



CT River Gateway Commission  
Regular Meeting Minutes – Hybrid  
Meeting Thursday, February 27, 2025  
7:00 PM RiverCOG  
Conference Room and via Zoom

**Present:** **Chester:** Misha Semënov-Leiva, **Deep River:** Jerry Roberts, John Cunninham (Alternate); **Haddam:** Mike Farina (Secretary); **Old Lyme:** Suzanne Thompson (Chair), Greg Futoma (Alternate); **Old Saybrook:** William Webb (Vice Chair); **RiverCOG North:** Raul de Brigard, Alan Ponanski (Alternate); **RiverCOG South:** Vacant; **CT DEEP:** Kathleen Perzanowski

**Absent:** **Chester:** Tom Brelsford (Alternate); **East Haddam:** Crary Brownell, Debbie Langdon (Alternate); **Fenwick:** Newt Brainard; **Essex:** Peter Fleisher; **Haddam:** Erin Ortega (Treasurer), **Lyme:** Susan Fox; **Ex Officio:** Melvin Woody.

**Others Present:** August Stromberger (CT River Museum); Michael Michaels, Joseph Wren, Attorney Keith Ainsworth

**Staff support present:** Susie Beckman (RiverCOG)

## I. Agenda

### 1. Call to Order

Chair Thompson called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM.

### 2. Roll Call

A quorum was present. New members John Cunningham (**Deep River, Alternate**) and Ellen Fitzgerald (**Old Saybrook, Alternate, not present**) were introduced.

### 3. Seating of Alternates

James Hiller was seated for Essex, and Lisa Wadge was seated for Lyme.

### 4. Approval of the Agenda

A **motion** was made by A. Ponanski, seconded by J. Hiller to approve the February 27, 2025, Regular Meeting Agenda. An addition was made regarding a text amendment referral from Deep River under item 7. The motion passed unanimously with no further amendments.

### 5. Approval of Meeting Minutes.

Minutes from the following meetings were reviewed and approved:

- December 2, 2024, Special Meeting
  - A **motion** was made to approve the December 2, 2024, Special Meeting Minutes with correction to the administrative header, removal of the word “from” on page 2 in the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph and adding that the letter addresses that the water supply is in the Gateway and 100-year floodplain setback, The motion passed unanimously.
- December 17, 2024, Special Meeting
  - A **motion** to approve the December 17, 2024, Special Meeting Minutes was made by R. deBrigard; seconded by A. Ponanski. The motion passed unanimously.
- January 23, 2025, Regular Meeting
  - A **motion** was made by L. Wadge; seconded by A. Ponanski to approve the January 23, 2025, Regular Meeting Minutes with correction to the administrative header, and correcting the one

point that it reflects only what the letter to the Old Lyme Zoning Commission says, and nothing further. The motion passed unanimously.

**6. Public Comment**

August Stromberger from the Connecticut River Museum was present, but his comments were deferred to later in the meeting. The Chair invited any additional public comments, but no further remarks were made. Members were reminded of the importance of community involvement and transparency in the commission’s work.

**7. Review of Referrals & Preliminary Discussions**

**a. Old Saybrook – 467 Main Street Variance**

Joe Wren, the project’s representative, presented the proposed variance, which involves modifications to an existing structure within the 100-foot setback. The changes include the removal of a lower deck, replacing it with a patio, and enclosing an upper patio. The commission determined that the request would not significantly impact the conservation zone, provided that lighting remained Dark Sky compliant and minimal for safety purposes. The discussion also included details on surrounding vegetation that could provide natural screening for the modifications.

A **motion** was made by W. Webb; seconded by A. Ponanski to approve a letter of support for this request with these conditions, emphasizing that the lighting should not increase the structure’s visibility from the river.

