



NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION ZONE ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES OF MEETING

October 19, 2023

The State Neighborhood Revitalization Advisory Board (advisory board) held a remote meeting on Thursday, October 19, 2023, at 9:00 AM. The [agenda](#) and [video](#) are available online.

Board Members or Designees:

Matthew Abbott, [City of Bridgeport](#)
Linda Brunza, [CT Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection](#)
Julie Carmelich, [CT State Historic Preservation Office](#)
Jennifer Edwards, [CT Social Equity Council](#)
Mike Gilmore, [Waterbury Development Corporation](#)
Marion Griffin, [Hartford NEXT](#)
Martin Heft (Chair), [CT Office of Policy & Management](#)
Kaelie Moran, [City of New Haven](#)
Matt Pafford, [CT Dept. of Administrative Services](#)
Marlon Pena, [CT Dept. of Transportation](#)
Mark Polzella, [CT Dept. of Labor](#)
Alexis Steele, [CT Dept. of Emergency Services & Public Protection](#)
Jim Vannoy, [CT Dept. of Public Health](#)
Laura Watson, [CT Dept. of Housing](#)

Other Participants:

Aram Ayalon, New Britain
Arlene Galindo-Jimenez, [CT Social Equity Council](#)
Jean Holloway, Clay Arsenal Revitalization Association (Hartford)
Vera Lembrick, [CT Social Equity Council](#)
Debi Martin, [LISC Connecticut](#)

Staff:

Justine Phillips-Gallucci, [CT Office of Policy & Management](#)
Bruce Wittchen, [CT Office of Policy & Management](#)

1. Welcome, Introductions, Adoption of Minutes

Martin Heft called the meeting of the [Neighborhood Revitalization Zone](#) (NRZ) Advisory Board to order at 9:05 and asked everyone to introduce themselves. A motion was made and seconded to approve the draft [April 20, 2023, Meeting Minutes](#) and the motion was approved unanimously.

2. CT Conservation & Development Policies Plan and CT Environmental Policies Act (CEPA)

Justine Phillips-Gallucci and Bruce Wittchen, CT OPM

Bruce Wittchen introduced the topic and said Justine Phillips-Gallucci will begin by providing an overview of the recently-begun process for updating the state Conservation & Development Policies Plan (C&D Plan) and of the [story map](#) she has created to explain the plan and process. He added that he will provide some background regarding the CT Environmental Policy Act process, which is something a state legislative working group is looking closely at.

Justine said she is the newest member of the Office of Responsible Growth at OPM, but previously spent time with community groups on environmental restoration projects in different neighborhoods in New Haven, so is excited to be able to continue working in this area. She showed the story map on her screen and explained that the 2025-2030 state Conservation & Development Policies Plan (C&D plan) will be the comprehensive plan that guides state agencies, plans, policies, and actions.

Justine highlighted that although the C&D plan has traditionally been thought of in terms of land and water resources, the update will emphasize more of the social and economic or economic dimensions of conservation and development as well. She provided an overview of the plan update process and schedule, following the sequence in the story map, and highlighted the opportunities for public involvement in the coming year. She said one of her program's goals for the updated plan is to make it a more useful guidance document for state agencies and more straightforward to implement.

Justine pointed out that the draft plan is oriented around four themes: *Sustainable, Equitable, Vibrant, and Resilient* and the web page provides a little explanation of what we are hoping to achieve with each of those. Another page lists vision areas: *thriving economy, healthy people & places, housing for current & future residents, resilient resources, and connected & inclusive communities*. Justine showed how to send any questions, comments, & feedback, and where to find meeting dates. She noted that a similar story map might be helpful on the state NRZ webpage.

Bruce Wittchen showed a [PowerPoint outlining the CT Environmental Policy Act \(CEPA\) process](#) so people will be aware of what can be involved when a project goes through the CEPA review process or when a project does not. He highlighted that, in a way similar to what Justine had said about the C&D Plan, CEPA looks at the social and economic environment too and it also can lead to consideration of project alternatives.

Bruce described the legal framework of CEPA: that it considers the entire sequence of activities, even if state involvement is limited to one phase, and does not apply to an action having no state agency involvement at all. CEPA only applies if the state agency has a discretionary role in the action being done, meaning the agency makes a decision about how work is done or whether to fund a particular project.

