



# Public Participation and Consultation Process for Transportation Planning

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Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments  
5 Connecticut Avenue, Norwich, CT 06360  
[www.secogct.gov](http://www.secogct.gov)

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Cover photo: *Stars above the Gold Star, Almond Butterscotch* ([flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/AlmondButterscotch/))

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Prepared in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway and Federal Transit Administrations, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

By agreement between the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECOG) and the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT), the process outlined in this document, and adopted by SECOG for development of the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), will satisfy and act as the State's public participation and consultation process, as allowed under Section 450.212(b) and 450.316(a)(1)(i) of Title 23 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Also, CTDOT, acting as the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5307(c) applicant, has consulted with SECOG and concurs that this public participation and consultation process adopted by SECOG, acting as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the development of the STIP/TIP, satisfies the public hearing requirements that pertain to the development of the Program of Projects for regular Section 5307, Urbanized Area Formula Program grant applications, including the provision for public notices and the time established for public review and comment. However, for FTA projects that are not routine (e.g.: Section 5307 applications requiring an Environmental Assessment of Environmental Impact Statement), the public participation provided herein for STIP/TIP review is not sufficient. For those instances, public participation, as presented in the joint FHWA/FTA environmental regulations (23 CFR 771) will be required for grant approval.

Please direct any questions relating to the  
Public Participation and Consultation Process for  
Transportation Planning to:

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## 1 Introduction

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECOG) is a Regional Council of Governments, providing a basis for intergovernmental cooperation, aiding in the solution of regional issues, serving as a technical resource to its member municipalities, and providing a collective voice for the region. SECOG serves 22 member municipalities.

### 1.1 The Process

In addition to its duties as a Regional Council of Governments, SECOG is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) responsible for transportation planning in southeastern Connecticut. SECOG is committed to the process of informing, and seeking information from, the southeastern Connecticut community. This document sets forth the policies and practices that will guide SECOG in seeking input from individuals and groups and describes the specific opportunities for public participation in the planning process. These policies meet or exceed similar requirements prescribed in the Connecticut General Statutes and federal authorizing legislation.

The public participation and consultation process is an important component of regional and transportation planning. Public participation and consultation occur continually, allowing the public and governmental agencies to provide input into different stages of planning. This process also specifically aids in implementing Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act ("Title VI"), which prevents discrimination by governmental agencies. The goal of a strong public participation and consultation process is to ensure that programs and policies developed by elected and appointed officials are responsive to the objectives and values of the general public impacted by such programs and policies. For more on the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments' Title VI and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) policies, please visit [www.secogct.gov/policies](http://www.secogct.gov/policies).







*Southeast Area Transit, seatbus.com*

## 1.2 Evaluation and Revisions

A 45-day public comment period will be required when revisions are proposed to the *Public Participation and Consultation Process for Transportation Planning*. The public comment period will commence upon publication of a legal notice. Annually this document will be reassessed by SECOG staff. While reviewing the effectiveness of the plan, staff will consider the following:

- Trends in communication. SECOG will remain informed regarding the usership and effectiveness of new communication platforms, including social media, and continually assess adopting those new platforms, with respect given to staff time, privacy, and costs.
- Use of existing techniques. The effectiveness of existing policies and practices will inform SECOG about future priorities or the need to explore parallel avenues.
- Website traffic. SECOG is able to monitor and analyze website traffic to seccog.org, receiving complex reports from its web host. Data gives staff an up-to-date look at the effectiveness of recent postings and site updates, including news related to transportation planning.
- Public comments. Feedback received at public hearings or informational meetings can give insight into effective techniques for improving public participation and access to information. This allows the public to have direct input not only into the planning process for a specific project, but also the processes employed for future projects. The public is also encouraged to contact staff and suggest additional outreach or information-sharing efforts outside of a formal public hearing, public comment period, or informational meeting.
- Other considerations. SECOG will consider additional practices, as they become apparent, in order to improve the effectiveness of public participation and information-sharing efforts.