Voting in favor: M. Semënov-Leiva, J. Roberts, J. Hiller, M. Farina, L. Wadge, S. Thompson, W. Webb, R. de Brigard, A. Ponanski, K. Perzanowski; **Opposed:** None; **Abstaining:** None. The motion **passed** unanimously, 10-0-0.

**b. Old Saybrook – 711 Middlesex Turnpike Zoning Map Change**

S. Beckman explained to the Commission that there is a contract purchaser who wants to purchase a property at 711 Middlesex Turnpike, Old Saybrook. He has worked with the surrounding property owners and has talked to them all about changing their zone. The commission reviewed a zoning map amendment request to change the area from a B-2 shopping district (which does not allow residential uses) to a B-3/B-4 mixed-use zone. Chris Costa, Old Saybrook’s Zoning Enforcement Officer, explained that this change would align zoning with the existing residential and commercial uses, making many properties more conforming. Members discussed potential impacts on local property values and traffic patterns. The commission acknowledged the request and noted no objections. The discussion also covered potential future development in the area and the implications of the zoning change on long-term planning.

A **motion** was made by R. de Brigard; seconded by L. Wadge, for the letter to include option 1 (not opposed) and is approved if adoptive does not conflict with the Gateway Commission’s standards or mission.

Voting in favor: M. Semënov-Leiva, J. Roberts, J. Hiller, M. Farina, L. Wadge, S. Thompson, W. Webb, R. de Brigard, K. Perzanowski; **Opposed:** None; **Abstaining:** W. Webb. The motion **passed** unanimously, 08-0-0.

**c. Chester – 286 Middlesex Ave Special Exception/Variance**

The property owner seeks to add dormers and an exterior staircase to an existing garage. Though the modifications comply with Gateway standards, the project exceeded 4,000 square feet, triggering a special exception review. Discussion centered on potential visual impacts from the river. The Commission

recommended that new windows be non-glare and lighting be Dark Sky compliant. The Commission also considered potential environmental concerns, including bird strike prevention measures, though it was noted that the divided-light window design would likely mitigate this issue.

A **motion** was made by J. Roberts; seconded by A. Ponanski, to approve with Gateway Commission’s recommendation that that new windows be non-glare and that lighting be Dark Sky compliant.

Voting in favor: M. Semënov-Leiva, J. Roberts, J. Hiller, M. Farina, L. Wadge, S. Thompson, W. Webb, R. de Brigard, A. Ponanski, K. Perzanowski; **Opposed:** None; **Abstaining:** None. The motion **passed** unanimously, 10-0-0

**d. Mixed Use Definition**

Ms. Beckman shared a proposed text amendment that was recently shared with her from the Deep River Zoning Commission on February 25, 2025. The proposed does not impact anything in the Gateway Conservation Zone. It is a change to the “mixed use” buildings definition. The “combined use” definition was previously removed because it was the same definition as “mixed use”. However, the mention of “combined use” still needs to be removed from a few of the zoning use table areas.

A **motion** was made by J. Hiller; seconded by L. Wadge, to accept the language that was proposed by Deep River Zoning Commission as it does not affect the Gateway Zone.

Voting in favor: M. Semënov-Leiva, J. Roberts, J. Hiller, M. Farina, L. Wadge, S. Thompson, W. Webb, R. de Brigard, K. Perzanowski; **Opposed:** None; **Abstaining:** None. The motion **passed** unanimously, 09-0-0.

**8. Correspondence/Staff Report**

The staff report was presented by S. Beckman, covering recent referrals, planning updates, and correspondence received. Two administrative reviews were noted, including a variance request at 56 Willard Ave. and a variance for a minor shed addition at 7 Meadow Lane, both approved. Members reviewed the implications of these approvals and their alignment with conservation objectives.

Ms. Beckman also noted the Eversource wire replacement project which is still in the development process. Eversource estimates that they will be filing their petition in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2025. Deb Mercier of Eversource communicated that once they have design cost comparison information and can speak to any alternatives, they will be contacting the Gateway Commission and are happy to come to a meeting and share information.