Bruce showed a slide listing the factors considered to be part of the environment under CEPA. The slide mentions indirect effects and an example would be that the potential environmental impacts of a new sewer line going 2 miles into the countryside are not limited to the road right of way disturbed to install the sewer; the agency must also consider how the sewer might enable development of farmland or core forest land.

The next slide includes a link to the state's [Generic Environmental Compliance Document](#) (ECD), which agencies use to decide if potential environmental impacts warrant public scoping under CEPA. The following slide outlines the CEPA process and points out that very few state actions must go through the entire process. The final slide

mentions that the C&D plan guides agencies choosing a project to do and CEPA helps them decide how to do it.

Matthew Abbott said Bridgeport has begun work on NRZ guidance and asked if the C&D Plan encourages support for community groups. Bruce said that could be considered a component of community sustainability and resilience and asked Matthew to send suggestions for how that can be included. A lot of what goes on in a community or in the state in general relies on associations of people to do it. Bruce added that an interactive approach like the story map might be a better way to provide guidance for NRZs than the current state NRZ webpage, which is just a place to go find a document.

Marion Griffon noted that Hartford NEXT is also working on guidance for NRZs and suggested working together with Bridgeport. Bruce Wittchen noted that at this group's last meeting we had discussed starting that at OPM but did not make progress. It could accelerate the process if people who have already started in Bridgeport and Hartford can work together with a small group and others can review what they're producing and offer comments.

Matthew Abbott said the NRZs are encouraging Bridgeport's planning office to develop guidance; they think it is a valuable document, especially because of the turnover that is often seen in NRZ groups. There are leaders who are thinking about leaving and they have knowledge that is not easily transferred. If they do leave, it will handicap a lot of the actions of that NRZ.

3. Updates, Comments, or Questions

Matthew Abbott said Bridgeport's planning office is in the process of getting all of the city's NRZs website space and mentioned [Engage.Bridgeport](#), which is the city's engagement service, where they post projects and get community feedback. It is a really useful tool for getting public comments and they are playing around with ideas about how it is designed and what it will look like. They are in the early stages and he said it is a tool that can be given to the NRZ and the city can administer or assign an NRZ member as administrator and they can manage their space for their websites. It is still in the pipeline but there might be more to show at the next meeting of this group.

Jennifer Edwards introduced two new program managers at the Social Equity Council: Vera Lembrick and Arlene Galindo-Jimenez. Vera said she is program manager for reinvestment and explained that they are in the process of distributing grants for disproportionately impacted areas in the next few weeks, with the first six being Hartford, Bridgeport, Stamford, Waterbury, Norwich, and New Haven.

Arlene Galindo Jimenez said she is outreach program manager and is working on the community conversations portion at the Social Equity Council. They are working on the first round of community conversations, in the cities of Waterbury, New Haven and Hartford, and she mentioned the role of trusted messengers. She also mentioned their [online reinvestment survey](#) and encouraged people to circulate that link so people can respond and help in planning the SEC's reinvestment strategies.

Bruce Wittchen noted that the meeting did not begin with the usual introductions and introduced Alexis Steele, from the [Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security](#) (DEMHS). He said we can see the increasing importance of emergency management and planning in the news and DEMHS is interested in working NRZs.

Alexis Steele said she is an Emergency Management Program Specialist and they have had a little bit of crossover before with the NRZs. She added that she is involved with the emergency support function responsible for emergency communications and mentioned they have a diverse communities task force. She mentioned their interest in doing a flood awareness workshop and pointed out that people in floodplains might be interested in learning more about floods and what to do in case of one. They are looking to do a workshop for Hartford NRZs and could bring this to other NRZs and maybe not even limit it to flooding.

Alexis said DEMHS is interested in what it can do for communities and working with NRZs could be a fun collaborative effort. They can tailor presentations towards the communities, focusing on specific environmental needs or hazards that they might face. She said they can set those up where people are interested.

Martin Heft mentioned a statewide planning exercise held the previous day involving a number of different agencies. Learning the roles of the various partners will be helpful in emergency situations when it is necessary to bring them together to help get the word out or let us know what's going on. Alexis mentioned she works in the grants unit and one grant is called the nonprofit security grant program, which provides funding to houses of worship, social service agencies, and senior care service agencies to enhance physical security measures.

Aram Ayalon said they had some flooding in New Britain and asked who NRZ leadership can contact to request one of the flood awareness presentations and Alexis said she would put her email address in the chat. She added that they can set up a flood awareness workshop there. She noted that she is not the go-to person for post-flood recovery but can try to help in any way.

