

Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

Strategic Planning Retreat
Chelmsford Public Library
January 28, 2023



Retreat Agenda

- 10:00-10:05** **Welcome**
- 10:05-10:20** **Pair and Share - Getting to Know You!**
- 10:20-10:30** **Group Agreement**
- 10:30-11:00** **What is NMCOG?**
Key Regional Issues and Priorities
Why Strategic Planning and Why Now?
- 11:00-11:45** **Small Group Exercise:**
Mission, Values, Hopes, Concerns
- 11:45-12:05** **Q&A | Stretch | Lunch**
- 12:05-12:55** **Council Priorities**
- 12:55-1:00** **Next Steps and Closing Remarks**

Getting to know you!



Please share (10 minutes total):

- 1. Who you are** (Name/ City/ Town + Board you are representing).
- 2. In a few words describe how you feel about a strategic plan** for NMCOG.
- 3. Briefly share what compelled you to get involved** with your local government.
- 4. Find a common theme** between you and who you are paired with and report out that common theme to the full group.

Group Agreement



How will we work together today?

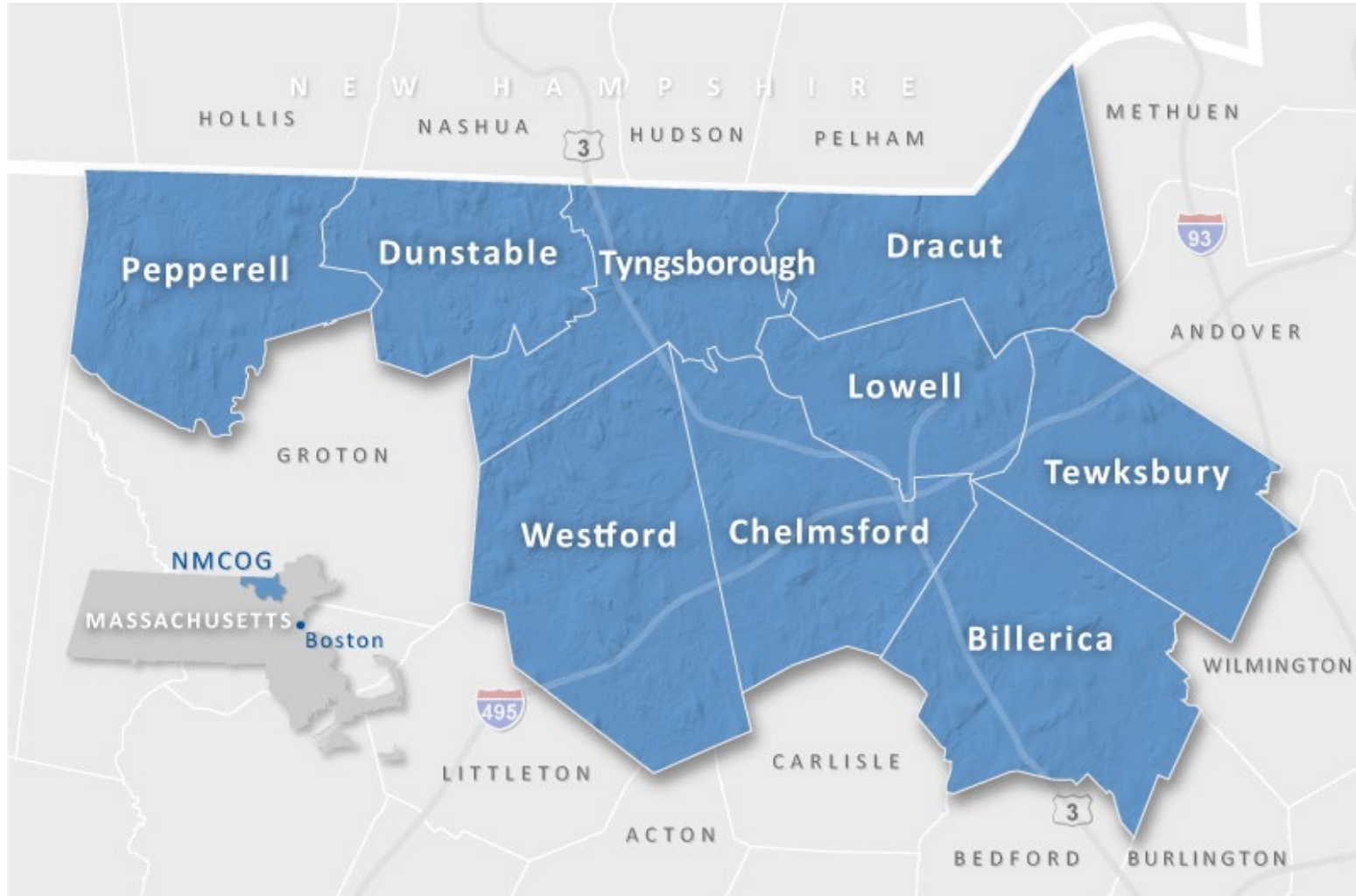
How should people conduct themselves at the meeting today?

