

To: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, Council and Alternate Members
From: Jennifer Raitt, Executive Director
Re: Executive Director's Report for November 2024

REGIONAL PLANNING ACTIVITIES

Transportation/ Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization (NMMPO)

- **Transportation / MPO**

As part of the public comment period for proposed amendments to the Federal Fiscal Year 2025 Unified Planning Work Program, staff held two public meetings on November 6 to describe the proposed changes and accept public feedback. The proposed amendments would move additional staff time under the MassDOT contract—a necessary step due to the nonrenewal of the LRTA contract. The amendments would also realign staff work hours based on updated understanding of projects, timelines, and priorities. The final amendments will be brought to the NMMPO at their meeting on December 4.

Staff continued work on a draft update to the agency's Public Participation Plan (PPP) – a federally required document that outlines the strategies and methods the agency will use to actively involve the public in the transportation planning process, ensuring that residents have opportunities to provide feedback and influence decisions regarding transportation projects and policies. Staff will conduct an internal review in December, presenting a final draft of the PPP to the NMMPO in January 2025.

- **Northern Middlesex Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan**

Staff published and promoted a Request for Proposals for the Northern Middlesex Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (watch for a more memorable project name once a consultant is selected) in November. While awaiting consultant proposals, due December 17, staff will be aggregating sidewalk, bike facility, and trail data and developing a communications plan for the project. A project advisory committee will be organized in early 2025 to coordinate with the project kickoff.

- **NMCOG Website Update**

Staff published and promoted a Request for Proposals for a vendor to assist in the development of a new agency website. The project is funded through NMCOG's MassDOT contract and will enable the agency to comply with state and federal accessibility requirements, better communicate the agency's projects, services, and priorities, and provide improved digital engagement tools. A vendor will be selected in December with the project to kick off in January.

- **Traffic Counting Program**

The 2024 Traffic Counting Season ended November 30th. Throughout November, transportation staff finalized coordination with New England Traffic Counts (NETC) on the collection and processing of traffic volume data. This data was then processed in MS2 to check for quality and errors. Data will be submitted to MS2 and to MassDOT prior to January 1, 2025. Staff also continued work on the 2023 Traffic Volume Report, which will be presented to the NMMPO in January.

Staff assisted local communities with traffic volume needs, including completion of a request from the Town of Chelmsford to analyze truck traffic leading from a quarry on Ledge Road through a residential area.

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

In November, NMCOG staff completed and submitted manual passenger counts on 29 LRTA routes to certify new APC counters for NTD reporting. This work was conducted to support the LRTA's transition to a ten-month period of fare free service, which began on December 1. As part of the Bus Stop Inventory Project, staff finalized a draft StoryMap, consolidating nearly a year of data collection into an interactive platform for stakeholders.

NMCOG also collaborated with McClure engineering consultants to assess 18 bus stop locations under the MassDOT Vulnerable Road User (VRU) program, targeting safety upgrades such as high-visibility crosswalks and pedestrian refuge islands. Staff joined the consultants and municipal staff to visit 6 site locations.

Additionally, NMCOG planners showcased their project on bridge readiness for battery electric buses (BEBs) at MassDOT's GIS Day. These activities reflect NMCOG's ongoing commitment to enhancing transit accessibility, safety, and planning throughout the region.

REGIONAL ACTIVITIES AND COLLABORATIONS

- **2025 Call for Planning Assistance and Project Ideas**

NMCOG received 25 project ideas from eight municipalities in response to its 2025 call for project ideas. Community project ideas included assistance with Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) zoning amendments; streamlining permitting processes such as site plan review; Master, Housing Production, and Open Space and Recreation Plans; economic-focused studies focused on specific sites, streetscapes, and neighborhoods; and many other ideas.

NMCOG staff will score the projects and meet with each municipality's staff to develop and refine priorities and scopes. By early January, staff intend to make project selections for the District Local Technical Assistance Program (DLTA). Other projects may be appropriate for the MassDOT Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) or to be funded through grants sought with Grant Assistance Program (GAP) funding.

