

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of October 3, 2013

Union Station, Fourth Floor Conference Room
New Haven, Connecticut

Attendance: Members: Kevin Maloney, Richard Schreiner. Russ St. John, Richard Sunderhauf, Chris Adams, Mort Katz, Yvonne Loteczka, Alan Sylvestre. **Ex-officio members:** David LeVasseur (OPM), Fred Riese (DEEP). **Guests:** Francis Pickering, Central Connecticut RPA.

Chairman Maloney called the meeting to order at 1:34 pm. The minutes of the meeting of September 5 were accepted as written subject to one addition. Mort Katz wished the September minutes to convey his Rosh Hashanah blessing which he had extended to the Commission via fax at that meeting. His blessing read "L'Shana Tova! May you all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for the coming year, 5774."

Featured Speaker

David LeVasseur, Undersecretary for Intergovernmental Relations at the Office of Policy and Management (OPM), briefed the Commission on the status of the process to consolidate Connecticut's regional planning organizations to a legislatively-mandated goal (Section 249 of Public Act 13-247) of eight such entities. LeVasseur began with a brief history of the origin and purpose of the regional planning organizations.

Regional planning in Connecticut got its start in the 1950s, following the devastating 1955 flood. In 1957, the Connecticut Development Commission, which was a predecessor agency to OPM, was charged by the General Assembly to define boundaries for the regional planning agencies. This effort took ten years but the boundaries defined at that time stayed virtually intact until 2011. The towns of Union and Stafford were not initially assigned to any planning region. In 2001, Union petitioned OPM to join the Northeastern Connecticut Planning Region and in 2010, Stafford petitioned OPM to join the Capitol Region Council of Governments. In 2012, Ashford petitioned OPM to move from the Windham Planning Region to the Northeastern Connecticut Planning Region.

In 2007, OPM was charged to do a review of the regional boundaries and to submit its report to the General Assembly by January 1, 2012. Subsequently, this deadline was moved back to January 1, 2014 and the General Assembly added a waiver clause that if any two contiguous regions voluntarily merged, they would not be subject to the boundary review by OPM. As a result, the former Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency and the Midstate Regional Planning

Agency petitioned OPM in 2011 to merge to form the Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments. Similarly, the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials and the Northwestern Connecticut Council of Governments petitioned OPM in 2013 to merge, forming the Northwest Hills Council of Governments. These consolidations left Connecticut with 13 regional planning organizations. Bringing his report up to the minute, LeVasseur reported that just earlier this week, the South Western Regional Planning Agency and the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials submitted a merger petition to OPM.

LeVasseur mentioned that, over the years, different criteria for defining planning regions have been added or taken away. Also added in 2012 were requirements for OPM to consult with the regional planning organizations, the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the Connecticut Conference of Small Towns and the leadership of the General Assembly's Planning and Development Committee during the analysis of planning region boundaries. In 2013, ConnDOT was added to the list of consulting agencies. OPM has also been consulting with the Connecticut Association of Regional Planning Organizations during this process. OPM's interim report on regional planning organization consolidation was submitted to the General Assembly's Planning and Development Committee on Tuesday, October 1.

Although OPM's intent through the consolidation process has been to combine the regional planning organizations with their existing boundaries as complete, intact entities in order to preserve historic working relationships, there may well be cases where some municipalities opt out of their existing planning regions during the consolidation process. Two regions where LeVasseur expects this to occur are the Windham and Greater Bridgeport Planning Regions. LeVasseur expects the nine towns of the Windham Planning Region to divide among the Capitol Region Council of Governments, the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments and the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. LeVasseur also mentioned that municipalities have four months to appeal the OPM assignment to a new planning region.

By January 1, 2015, all regional planning organizations must convert to a council of governments format. At present, some regional planning agencies are already councils of governments, some are councils of elected officials and some are regional planning agencies.

The General Assembly wants the regions to become more involved in areas beyond transportation planning. Some regions are already involved in the provision of other services. The Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency, now part of the Lower Connecticut Valley COG, has operated household hazardous waste collection days. The Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments

operates a regional animal shelter, runs the local transit systems and organizes the property re-evaluation process for its member municipalities.

Funding to operate the regional planning organizations has varied over time. Before 2000, an annual State grant of \$640,000 was split among the RPOs. This funding was in addition to the membership dues for member municipalities, as well as any grant money the agencies obtained in connection with projects or studies. ConnDOT and Federal Highway Administration funds are important sources of operating funding for the RPOs, particularly for the urban regions.

In the early 2000s, the State support increased to \$1,000,000, again to be split among the RPOs. Subsequently, that amount of support was reduced. Under the new legislation, each existing region will receive \$125,000 in Year 1 and starting in FY 2015, each existing region which has become part of a voluntarily-merged region will receive \$125,000 per year plus an additional fifty cents per head. This support structure is meant to encourage voluntary consolidations.

LeVasseur pointed out that OPM is required to review the regional planning boundaries every 20 years.

