

To: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, Council and Alternate Members  
From: Jennifer Raitt, Executive Director  
Re: Executive Director's Report for October  
Date: October 2023

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## REGIONAL PLANNING ACTIVITIES

- **Transportation/ Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization (NMMPO)**

- **Greater Lowell Vision Zero Plan (the SS4A Regional Comprehensive Safety Action Plan)**

NMCOG has executed a contract with WSP to create a regional Safety Action plan under the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grant Program. WSP has played a meaningful role in the Vision Zero movement, having produced Vision Zero action plans in Sweden, Canada, New Zealand, and the US. The Swedish government was the first to adopt a vision zero policy, paving the way for future plans.

WSP will provide technical support for the Greater Lowell plan development and work with NMCOG to develop a High Injury Crash Network and identify equity indicators for motor vehicle related serious injuries and fatalities. This planning process will continue through June 2024 and will provide the Greater Lowell communities with identified projects needed to apply for SS4A Implementation funds. This month, NMCOG convened the first meeting of the Greater Lowell Vision Zero Advisory [Committee](#), local volunteers who will inform the plan development, implementation, and monitoring.

- **Traffic Counting Program**

In October, NMCOG staff received data for 21 counts from NMCOG's consultant, Southern Traffic Services + Rekor (STS). The counts were conducted during September. These data are being processed to be uploaded to MS2, the transportation data management system used by MassDOT. Remaining counts for the 2023 season were collected from October 23 through 27 and are expected to be received from STS in early November. Coordination with STS to gather and process data will continue through November 30. In the event of any technical difficulties with gathering data in October, counters will be reset in November.

Data collected during the 2023 traffic counting season will inform regional traffic volume reports that address topics such as average daily

traffic, regional traffic volume trends, traffic growth, and heavy vehicle monitoring. Traffic counting data are also maintained to be used to inform NMCOG reports such as The Greater Lowell Vision Zero Plan.

- **NMMPO 2023 Title VI Report Update**

In October, NMCOG staff began updating the NMMPO Title VI report. For calendar year 2023, the MassDOT Office of Diversity and Civil Rights (ODCR) has required specific updates to the 2022 report in lieu of a completely new report. NMCOG staff has begun making the required updates and will present the list of changes at the November NMMPO meeting. Staff will submit the updated report by the end of calendar year. The NMMPO Title VI Report provides information and analysis on transportation policies and services necessary to measure the NMMPO's compliance with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. 2000d) and USDOT's implementing regulations. Title VI provides that: "No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

- **Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA) Planning Support**

In October, NMCOG staff made strides in supporting LRTA's service efficiency and information accuracy. NMCOG successfully updated its comprehensive bus route database, a foundational step in transit planning. Utilizing this data, staff created an up-to-date comprehensive, systemwide map of LRTA bus services, and provided poster-sized versions to support LRTA operations staff in planning and training. Furthermore, staff identified an important accuracy fix of a bus route on the LRTA website and coordinated with LRTA staff and Trillium staff to correct the issue. This correction improves the rider experience by providing more accurate information and also lays the groundwork for accurate route tracking in anticipation of the implementation of automatic vehicle location systems.

- **Weights and Measures**

During the month of October, NMCOG's Weights and Measures program conducted 35 inspections in the communities of Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Littleton, Lowell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford. All 35 inspections were annual inspections. The outcome of these inspections resulted in 361 devices being inspected and sealed. Eight businesses were fuel oil trucks inspected in preparation for the upcoming colder months.

- **Regional and Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program**

On Thursday October 26<sup>th</sup>, NMCOG and MAPC hosted the Digital Equity Plan

Kickoff meeting. This initial meeting was held virtually with representatives from each of NMCOG’s nine municipalities. The meeting introduced the issue of Digital Equity and served as the first of many discussions about inequities in internet use and access across the Greater Lowell region. The final Digital Equity Plan will highlight digital equity issues and strategies applying to the entire region, and will also discuss challenges and propose possible solutions aimed at each individual municipality. A project website has been created to share details about this work, project schedule, upcoming meetings, and project outcomes; visit [nmcog.org/digitalequity](https://nmcog.org/digitalequity) to learn more.

- **“At Home in Greater Lowell” Regional Housing Strategy**

NMCOG is moving forward with contracting with the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) to assist with data collection, analysis, and recommendations for [At Home in Greater Lowell](#). This will supplement the work of NMCOG staff and an additional outreach consultant in creating a regional housing strategy with reasonable housing benchmark targets for each municipality, strategies to achieve those benchmarks, a storytelling effort to better understand and share housing challenges, and a toolkit of public educational and other materials to implement strategies. NMCOG is planning a January kick-off summit to bring together municipal, state, nonprofit, and federal staff, boards, and officials.

- **Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Economic Development Administration (EDA) Grant**

The Greater Lowell Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for 2020-2024 expires May 30, 2025. This document is critical both for allowing NMCOG and its member communities to receive grants from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and for coordinating and prioritizing the activities of NMCOG; local, regional, and state economic development agencies; and municipalities. NMCOG submitted a \$75,000 grant application, committing a \$75,000 match, to EDA for updating the CEDS with the council’s support. NMCOG anticipates a decision from EDA before the end of the year in order to start the planning process in January 2024. NMCOG would engage the services of a consultant to assist in data collection, analysis, and recommendations.