- **Community Compact Cabinet's Efficiency and Regionalization Grant: Multi-municipality Regional Housing Support Organization (RHSO) Pilot Program**

On December 6, NMCOG received a grant award of \$95,000 from the Community Compact Cabinet's Efficiency and Regionalization Grant program to provide seed funding for an inter-municipal Regional Housing Support Organization (RHSO). The intent of this funding is to hire a new NMCOG staff member to devote a majority of their time to assist communities with such tasks as administrative support for municipal housing committees; Housing Production Plan implementation support; maintain administrative requirements for Subsidized Housing Inventory units; supporting communities working with Local Initiative Program and 40B Comprehensive Permit projects; and similar tasks.

NMCOG staff intend to work with the Affordable Housing Workgroup—a committee comprised of planners and housing advisory committee members from across the region — to refine a job description and tasks over the coming months, with a goal of the new staff person starting in early spring. After that, the pilot program would last one year. If successful, NMCOG would establish an intermunicipal agreement in collaboration with participating communities to continue funding the activities after the pilot has concluded.

- **Green Communities**

NMCOG staff supported Dunstable in submitting their Green Communities Annual Report, reviewed Dracut, Pepperell, Tewksbury, and Tyngsborough’s reports for potential errors or omissions, and provided the energy narratives section for each community. Staff attended the Inaugural Green Communities Summit in Devens, on November 22. The Summit provided an opportunity to learn more about energy building codes, Climate Leaders, and electric vehicle infrastructure.

- **Brownfields Community-Wide Assessment Grant**

Staff submitted an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Community-Wide Assessment grant application on November 14. NMCOG requested funding for planning and assessment activities, to be shared between NMCOG and a technical environmental engineering consultant.

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

Staff provided feedback on draft measures for the Comprehensive Climate Action Plan. The November CPRG Regional Planning Agency meeting was moved to December 13; at that meeting, participants will review and provide feedback on draft GHG reduction measures, accompanying prioritization framework, and plans and materials for the Engagement Roadshow.

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

NMCOG analyzed feedback collected from nearly 100 participants at November’s *Ideas to Action* Summit. Many participants re-emphasized the need for progress on all six goals to move forward in unison – all are necessary to tackle the housing challenges the region faces. The most important feedback was the need to begin implementation, as immediate action is necessary to address the region’s gap of more than 19,000 housing units in the next decade.

Staff are now finalizing the goals and strategies based on feedback for presentation to each municipality and to other key stakeholders. A scope and schedule for Phase 2, to be initiated in 2025, is being finalized. This work will include scenario development to better define the types and location of needed housing.

Videos of presentations, draft strategies, and more can be found on the project webpage, and NMCOG is encouraging broad sharing of videos to any interested parties – [a playlist of all presentations can be accessed by clicking here](#) or by visiting the *At Home in Greater Lowell* website, www.nmcog.org/ahgl.

- **Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for 2025-2030**

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Consultant, Fourth Economy, and NMCOG staff have interviewed more than a dozen planners, economic development experts, and nonprofit staff to evaluate the region's strengths, opportunities, and aspirations. The team is reaching out to several dozen more to ensure that the plan incorporates a view of the region's economic situation from as many viewpoints as possible. This work, along with data collection from sources such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the American Community Survey, is anticipated to conclude in January. The work will be integral to completing an existing conditions report that will guide an Economic Development Summit in the new year to generate collaborative Economic Development strategies to be undertaken in the next five years. NMCOG invites all to submit suggestions for names of stakeholders who should be contacted as part of this process.

- **Northern Middlesex Stormwater Collaborative (NMSC)**

Staff finalized the revised MOU which will be sent to municipal leaders for adoption at the CEO meeting in early December. The next NMSC meeting will be on December 10. Agenda items include initial review of proposed changes to the Stormwater Handbook and the collaborative's 2025 workplan.