What behaviors do you want participants to exhibit or not?

Group Agreement

- Exercise trust, openness, and honesty
- Focus on solution and resolution
- Be open to new ways of thinking
- One conversation at a time
- Everyone stays on time
- Turn off the sound on your cell phone.
- All opinions are valued.
- All ideas are treated with respect; no right/wrong ideas or answers.

About NMCOG



About NMCOG

January 1961	1st formal meeting to organize
1963	Lowell Area Planning Committee established to study enabling legislation for regional planning districts
1963	MGL c. 40B, ss. 1-8 Regional Planning enacted Greater Lowell Area Planning Commission established
1965	First member community assessments collected to support operations
1966	First Planning Director Harold Kramer hired with funds from US HUD
1967	Dunstable and Pepperell join GLAPC
1969	Changed name to Northern Middlesex Area Commission
1970	Hired Joseph P. Hannon , Executive Director, plans in the works to form the LRTA
1972	Legislation filed to change NMAC governing board (CEO, PB member, and one alternate)
1974	Lowell Regional Transit Authority established
1976	Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization established
1987	Promoted Robert W. Flynn to become Executive Director
1990	Changed name to Northern Middlesex Council of Governments
1999	<i>2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region</i>
2007	Promoted Beverly A. Woods to Executive Director
2011	<i>Regional Strategic Plan for Greater Lowell</i>
2022	Jennifer M. Raitt hired as Executive Director

About NMCOG - Council

Billerica

Chris Tribou - *Assistant Clerk*
 Andrew Deslaurier – *Chair*
 Mary McBride - *Clerk*

Chelmsford

Paul McDougall
 Pat Wojtas - *NMMPO Rep.*
 S. George Zaharoolis

Dracut

Charles Kanavos
 Alison Genest
 Phillippe Thibault

Dunstable

Position Vacant
 Kieran Meehan
 Position Vacant

Lowell

Gerard Frechette – *Treasurer*
 Daniel Rourke
 Position Vacant

Pepperell

Joan Ladik
 Chuck Walkovich
 Stephen Themelis

Tewksbury

James Duffy
 Jayne Wellman - *Assistant Treasurer*
 Position Vacant

Tyngsborough

Steven O'Neill
 Ronald Keohane
 Katerina Kalabokis

Westford

Darrin Wizst
 Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen - *Vice Chair*
 James Silva