**9. Chairman’s Report**

Chair Thompson requested that each member of the Commission put together a short bio including why they are on the Commission. The bios are internal and will not be distributed to the public. They will be collected and distributed those in the next iteration of the Gateway Commissioner’s Guide.

**a. CT Land Conservation Conference - March 22, 2025, Registration**

Members were encouraged to attend the conference, which will focus on land preservation strategies and conservation policy updates. G. Futoma and Chair Thompson were confirmed as conference representatives and have taken the two conference sponsor spots. S. Beckman will share a link with the Commission for members to register.

## 10. Committee Reports

### a. Finance & Treasurer – Approve Bills

E. Ortega (Treasurer) was not present. Chair Thompson provided an overview of current financial statements, noting that all expenses remained within budget.

- Halloran and Sage: \$280.00/ North Co. Property
- Halloran and Sage: \$20.00
- RiverCOG: \$5,660.00

A summary report will be sent out to members of the Commission after the meeting.

A **motion** was made by A. Ponanski; seconded by J. Hiller, to pay the aforementioned bills, including legal fees and staff time expenses, totaling \$5,960.00.

### b. Communications – Update

G. Futoma reported that the Gateway Commission will be a bronze sponsor for the upcoming conference, including a quarter-page ad and an exhibit table. The Commission is one of the organizers of a workshop on invasive plant mapping and riparian buffer management; instead of having a panel speaker, he will provide a quick overview of the Gateway Commission, Standards and Conservation Zone. A discussion continued regarding improving outreach and marketing capacity following recent consultant turnover. Members considered strategies to enhance public engagement.

### c. Rules of Procedures

#### i. Eversource Wire Replacement/K Ainsworth – Update

The Commission was informed that Eversource plans to file a petition in Q2 2025. The Rules Committee had discussion with Attorney Ainsworth who has provided the Committee a representation proposal. Ainsworth explained that the petition is a lot different from other applications to the regulatory board. The Rules Committee is exploring the route of contacting Eversource and trying to steer them into considering feasible and prudent alternatives with regards to the location of the lines under the Connecticut River. Members discussed potential environmental impacts and mitigation strategies, including alternative drilling techniques to minimize habitat disruption.

Attorney Ainsworth addressed the group and explained that it is to the Commission's benefit to negotiate with Eversource early when there's an opportunity for them to either alter the application itself, or to perhaps drive them toward a full application process where there could be a hearing.

Ainsworth encouraged members to engage their local member political structure, including not just the local Selectmen, but also State Representatives and State Senators. He stressed that Eversource is a large entity with significant political clout and that the Commission should try to match that as much as possible.

A **motion** was made by A. Ponanski, seconded by L. Wadge, to authorize the Chair to sign a contract with Attorney Ainsworth for representation of the Gateway Commission, including efforts to negotiate the placement of lines beneath the Connecticut River.

Voting in favor: M. Semënov-Leiva, J. Roberts, J. Hiller, M. Farina, L. Wadge, S. Thompson, R. de Brigard, A. Ponanski, K. Perzanowski; **Opposed:** None; **Abstaining:** W. Webb. The motion **passed** unanimously, 09-0-0.

**ii. HB-6831 – CRGC Submit Testimony**

R. de Brigard explained HB-6831 with regard to housing, is a slightly different version than in the past. In addition to resident income qualifications, it proposes providing financial incentives (grants) to municipalities that adopt specific transit-oriented development policies.

R. de Brigard explained that he has brought up this Bill because of concern that Office of Policy & Management (OPM) may not consider what is included in the Commission’s standards which would put the towns in a conflicted position – breaking the Gateway Commission’s standards or violating OPM.

A **motion** was made by A. Ponanski; seconded by J. Roberts, to send the letter regarding HB-6831 as designed, subject to Chair’s modifications, regarding the Gateway Commission’s position on the Bill. The motion passed unanimously.