If updates are deemed necessary, SECOG staff will draft an amendment to the plan, provide a 45-day public comment period commencing upon public notice, and recommend the revised plan for adoption of the plan by the full SECOG MPO.

## 2 Core Plan Public Participation Processes

### 2.1 Regional Plan of Conservation and Development

SECOG develops a Regional Plan of Conservation and Development at least every ten years, a requirement set by the Connecticut General Statutes (CGS 8-35a). The Plan serves as a blueprint

for the Council of Governments and its member municipalities to follow in working together “to promote with the greatest efficiency and economy the coordinated development of its area of operation and the general welfare and prosperity of its people”. The Plan identifies shared goals for maintaining and expanding the region’s infrastructure, promoting economic growth, meeting the housing needs of the region’s residents, and protecting the health of the natural environment.

The most recent RPOCD was adopted in 2017. The development centers around public workshops and hearings, and engagement with local elected officials and staff. Public engagement comprises of: (1) an initial public workshop to identify perceived issues, opportunities, and threats that should be addressed; (2) multiple public workshops to solicit feedback and comments on the draft Plan; and (3) a public hearing. The 2027 plan will expand SECOG’s practices around going to target audiences to at least one touch point within each member municipality to engage with members of the public outside of traditional workshops and public hearings.

Before adopting or amending the RPOCD, SECOG holds at least one public hearing. Notice of the time, place and subject of the hearing shall be given in writing to each member municipality and shall be published once in a newspaper having a substantial circulation in the region. Such notices shall be given not more than twenty days or less than ten days before such a hearing. At least sixty-five days before the public hearing, SECOG posts the plan on the website and submits the plan to the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management for findings in the form of comments and recommendations.

## **2.2 Metropolitan Transportation Plan**

SECOG develops a Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) every four years, as required by federal regulation. The MTP is a long-range transportation plan for the southeastern CT region with a 20-year planning horizon. COG coordination and outreach is an ongoing process with COG members (Municipalities, Transit Districts, and affiliate Military and Tribes members), local and state agencies and stakeholders. In addition to public input received during the plan update, the MTP also considers public and stakeholder input from prior plan versions and other planning efforts. Federal regulation requires specific coordination with stakeholders representing in following groups or individuals: public ports, freight shippers, freight transportation service providers, intercity bus operators, employer-based commuting programs, and representatives of public transportation, active transportation, transit dependent users and underserved populations. Representatives of these stakeholder groups are encouraged to provide feedback through direct mailings.

The draft plan is published on the website and publicly noticed in the newspaper of record for the region. During a 30-day public comment period, the SECOG holds a public hearing and presentation using visualization techniques. The public may provide comments in person at the hearing, or submit comment via email, mail or phone. Upon conclusion of the public comment period, the public comments are summarized and responses are provided to the comments within the public participation section of the plan. The final draft is adopted by the SECOG MPO and forwarded to CTDOT for review for state and federal review and concurrence. Upon approval, the adopted document and associated files are uploaded to the website.

Comments regarding the need for new projects are not typically incorporated into the project list during the same plan cycle; this is due to several factors: (1) all projects listed in the MTP must go through the concurrent Air Quality Conformity process, (2) the projects must also be listed on the Statewide Long Range Transportation Plan, and (3) projects must be vetted, scoped and estimated through the planning process. Comments regarding new projects are documented in the Public Participation section of the document and are reviewed by SECOG staff and pertinent local or CTDOT staff to determine if a project should be developed for inclusion or to add a project. Mid-cycle updates follow the same public process as the four-year update. The MTP may be updated mid-cycle to meet requirements for consistency between the TIP and MTP regarding fiscal and air quality conformity.