Martin Heft added that DEMHS has divided the state into emergency management regions and that people should work through those because they can move things up or down the ladder as needed and every municipality works with the regional directors. Marion Griffin said Hartford NEXT is the coalition of NRZs in Hartford and they would be happy to have Alexis come to one of their meetings, where DEMHS can have access to all the city's NRZs. They would be happy to collaborate on a workshop too.

Bruce Wittchen mentioned that he and Justine Phillips-Gallucci spoke with Alexis earlier this week about the possibility of her and others from DEMHS giving a more thorough presentation at a future meeting of this advisory board about things they do that are relevant to NRZs.

Marion Griffin provided an update of NRZ activities in Hartford, highlighting their work on community engagement. She said it was discussed at this group's last meeting: the interest in coming up with ideas to increase participation in the community and in activities. They also are focusing on civic engagement and she noted that voter turnout is typically very low in the larger cities. We have to figure out ways to increase engagement, participation in commissions, and other ways of helping to improve the community.

Marion also mentioned bond funding, probably from 2022, to help communities that have concentrated poverty. An article in October said Senator Fonfara proposed helping Clay Arsenal, which is one of our NRZs, probably one of those ones with the most concentrated poverty, to help to develop a Community Development Corporation so they

can have access to these funds. She said it was interesting to her because it is related to an issue we discuss in this group: that most NRZ's do not have the capacity to do anything like this to have an impact in their neighborhood. Bruce Wittchen said he had not seen the article, but he is interested in the potential use of bond funding for building the capacity of a neighborhood-level organization because people usually think of bond funding to build a build or a park.

Aram Ayalon said an issue he would like to raise many communities are struggling with, is the high rent. He noted the role of higher property taxes and outside buyers coming in and buying properties and raising the rent. He said people forced the city to establish a Fair Rent Commission, which has been holding some hearings, but most residents do not know how to present their cases and how to win unless they have assistance from somebody who knows the process. Is there support for NRZs around the state helping establish and maintain a Fair Rent Commission and also supporting residents who want to go to their commission?

Bruce Wittchen said an NRZ might be a difficult place organize something like that because NRZs include property owners and landlords, some of whom are key members of their NRZ. Aram's idea could work for some NRZs and there could be landlords who would be interested in participating in that. He noted that he is on his town's Fair Rent Commission and pointed out that a lot of Fair Rent Commissions are being established now. Martin Heft said the [CT Fair Housing Center website](#) has a [link](#) about those commissions. Martin also mentioned the [Dept. of Housing's page on fair rent commissions](#).

4. **Next Steps for State NRZ Advisory Board**

- See [NRZ Advisory Board Concepts for 2023](#)

Martin Heft explained that the linked advisory board concepts was a bullet list generated by previous discussions and noted that additional concepts this group should consider have been mentioned this morning. He pointed out that the group will not meet again in 2023 but the work will carry over into 2024. He asked if anyone has any thoughts or comments regarding the listed concepts to help this move forward, noting that Matthew and Marion will start some of this at a more local scale that will help all of us.

Martin said that Laura Watson had asked in the chat if it is possible to bring a consultant to meet with each NRZ and support them in a way they need? He commented on resource needs to do that and mentioned the earlier discussion of a half-day emergency management-oriented workshop and said something comparable could be an effective way to begin to bring information to NRZs. He also mentioned the possibility of working with the [CT Main Street Center](#).

Matthew Abbott said Bridgeport is launching an effort with its East Side NRZ and described what they are doing, noting the key role of the [Bridgeport Economic Development Corp.](#) (BEDCO). Bruce Wittchen said Laura Watson has experience with using a consultant to help community organizations in a housing context and said many NRZs will need help to reach a level at which they have the capacity they need. The state also needs to build up the capacity of the advisory board to have a better idea of what NRZs are doing, where they are, and who is in charge. Martin Heft said we have heard things today that can help move us forward.

5. **2024 Meeting Schedule**

Martin Heft noted the agenda's suggestion to schedule quarterly 2024 meetings on the 3rd Thursdays of January, April, July, and October, at 9:00. There were no objections.

6. Adjourn

Martin Heft welcomed all the new people who joined the meeting and thanked Justine and Bruce for their presentations. He also thanked everyone for participating and helping to keep NRZs alive and moving forward. The meeting adjourned at 10:07.