ASSISTANCE TO INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITIES

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

Staff worked with the Dracut Zoning Bylaw Review Committee (ZBRC) and Planning Department to create supporting maps and materials to support the Town's preparation in advance of Dracut's November Town Meeting. Part of the supporting materials included an updated EOHLC compliance model and soft site development analysis to better understand the potential development timeline and patterns.

Staff assisted the Billerica Planning Department in preparing a townwide survey for potential MBTA Communities Section 3A compliant districts and assisted in drafting a corresponding zoning bylaw amendment. Staff created GIS datasets for the potential districts and analyzed their capacity using the EOHLC compliance model. The Planning Board utilized this information in their final district proposal submitted for adoption at the Town Meeting in December.

- **Tyngsborough Housing Production Plan**

Staff met with the Affordable Housing Trust on November 14 to review a draft of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and begin brainstorming goals and strategies for the final plan. A housing forum was held at the Center for Active Living on November 20, where the goals and strategies were presented and discussed with the public.

- **Chelmsford Housing Production Plan**

Staff met with the Housing Advisory Board on November 19 to discuss the results of the Creating Chelmsford's Future Ice Cream Social outreach event from September and review the qualitative survey data from the participants. They also reviewed notes from their interview with the Director of Chelmsford Housing Authority to identify the Town's affordable housing needs.

- Chelmsford Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP)**
 Staff met with and provided a partial draft to the Chelmsford OSRP Committee on November 19. After a series of meetings with the Town Manager, Town Planner, and the OSRP Committee, staff will deliver a full draft to the town for staff and committee review on December 3. Feedback and comments on the draft will be due on December 20 to allow for revision before the document goes out for public comment on December 23. The final meeting with the OSRP Committee will be on December 17.
- Pepperell Fiscal Sustainability Project**
 Staff completed their contracted work with the Town of Pepperell on facilitating community conversations on residents' ideas, priorities, and goals for balancing the municipal budget. This project culminated with a presentation of a final report to Pepperell Town Meeting on December 2. The report, which is [available on the Town's website](#), summarizes the discussions at three community meetings and presents and analysis of a community-wide survey administered by the Town.
- Westford Sustainability Support Services**
 Using the results from the Climate Action community survey conducted in October, staff facilitated a workshop with key Westford staff, members of the Select Board, and Town Committees. The November 12 workshop had two goals: to rebuild mutual respect and cultivate a renewed partnership and begin to develop the Climate Action and Sustainability elements of the Town's Strategic Plan. At the end of the workshop NMCOG decided the initiative needed a second workshop to further refine the climate actions. The second workshop will be on December 17 after which staff will develop the climate and sustainability section of Westford's Strategic Plan. Staff also completed the town's Green Communities Annual Report.
- Dunstable Town Center Trail Feasibility Study**
 In late November, NMCOG contracted with the Town of Dunstable to study the feasibility of developing a trail loop to circumnavigate Dunstable Town Center. The study will include direct outreach and engagement with property owners, Town Boards, Committees, and Commissions to evaluate viable paths and assess community support for the development of a trail loop to facilitate safe pathways connecting key Town amenities, and municipal and educational buildings. If adequately supported by the community, the project will position the Town to apply for state grants to finance the design and construction of path segments.

GIS AND DATA SHARING

Phase 3 of the MassTrails statewide trails database grant project officially commenced with agreements signed with MAPC. The project will conclude in June with NMCOG's regionwide trails data integrated into the statewide system and ready for data sharing and ongoing updates. Through November, staff acquired or updated several GIS data sets for communities and the region, including crosswalks data, regional environmental hazards data, EOHLC's Subsidized Housing Inventory, and Chelmsford watershed sub-basins. Staff also provided a voting district map

for Tyngsborough staff. The agency is improving its IT security profile with upcoming staff security awareness training, password management software and protocols, and an enhanced email security and backup system.

REGIONAL SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Updates

There were no projects advertised in the MEPA Monitor in the NMCOG region for November.