### **2.3 Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP)**

SECOG develops a Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) at least every four years, as required by federal regulation which is related to the CTDOT-developed Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP). The TIP and STIP are 4-year capital plans listing federally funded projects which implement multimodal goals and objectives related to transportation. The TIP includes a subset of projects from the STIP that directly benefit the MPO/COG including local, regional, multi-regional, and statewide projects that are approved by the MPO. The project list is developed collaboratively between SECOG and CTDOT and is informed by longitudinal transportation planning for and with our member municipalities and affiliate members and public participation. COG members have input into the draft project list within the TIP plan cycle, prior to Air Quality Conformity modeling.

Federal regulation requires specific coordination with stakeholders representing the following groups or individuals: public ports, freight shippers, freight transportation service providers, intercity bus operators, employer-based commuting programs, and representatives of public transportation, active transportation, transit dependent users and underserved population users.

During a 30-day public comment period the public may provide comments in person at the hearing, via email, mail or phone. The draft TIP, which is posted to the website, direct mailed to stakeholders and interested parties, and is publicly noticed. SECOG provides a public hearing and presentation of the draft plan using visualization techniques through electronic means and in-person meetings at accessible locations and times. Upon conclusion of the public comment period, the public comments are summarized and responses provided to the comments within the public participation section of the plan. The final draft is adopted by the SECOG MPO and forwarded to CTDOT for state and federal review and concurrence. Upon approval, the adopted document and associated files are uploaded to the website.

It may be necessary to update the TIP mid-cycle, typically for revisions to the TIP project list. Updates to the TIP comply with Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) Amendment/Action/Notification Process (2023, CTDOT). The approval process involves CTDOT, SECOG and FHWA. Changes are categorized as Notifications, Actions or Amendments. Notifications are minor changes such as adding illustrative projects/earmarks/grants to the "FYI" year of the plan, correction of typos, and minor cost increases. Notifications are approved administratively by CTDOT and FHWA. Actions



include mid-sized cost increases, changes to the year of investment by one year within the TIP term, break out a project phase under a new project number, add a right of way phase during construction of a project, or phase deletion or addition where the cost is increased less than 50%. Actions are authorized administratively by the MPO Executive Director and approved by CTDOT and FHWA. Amendments are the most significant category of changes and include adding or cancelling projects, changing the intent and limits, adding phases or project breakouts where costs increase by more than 50%, or moving a project to or from the "FYI" year. Amendments are brought to the Executive Committee, acting as the Transportation Committee for review and referral to the SECOG MPO Board. Amendments are made available to the public in the SECOG board meeting agenda available on the website. The public may provide comments on TIP amendments during the public comment period (at the beginning of the meeting). The SECOG MPO Board votes to approve amendments, which are then approved by CTDOT and FHWA. Changes to the TIP project list (approved notifications, actions and amendments) are posted on the SECOG website only after FHWA approval.

### **3 Information Availability and Transparency**

Transparency will be ensured prior to the outset of any planning process. Once the planning process is initiated, all systems should be put in place to provide the public with information and data in a variety of formats. The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECOG) employs several proactive techniques to inform and involve the public in a transparent manner.



#### **3.1 Special Studies**

As part of its program, SECOG staff conduct special studies on a variety of transportation-related topics. Studies are distributed in draft format for the purpose of seeking comments from COG member municipalities and other stakeholders. Comments submitted are then considered in the development of the final study.

#### **3.2 Collaboration & Coordination**

In addition to working internally with the SECOG Board or other SECOG Committees, staff regularly collaborate with committees and organizations within the region. This provides opportunities for interaction between staff and the general public. SECOG has established special

advisory committees on an as-needed basis. These committees are typically technical in nature, drawing outside resources into planning programs.

### **3.3 Technical Assistance**

SECOG staff are available to agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders to discuss subjects of topical concern. This provides an added avenue for public access into the planning process. Staff may attend partner organization meetings and are available by appointment for in-person or virtual consultations. Technical memos and white papers are made available on the SECOG website on topics of interest to our members.