About NMCOG - Staff

Executive / Administration

Jennifer Raitt
Executive Director

Lambert "Bert" Almeida
Financial Officer

Lesley Shahbazian
Executive Assistant

Transportation

Jessica Boulanger
Transportation Planner

Christopher R. Curry
Transit Manager/Associate Planner

Justin Howard
Transportation Director

Shravanthi Gopalan Narayanan
Transportation Planner

Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Sustainability, and GIS

Carlin Andrus, *GISP*
GIS Specialist

Chris Hayes, AICP Candidate
Housing and Economic Development Planner

Daniela Garcia Moreno
Sustainability Planner

Jeff Owen, AICP
Regional Planner

Weight and Measures Program

David Tilton
Transportation Planner/
Sealer of Weights and Measures

Mark Normandin
Deputy Sealer of Weights and Measures

About NMCOG

- One of 13 Regional Planning Agencies within the Commonwealth, NMCOG is a public agency governed by an 18-member policy board comprised of local elected officials from the City of Lowell and the eight surrounding Towns of Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford.
- Goal is to increase the capacity of municipalities and foster regional cooperation and coordination.
- 12 person staff providing comprehensive planning services to its member communities in transportation, economic development, land use, housing, environmental protection, public safety, public health, geographic information systems, and historic preservation.
 - » Hiring two new planners: housing/ land use and transportation

About NMCOG

- Technical staff for the Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization, providing comprehensive transportation planning services for the region under contract with MassDOT and LRTA.
- Partner for the Economic Development Administration (EDA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED) and local communities to address housing and economic development issues on a regional and community-level basis.
- Funded by municipal assessments, federal transportation and economic development funding, state grants, local fees for services, and special assessments.

Selected Current Projects and Activities

- Assistance to designated Green Communities with net zero action planning, including GHG inventories, net zero municipal operations, and compliance activities
- Facilitation of the Northern Middlesex Stormwater Collaborative to help municipalities comply with stormwater rules and regulations and provide guidance on initiatives to educate the public about stormwater
- Weights and Measures Program
- Assistance to municipalities to comply with MGL 40A Section 3A, MBTA Communities requirement
- Envision 2050 (Long-Range Regional Transportation Plan) and increasing mode shift
- Housing, economic development, and other local planning technical assistance