- **Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG)**

NMCOG is working closely with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to coordinate efforts to advance the regional climate planning effort funded through the CPRG, funded by the US Environmental Protection Agency. NMCOG staff are serving on the Regional Planning Agency Steering Committee, which will be in charge of leading outreach and engagement effort in our

region and coordinating with MAPC. Efforts are anticipated to start this fall and wrapping up in spring 2024.

## **ASSISTANCE TO INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITIES**

- **Multi-Family Zoning for MBTA Communities – Compliance Activities**

NMCOG continues MBTA Communities planning work with Tewksbury and Westford for mapping GIS boundaries and reviewing proposed districts against the EOHLIC's compliance modeling tool. The Tyngsborough Zoning Review Committee selected proposed district boundaries and made progress towards finalizing the state's model zoning, which is expected to be completed in November.

Staff worked with the Chelmsford Planning Board to conduct the final neighborhood outreach meeting on October 25 and presented an updated final scenario report for the Board's consideration to select the proposed district boundaries and the initial and initial draft of the state's model zoning.

NMCOG and Billerica planning staff conducted an MBTA-Communities focused Open House on October 19 at the Marshall Middle School. The event was well attended with approximately 100 attendees. The staffs then presented a summary of the event and provided resident feedback to the Planning Board at their October 23 meeting.

NMCOG signed a contract with Dracut for MBTA Communities outreach and engagement through the Massachusetts Housing Partnership's 3A-TA grant program. This work will begin in earnest in November.

NMCOG also hosted a monthly technical support conference call with all seven participating MBTA Communities from the NMCOG region on October 10.

- **Lowell Housing Production Plan**

NMCOG presented housing goals at the Lowell Forward Citywide Workshop on October 25. NMCOG is now working on refining the goals based on public and city feedback and further analysis of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment that was created over the year of 2023. This project is anticipated to be completed in early 2024.

- **Dracut Open Space and Recreation Plan**

Following on the Town's second Public Forum, staff worked with the Town's Conservation Agent and Assistant Planner, Jackie Anderson to incorporate

community priorities for open space and recreation into a draft plan. Staff attended public forums with the Open Space Committee, Conservation Committee, and Recreation Committee to discuss strategies on October 12 and 18, and on November 6. A draft plan is anticipated to be completed in November.

- **Pepperell Subdivision Regulations Ordinance**

The Planning Board began an official public hearing on the subdivision regulations in October. NMCOG's portion of work on this project is nearly complete with the exception of final revisions that arise from the public hearings.

- **Dunstable Union Building Rehabilitation and Future Use**

In October, NMCOG partnered with architect Spencer Preservation Group to facilitate a hybrid workshop attended by more than 30 participants related to discussing future uses of the Union Building, which is no longer needed by the Groton-Dunstable school district. The meeting created excitement for potential adaptive reuse, generated buy-in for the planning process, and resulted in a list of nearly a dozen re-use ideas to test via a town-wide survey. It also generated a list of concerns for the architect to consider when advancing its feasibility study into preferred uses.

- **Dunstable Walk Audit**

NMCOG is synthesizing feedback from three walk audits held this past summer and fall and developing recommendations for ways to improve the walkability of Dunstable Town Center into a final Walk Dunstable report. The final draft will be presented to the Dunstable Select Board in December.

## **GIS AND DATA SHARING**

Newly available lidar-based elevation data is available for the Northern Middlesex region which will replace elevation data from a combination of flyovers from 2005-2013. The new half-meter datasets were developed by MassGIS from the USGS 2021 Central Eastern MA Lidar Project and meet Quality Level 1 (QL1) standards. The datasets will improve NMCOG's assessments of developable land and include slope, 1-foot contour lines, and shaded relief.

GIS and data support was provided for a number of ongoing projects. An updated LRTA wall-sized service map was provided to LRTA for public outreach. Draft housing development locations were mapped for Dunstable, and map and data recommendations were compiled for the Lowell Housing Comprehensive Needs Assessment.

## REGIONAL SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

- **Northern Middlesex Municipal CEO Group**  
The group met in Westford in October, where CEOs met Paul Christner, NMCOG's new Transportation Program Manager. The meeting focused on local and regional transportation, Envision 2050 the long-range transportation plan for Greater Lowell and other regional transportation initiatives.
- **Citizen Planner Training Collaborative (CPTC) Trainings**  
The City of Lowell Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals requested NMCOG's assistance with a training on fair housing laws to ensure that their board members understand the laws and their role in the process to affirmatively further fair housing. Jennifer Raitt delivered the first training through CPTC's On-Demand program on September 25<sup>th</sup>. The second session will be provided on October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

On December 14, 5:30 pm, NMCOG will host the CPTC webinar on Writing Reasonable and Defensible Decisions. Other CPTC webinars are listed here: <https://masscptc.org/index.php/training/webinar-series/>

## GENERAL UPDATES

- **Office Move Update**  
Furniture and IT plans for the new office space have been finalized and build-out work started on October 30<sup>th</sup>. The new IT network integrates several security and performance improvements and NMCOG's current end-of-life phone system will be replaced with a VOIP system that staff can use when working remotely.