providers, so municipalities and municipal utilities should remain aware of incoming funding.

5) Update on Status of Unmet Needs

Unmet Needs were referred to the Statewide Steering Committee. Sam Alexander will follow up with individual organizations following resolutions to each Unmet Need.

6) Regional Resilience Baseline Assessment.

The DEMHS Region 4 Regional Resilience Baseline Assessment report is available at www.seccog.org/recovery and www.neccog.org/demhs-recovery-work. One important function of the Regional Resilience Baseline Assessment is to identify “fundable projects” in DEMHS Region 4. Sam Alexander gave an overview of the key findings of the Regional Resilience Baseline Assessment:

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Finding 1: Region 4's urban communities are poised to capitalize on General Dynamics Electric Boat's planned expansion to attract additional supporting business, as well as the expected expansion of blue economy, biotechnology and healthcare businesses.

Finding 2: The rural character of the majority of Region 4's municipalities and the associated gaps in information and transportation infrastructures present special challenges for the region's many socioeconomically vulnerable residents in gaining access to economic and educational opportunities, social services, and healthcare.

Finding 3: When the COVID-19 eviction protections expire, there is a significant risk of displacing families from their homes in Region 4.

Finding 4: Main Street business (i.e., small to medium local businesses), particularly those businesses that are owned or serve vulnerable populations or locales, have suffered the most serious damage in the pandemic, making a focus on recovery of this business strata critical to the region's long-term economic recovery.

Finding 5: Loss of jobs in the hospitality and entertainment sectors presents a serious risk of long-term unemployment for working-age adults across Region 4 in the absence of targeted recovery supports for advanced skills workforce training to meet the demands of the industries that are poised for growth.

7) Other.

None.

8) Adjournment.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:55am.