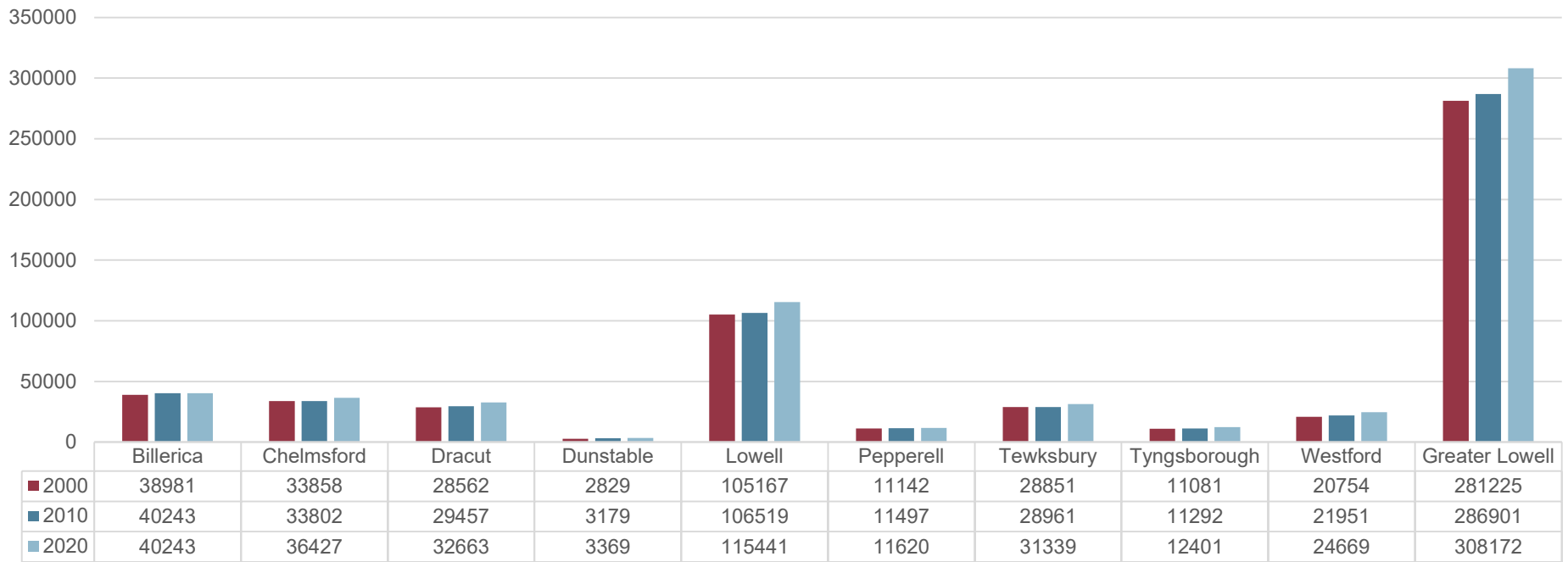
Lots of funding

- District Local Technical Assistance Program (regular funding + additional assistance available to communities)
- Regional Energy Planning Assistance (preparing for next two-year grant cycle January-April 2023)
- Leveraging federal funding opportunities through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, and American Rescue Plan Act
- Leveraging funding through other state agencies, including Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and Massachusetts Housing Partnership



About NMCOG

NMCOG Communities and Regional Growth 2000-2020



Key Regional Issues and Priorities

- Housing (all types, income levels/ needs, creating and preserving, housing stability, supportive housing)
- Infrastructure (water quality and capacity and sewer capacity and combined sewer overflows)
- Regionalization (municipal services and collaboration)

Our purpose today: Orient the full Council to our project and get feedback on how to make the most of our partnership

During our time together, we plan to achieve 3 main objectives

Session Objectives

- 1 Introduce the Council to NMCOG and our strategic planning project
- 2 Surface hopes and concerns around the process
- 3 Align on the key questions the Council believes this project must answer

We will have succeeded if...

...we leave acquainted with one another and familiar with the process at a high-level

...we are mutually aware of the promise and potential pitfalls of this work

...the Council has weighed in on where the NMCOG team should focus our time over the next 5 months

Why Strategic Planning and Why Now?



When the pandemic started, I kept track of phrases people used to describe how we needed to change our working style and approaches to work in the future in order to “survive” the stressful times and change:

- Improvise
- Adapt
- Be flexible
- Be responsive
- Collaborate
- Ask for help

Why Strategic Planning and Why Now?

The purpose of strategic planning is to help NMCOG:

- Make decisions about what it will and will not do to advance progress against measurable goals;
- Articulate the roadmap of actions and required resources (time, talent, funding, systems, and partners) to successfully execute on those decisions over a specific timeframe; and
- Clearly communicate what those decisions are and why they were made to serve as an internal playbook and external pitchbook.

Three things inform decisions in strategic planning

1. **Values.** What is driving NMCOG's commitment to this work? What values are a 'north star' that guide decision-making, and what values are in tension within NMCOG that need to be resolved?
2. **Data.** What information – both quantitative and qualitative – would help inform decision-making? Some data can only be created through the execution of a strategy. Part of our strategic planning deliverable is an implementation plan with a learning agenda and a data dashboard that can be used to manage and maximize impact.
3. **Dialogue.** The best decisions are made when the right stakeholders are involved in the right role and at the right time. Strategic planning is an opportunity for NMCOG to build deeper relationships and engagement with both internal staff and key external stakeholders – and that the result of doing so is a strategic plan that is fully embraced by all stakeholders and implemented with clarity and resolve.

Why is strategic planning so difficult, so feared, and sometimes so resisted? (1 of 3)

- Planning takes (sometimes a lot of) time and it is **easy for the immediacy of the urgent to overwhelm the important addressed in strategic planning**
- **Making decisions is hard** because good things get left on the table



Why is strategic planning so difficult, so feared, and sometimes so resisted? (page 2 of 3)

- For many organizations, planning bogs down because **the process of decision-making is unclear**
 - Who is involved? When are they involved? In what role do they serve? Is decision-making inclusive in reflecting the voices of all stakeholders, particularly those most proximate to the impact being pursued?
- Many people have been **burned by previous strategic planning** because no decisions are made, things are not properly resourced, and nothing changes

Why is strategic planning so difficult, so feared, and sometimes so resisted? (page 3 of 3)

- Because conditions change, some hesitate to plan for the long-term
 - Conditions will change over time (new challenges AND new opportunities), and this does mean plans will evolve: “plans are meant to stick but are not set in stone”
 - However, a strong plan gives you a starting point to evaluate new challenges and opportunities, and make intentional trade-offs