**iii. TAG Team - Update**

The TAG Team provided updates on evaluations of referrals. Members discussed the effectiveness of the TAG Team’s review process. The team reviewed application requirements, incorporating a revised version of Old Saybrook’s clear and concise standards. A comparative analysis of the term “structure” across towns is underway to ensure consistency before making any local definition changes.

The plan is continued outreach to additional member towns of Haddam, Old Lyme, and East Haddam to discuss regulations and collaboration. Previous visits with towns Land Staff revealed specific town needs, such as Lyme’s plans to add tree cutting within the setback provisions in its regulations. Meetings with towns staff will be coordinated with the respective Commission representatives.

Regarding standardizing application requirements, efforts are being made to standardize application completeness requirements across towns. The revised application and addendums will be shared with members and town CEOs before public implementation to ensure alignment.

Next Steps include:

- Distribute revised application to Commission members for review.
- Schedule future town visits based on need.
- Complete structure definition analysis.
- Process for introducing new application requirements to town officials before implementation.

**d. Land**

**i. Deep River Land Trust Request for Land Acquisition Grant**

The Land Committee met to review the Deep River Land Trust request for funding for acquiring a conservation parcel. The Land Committee wants to recommend that the full Commission provide \$29,000 to support the acquisition of this property. Support includes items such as attorney fees, title, search, perimeter, survey, trail, materials, and the establishment of a stewardship account, however it has a list of questions for Deep River Land Trust before committing the funding. These include: signage acknowledging Gateway’s support, right of first refusal or reimbursement to the Gateway Commission should the DRLT decide to sell the property, and the deed as part of the transaction be amended, either to take away development rights, or that the property be declared conservation land in perpetuity. It was requested by

the Commission that when Ms. L. Giannotti returns to the next meeting, that she is prepared to respond and to provide a proposal from Deep River that can be officially voted on by the Gateway Commission.

A **motion** was made by W. Webb, seconded by R. de Brigard, that Gateway is inclined to support this request with some potential modifications. When Ms. L. Giannotti returns to the next meeting, it is requested that she is prepared to respond and to provide a proposal from Deep River so that the Commission can vote.

**ii. Haddam Property – D Brown Report**

A report on efforts in Haddam was reviewed. It was noted that D. Brown has agreed to help, but not much has happened since. On the 13th of March, an evidentiary session will be held at 2pm via zoom, followed by a public session. Members discussed maintenance strategies and safety concerns for conserved properties.

**11. Old Business**

**a. 38 Foxboro Point, Essex Dock Approval - Update**

No further action by the Commission is required at this time. Commissioners had been notified by the Essex Harbor Management Commission that a pending compromise between the parties is pending. Chair Thompson noted that although the Commission had voted at its January meeting to provide financial support for litigation and expert witnesses, we have not been notified of any expenses incurred.

**12. New Business**

**a. CT River Museum Event – Sponsorship Request**

A. Stromberger presented on the Environmental Summit to occur on April 5, 2025, at Wesleyan University. He highlighted expert participation, poster sessions, and student involvement. A sponsorship request was reviewed. Commissioners discussed the benefits of increased visibility and community engagement.

A motion was made by W. Webb; seconded by L. Wadge, to approve the Gateway Commission’s support of the CT River Museum Event at \$500 Bronze sponsorship level.

**13. Executive Session**

None

**14. Adjournment**

A **motion** was made by W. Webb; seconded by J. Cunningham, to adjourn the meeting at 9:59pm.

Respectfully submitted,  
Elizabeth Rolison

**The next regular meeting of the Gateway Commission is scheduled for Thursday, March 27, 2025, at 7:00 PM.**

Minutes are posted in compliance with Connecticut’s Freedom of Information Act. Please note that edits may be made to these minutes prior to their acceptance by the Commission at its next meeting. Any changes will be included within the next meeting’s minutes.