### **3.4 Public Records**

As a public agency, SECOG prepares agendas and minutes for all public meetings, and provides access to all public records, as required under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

### **3.5 Website/Social Media**

SECOG maintains a website ([www.secogct.gov](http://www.secogct.gov)). Agendas, meeting minutes, reports, hearing notices, documents and publications, fillable forms, as well as news, are regularly posted to the site. The website, therefore, is the centerpiece of public participation. The SECOG website uses a fillable form for public comments with downloadable documents. The website is also a resource for additional related organizations. The incorporation of social media, presently Facebook and LinkedIn, allows additional information sharing and discussion regarding SECOG activities. Both formats allow non-English-speaking persons to participate.

### **3.6 Data**

SECOG collects and maintains both historic and current data from plans, studies, and counts. Often this data has a geographical whereby we leverage a Geographic Information System (GIS) to house and serve this data. GIS data plays a crucial role in modern planning projects. Our GIS department employs cutting-edge computer-based and web-based technology to aid the planning department in comprehending the conditions and variables influencing the region. This helps us better understand the region's goals and needs while ensuring public information is accessible to a broader audience.

Our strategy aims to connect people with data so that spatial insights and relationships can be ascertained with minimal effort. We seek to engage the public by publishing free and open tools to our website. SECOG staff leverage desktop applications to create visual mapping products for reports, plans, and outreach products. Staff also utilize web GIS tools to create custom applications, data driven story maps, and access downloadable content for use by the public. The primary data collected by the SECOG is available through the FOIA request, as applicable. We also host a variety of readily available datasets and resources on our SECOG Data Hub ([geodata-sccog.hub.arcgis.com](http://geodata-sccog.hub.arcgis.com))

## 4 Stakeholder Consultation



Harvey Barrison, flickr.com

### 4.1 Member Municipalities and SEAT Representatives

On MPO matters, each member may vote. For COG matters, SEAT is not a voting member. COG and MPO members provide input into plans and endorse plans as required.

### 4.2 Affiliate and Liaison Members

Two federally recognized Tribal Nations [Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot] and two important military institutions [the United States Coast Guard Academy and United States Naval Submarine Base New London] are affiliates of SECOG, appoint regional liaisons to attend meetings of the SECOG Board. SECOG benefits greatly from its affiliate members and liaisons. Consultation with tribal affiliates and military liaisons reaches well beyond transportation planning, into matters related to housing, economic development, and natural resource planning.

### 4.3 Other Consultation

SECOG has created consultative links with state agencies, local organizations, and neighboring Regional Councils of Governments. Plan processes may include specific consultation requirements as noted in the Core Plan section of this document. These entities include representatives of active transportation users, conservation and recreation, federal and state agencies, senior and disabled communities, environmental justice communities, freight users and providers, healthcare, limited English proficiency communities, libraries, industrial organizations, media, private and public transit providers, regional planners, local government officials and recreation, language translators.

### 4.4 Outreach to Underserved Communities

SECOG seeks out and considers the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as low-income and minority households, as well as LEP individuals. Targeted outreach with minority and low-income stakeholders has included holding public meetings at local community centers and community events where these stakeholders are likely to be present, utilizing virtual meetings and providing diverse methods of public input. Additional guidance on the SECOG policies pertaining to underserved communities can be found in the SECOG Title VI and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Plan.

SECOG continues to engage and maintain contact with our constituents, including minority and ethnic groups as well as current and historically underserved communities to represent and include their input in our planning processes. Outreach is targeted to ensure broad participation by a representative sample of the communities SECOG represents. Inclusive planning practices aim to protect from disproportionate and adverse human health and environmental effects (including risks) and hazards, including those related to climate hazards, the cumulative impacts of environmental and other burdens, racism, and other structural or systemic barriers; and have equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live, play, work, learn, grow, worship, and engage in cultural and subsistence practices.