This is how we plan to address challenges/concerns to create a successful strategic planning process

- We will work together to create a **workplan and timeline** that – while aggressive – factors in that everyone has very full day-jobs under very challenging circumstances
- This planning process will model **transparency** and **communications** at each step
- We will be **clear on scope** and **structure a process that emphasizes the need to make decisions** – and part of that is what the Council **says ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘not yet’ to**
- We will **lay out a decision-making process** in collaboration with the Council that is:
 - Clear on **who has what role in making a decision**
 - **Inclusive** (sometimes prioritizing ‘community’ over ‘efficiency’) to arrive at the best decision with broad buy-in
 - **Establishes the criteria** by which decisions are made

This is how we plan to address challenges/concerns to create a successful strategic planning process

- We will **pressure test different strategic options** based on the resources (time, talent and money) required, based on existing commitments, and stakeholder voices as part of making a decision
- We will be **clear on how to measure progress and success** in executing this plan (and how that changes over time)

The **NMCOG team will do the heavy lifting** of project management, interviewing, research, analysis, synthesis and facilitation. However, **success requires commitment from the NMCOG Council** so we arrive at the right, best decisions. At the end of the day, **it has to be your plan**

SOAR Model Analysis (Appreciative Inquiry)

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Strengths: *What can we build on?*

- What are we most proud of as an organization?
- What makes us unique?
- What is our proudest achievement in the last year or two?
- How do we use our strengths to get results?
- How do our strengths fit with the realities of the marketplace?
- What do we do or provide that is world class for our customers, our industry, and other potential stakeholders?

Aspirations: *What do we care deeply about?*

- *When we explore our values and aspirations, "what are we deeply passionate about?"*
- *Reflecting on our Strengths and Opportunities conversations, who are we, who should we become, and where should we go in the future?*
- *What is our most compelling aspiration?*
- *What strategic initiatives (projects, programs and processes) would support our aspirations?*

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Opportunities: *What are our stakeholders asking for?*

- How do we make sense of opportunities provided by the external forces and trends?
- What are the top three opportunities on which we should focus our efforts?
- How can we best meet the needs of our stakeholders?
- Who are possible new customers?
- How can we distinctively differentiate ourselves from existing or potential competitors?
- What are possible new markets, products, services or processes?
- How can we reframe challenges to be seen as exciting opportunities?
- What new skills do we need to move forward?

Results: *How do we know we are succeeding?*

- Considering our Strengths, Opportunities, and Aspirations, what meaningful measures would indicate that we are on track to achieving our goals?
- What are 3 to 5 indicators that would create a scorecard that addresses a triple bottom line of profit, people, and planet?
- What resources are needed to implement vital projects?
- What are the best rewards to support those who achieve our goals?

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Small Group Exercise: Mission, Values, Hopes, Concerns

- NMCOG does not have a mission statement. Work with your small group to **list words that you believe could be part of a NMCOG mission statement** based upon what you learned or already knew about NMCOG.
- What are NMCOG's core values? How do our values drive our actions? Choose **five core values** that you believe could be part of a **NMCOG Statement of Values**.
- What are your **hopes for the NMCOG Strategic Planning process?**
- What are your **concerns about the NMCOG Strategic Planning process?**

Council Priorities

- What key questions do we need to answer as part of the Strategic Planning process?
- In addition to the regional priorities noted earlier in this session, what other priorities are important to the Council?

Next Steps and Closing Remarks

- Executive Director will debrief session with staff in attendance, share summary with full staff, and discuss timeline and process for moving forward.
- Executive Director will provide a summary of this session at the next Council Meeting (2/15/23) including a timeline and process for moving forward.

THANK YOU!

NMCOG Officers:

Andrew Deslaurier, Chair

Anita Tonakarn-Nguyen - Vice Chair

Gerard Frechette –Treasurer

Mary McBride - Clerk

Support for today's meeting provided by:

Pat Wojtas

Mary McBride

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