The consolidation of the planning regions is mandated under Public Act 13-247 but has been sought by ConnDOT as well in the hope of having fewer Metropolitan Planning Organizations with which to interact in the planning and approval of transportation projects. There is also the hope that the new regional districts may be adopted by other agencies for the delivery of services or the exercise of State regulation. The Connecticut Department of Public Health plans to use the new regions for public water supply planning purposes. Further, the outsourcing of the delivery of some State services to the larger regional entities could happen in the future though such a development would not occur in the near-term. ConnDOT would eventually like to see the designated MPOs handle the design functions for some transportation projects.

LeVasseur said the merger of the Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency and the Midstate Regional Planning Agency has become the template for the other proposed mergers. He noted that if two regions voluntarily sought a merger but did not meet the statutory minimum of 14 towns in the new, merged region, the Secretary of OPM could issue a waiver from this requirement and allow the merger to go forward.

In response to a question about the number and size of planning regions in Connecticut compared to those in other states, LeVasseur said Connecticut has more regions and smaller regions than other states.

Francis Pickering, Deputy Director of the Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency, noted that New Jersey has only three planning regions but they also have special regions such as the Pine Barrens Region and the Highlands Region. He concurred that Connecticut does have smaller regions than most states but noted that his region, for example, with seven municipalities, would be pretty much at the median for planning regions nationally on a population basis. Pickering noted that within Connecticut, different regions have served different functions because the regions are very good at “following the money”. The Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency, for instance, maintains the region’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, operates regional paratransit in 9 towns (including two outside its region), works to promote agriculture in its region, provides assistance to local land trusts, provides funding for open space acquisition, works on hiking and mountain bike trail development, maintains watershed plans to protect and improve water quality, and has recently completed a transportation strategy for Central Connecticut State University. One point the legislature seems to have overlooked in the consolidation legislation is the fact that the regions do not all provide the same services but rather have become functionally specialized.

Pickering feels it is important that his region, which thus far has not taken any position on merging with any other region, be assigned as an intact block of towns in any merger in order to preserve the integrity of many of its functions and planning efforts. He is concerned that individual towns in his region might merge in different directions. One example he cited where a division of CCRPA towns between regions would be problematic is the planning work done for the New Britain/Bristol division of Connecticut Transit. This division does not have an organization like First Transit available to do its planning work, as the Hartford Division does, so CCRPA staff does much of its planning. Pickering noted CCRPA staff had just put in 200 hours riding the buses to get ridership data. He noted that they have found a strong demand for a transit link between New Britain and Middletown, a trip that is difficult to make under current conditions.

Pickering also suggested that the transit district boundaries should be analyzed and evaluated as well. He said that, while the regions do much highway planning work for FHWA, most regions do very little transit planning. Finally, he noted that the CCRPA, though considered to be a smaller region by many, has the second largest staff and budget of any RPO in Connecticut.

Comments from the public

None.

Comments from Operating Entities

Rich Sunderhauf reported that the Star Shuttle, which is a circulator bus operating in downtown Hartford, is being rebranded as the DASH. Rich also said that the new buswash at the Hartford Division garage is now up and running.

Chairman's Report

Kiernan Ryan submitted a formal letter of resignation dated Sept. 12, 2013 to Chairman Maloney. As Ryan was an appointee of Senator John McKinney, Chairman Maloney will pursue the filling of this vacancy with Senator McKinney's office.

Old Business

Fred Riese reported that he and Robert Rodman attended the September 25 forum sponsored by the Capitol Region Council of Governments and the Connecticut Association for Community Transportation on the topic of transit-oriented development and housing opportunities occasioned by the upcoming *CTfastrak* busway project. ConnDOT Commissioner Jim Redeker gave a very good presentation on the multiple functions to be served by *CTfastrak* and noted that the roadway of the facility is now 80% complete. The busway has won national awards for its construction techniques.

Department of Housing Commissioner Evonne Klein noted that her department will be looking more closely for TOD components when the next \$15,000,000 round of affordable housing grants are awarded in March.

New Business

Fred Riese summarized the testimony at the Commission's two public hearings in September. Expanding bicycle use and bicycle infrastructure along with the Housatonic Railroad's proposal for passenger rail service between Danbury and Pittsfield were the two dominant topics at the September 24 hearing in New Milford. On the topic of bicycle usage, Rich Sunderhauf said people are frequently waiting for space on CT Transit's bicycle racks and often simply bring the bicycles on the buses when the racks are full. Fred Riese mentioned that a recent cycling publication noted that Boulder, Colorado and Madison, Wisconsin, both of which are university towns, are closing in on seeing 15% of their commuting trips done by non-motorized transportation. Chris Adams noted that bicycle usage right here at Union Station in New Haven has greatly expanded as evidenced by the full bike racks and shelter.

At the Orange public hearing on September 18, First Selectman James Zeoli stressed two main points: his town's desire to have a Metro-North New Haven Line station in Orange and to see center turn lanes added along Route 1. Karen Burnaska, Coordinator for Transit for Connecticut, discussed the increasing ridership on Connecticut's bus systems, the need for more inter-regional bus service, the popularity of bus to rail shuttles, and the overcrowding on the Coastal Link bus service.

Chairman Maloney closed the meeting at 3:02 pm.