#### **4.5 Civil Rights (Title VI)**

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act pertains to protection from discrimination based on race, color and national origin. SECOG continues to engage and maintain contacts representing these communities in planning processes, including transportation planning, commuting programs, housing, emergency management, and community organizations. All public notices will invite participation by non-English speakers. Depending on the project, additional materials may be made available in additional languages where stakeholders are likely to speak English less than very well. The scheduling of public outreach and involvement is intended to accommodate broad participation by the community and stakeholders. Language included in meeting notifications and other publications will reflect the regional needs documented in the LEP plan available at [www.secogct.gov](http://www.secogct.gov). The notice requests that those needing interpreter services contact SECOG in advance of the meeting for accommodation at the meeting. Additionally, translation of documents is available upon request.

### **5 Modes of Engagement**

#### **5.1 Public Outreach**

SECOG utilizes various modes of outreach to inform the public and gain input from a broad range of stakeholders and the public. SECOG carries out regulated public outreach processes in addition to utilizing emerging techniques where relevant.

##### **5.1.1 Public Hearings**

Public hearings are the most formal mode of outreach. The focus of the hearing is to provide a public forum for comment on a specific topic. Meeting materials and agendas are provided on the website. If any final documents differ significantly from a version made available for public review, or if new issues were raised that were not foreseeable at the time, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made.

##### **5.1.2 Public Information Meetings**

Informational meetings are less formal, but still valuable, forums for communicating a topic and providing a stage for public comment.



### 5.1.3 Virtual Modes of Engagement

The use of virtual attendance at in-person meetings increases participation and provides an affordable and accessible means of participating and submitting public comments. Additionally virtual meetings may be recorded and posted to the website for later review by the public.



*Doug Kerr, flickr.com*

### 5.1.4 Meeting Locations

Public hearings and informational meetings are held at a location and time considered to be convenient to the public, to optimize participation. Locations utilized for public meetings must be handicapped-accessible and, preferably accessible from public transit systems. Locations for public hearings and informational meetings are chosen carefully, based on the potential size of the audience and the issue being discussed; certain topics affect certain groups or regions more than others, so locations must be sensitive to the context of the meeting or hearing. In all cases, SECOG staff ensure that accommodations are made for senior and disabled communities. Likewise, people with LEP are afforded an opportunity to request translation assistance.

### 5.1.5 Dates/Times

The open dialogue afforded at public hearings and informational meetings is crucial to the planning process. Selection of the day and time that encourages participation will be based on the convenience to the general public. The planning process, however, is also time-constrained; therefore, great effort is made to allow for informal and formal opportunities to comment to influence transportation planning. Also, to encourage additional opportunities for public participation, time for public comment is set aside at all regular SECOG meetings.

### 5.1.6 Meeting Notices

It is the SECOG policy to seek the opinion of all interested parties and persons who wish to participate. Notification of all agency meetings will conform to the requirements of the FOIA. Public meetings are noticed on the SECOG website. Further, special notification will be directly made to consulting agencies, as well as individuals and groups requesting such notification or



those required by statute. Consideration will be given to underserved communities and transit providers to ensure that the distribution of meeting notices ensures receipt of notifications and encourages participation.

Legal notice is required only for public hearings. The notice will be made in at least one newspaper with distribution throughout southeastern Connecticut, and posted to the SECOG webpage and Facebook page, no fewer than five days prior to the hearing. This notice will contain the time, date, location, and subject of the public hearing, and will refer to the location of meeting materials. Meeting Notices will include Spanish, Chinese, and English notifications that translation services are available upon request.

## **5.2 Opportunity for Public Comment**

Opportunities for public comment will be used for the benefit of a plan, program, or policy. Specifically mandated public comment periods are addressed within the Core Plan section of this document. Public comment will be received during public comment periods in person or virtually at a hearing or meeting, via email or phone, or through the website. Additionally, public input may be sought via survey or other means.

### **5.2.1 Response to Comments**

When significant comments are received by SECOG as part of the formal transportation planning process, every effort will be made to respond to the comments and, if pertinent, incorporate the input into the subject proposal. Responses to comments will detail the manner in which they were considered or incorporated.