

STRATEGIC PLAYBOOK

September
2023



A collage of murals from the region

HOW IT BEGAN

Introduction

In the spring of 2023, we embarked on a strategic visioning process that was designed to serve as an opportunity to step back and think about where CRCOG as an organization is now and where we would like to go. Through a stakeholder interview and survey process, an all-staff retreat, and a strategic visioning meeting with our Policy Board, we gathered information and insights and explored the potential priorities, initiatives, and policy areas where we could play a leadership role to improve the quality of life across our region.



CRCOG Staff, May 2023

HOW IT BEGAN

Stakeholder Findings

We retained Grossman Solutions to assist us with the strategic visioning process. As a first step, Grossman Solutions conducted a stakeholder interview process with 10 CRCOG employees, including members of the leadership team and the Executive Director's direct reports. Grossman also conducted interviews with 18 additional stakeholders, including members of the Policy Board, elected officials, and external partners from municipal, state, and federal government offices and other related organizations. All remaining CRCOG staff were invited to participate in an online stakeholder survey, and 17 staff members completed this survey.

The purpose of the stakeholder process was 1) to better understand the internal, external, and political landscape, challenges and opportunities facing CRCOG to draft a strategic vision document, and 2) to design an effective staff retreat for CRCOG's team to explore, articulate, and define the organization's mission, values, and strategic vision.

Through the stakeholder process, Grossman Solutions found that the CRCOG team is highly regarded for its professional expertise, non-partisan ability to build consensus among the 38 member municipalities, and its impactful transportation and regional planning, public safety and municipal programs and services. Based on the stakeholder interviews and surveys, CRCOG is uniquely positioned by virtue of its reputation, expertise, and non-partisan status to further advance the conversation around shared services and to add a new slate of priorities.

“CRCOG is a well-established thought leader. They have the means to conduct studies and figure out a strategic plan of action.”

“CRCOG is informative, effective and efficient.”

HOW IT BEGAN

Staff Retreat

On May 25, our staff team convened for a day-long staff retreat. Staff examined their views about the mission, values, and strategic vision for the organization. They also considered a framework to evaluate potential new projects and priorities, which initiated a final conversation about the direction of CRCOG's work for the future. The retreat was a productive day where staff members articulated the building blocks of the mission and values statements, brainstormed impactful project ideas, and deepened connections across the organization.

In early June, our leadership team reviewed the findings and recommendations that emerged from the staff retreat and stakeholder interviews. The team used this information to prepare background materials, including a proposed set of strategic priorities, that we distributed to Policy Board members in advance of the June 12 strategic visioning exercise.



Staff Retreat, May 2023

HOW IT BEGAN

Policy Board Vision Session

Various members of CRCOG's Policy Board met on June 12 for a strategic visioning retreat. We briefed Policy Board members and other attendees about the findings from the stakeholder process and staff retreat and reviewed the proposed strategic priorities prepared by the leadership team. The visioning session participants' recommendations and insights are reflected in the final section of this report. Policy Board members and alternates who did not attend the visioning session were sent a survey offering them the opportunity to comment on topics discussed during the visioning session. Between the visioning session and survey, about two-thirds of the region's members participated in this exercise.



Policy Board vision session in New Britain, CT, June 2023

CRCOG'S MISSION

Mission Statement

The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) leads as a catalyst to enhance the quality of life, vibrancy, and vitality of the Greater Hartford region. CRCOG provides planning, programs, and services to its member municipalities and is the region's designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). CRCOG is a strong advocate for the region and regional solutions.

CRCOG Mission and Guiding Principles

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Use sound planning practices and data-based solutions to incorporate best practices



Embrace diversity and promote equity, inclusion, and belonging



Apply a lens of sustainability – environmental, economic, and equity



Work together, recognizing that the success of individual municipalities depends on the success of our region

CRCOG'S VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

CRCOG Values and Guiding Principles

At CRCOG, our core values are derived from our mission, our work, and our commitment to the municipalities and residents that we serve. As an organization dedicated to improving the quality of life throughout the region, we continuously strive to be:

- Member-focused
- Impactful and high performing
- Collaborative and inclusive
- Innovative

Our CRCOG team adheres to several guiding principles to supplement our core values. We are committed to the use of **sound planning practices** and **data-based solutions**. As a regional planning agency, we make sound decisions on behalf of our members and stakeholders and we incorporate **best practices** to promote a broad range of goals, including safety, accessibility, equity, and quality of life within the region. We further recognize that diversity is one of the Capitol Region's greatest strengths. We are a region comprised of urban, suburban, and rural communities, with residents from all over the globe. Embracing our **diversity, and promoting equity, inclusion, and belonging** makes us stronger, more competitive, and more resilient. We acknowledge that actions made today may impact the future, and therefore commit to applying a **lens of sustainability** -- environmental, economic, and equity -- to all our work. Finally, we recognize that the success of our individual municipalities depends on the success of our region as a whole. By **working together**, we can secure a more vibrant future for all.

CRCOG Core Values









STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Strategic Framework

As we set out to chart a course, the leadership team developed a framework to assess potential new initiatives for CRCOG. The framework is comprised of a set of criteria meant to serve as a tool to prioritize proposals for the purpose of strategic planning.



Each new project, program, or service should align with several elements of the following framework to warrant an allocation of resources:

-  Be compatible with CRCOG's mission and fall within our capacity and capability, either with existing or new resources.
-  Be member-focused and designed to help our members serve their communities more efficiently and effectively.
-  Present an opportunity to innovate, collaborate or partner with key stakeholders or other entities.
-  Be impactful for several CRCOG communities, including municipalities of different sizes and demographics.
-  Promote equity and environmental and economic sustainability.
-  Comply with state and federal requirements.

Strategic Priorities

Throughout the strategic visioning process, CRCOG staff and Policy Board reflected on the ways we could best serve our member municipalities, focusing on the next three to five years, with plans to periodically review and update our work. As part of our deliberation, we considered the region's primary challenges and opportunities in the context of our organizational mission and values, as well as the main policy issues and focus areas where we believe CRCOG could play a leadership role to improve the quality of life across the region.

As a result of those conversations, we recognize that CRCOG must continue to provide the established programs and services that are required by state statute or federal regulations. We are also committed to completing the work identified in our approved Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) and Regional Services Grant (RSG) Plan. In addition, we affirmed that CRCOG has the talent and the drive to lead on a set of strategic priorities.

The following list of strategic priorities is consistent with CRCOG's mission and grounded in our ongoing work. These initiatives are the product of our conversations and assessment of unmet but recognized needs that emerged during the strategic visioning process.

Governance and Communications

During the Policy Board strategic visioning session, our members indicated a desire to create a forum or a space to discuss key policy issues facing the region. Policy Board meetings generally feature a presentation and several business items, leaving little time for substantive conversations on policy matters. Members further highlighted the need for CRCOG to increase awareness of the critical challenges and opportunities the region faces, to create a common understanding and positive public dialogue about those issues, and to facilitate solutions that will help the Capitol Region prosper. Because elected officials, municipal staff, and other stakeholders are not aware of the full array of programs and services that CRCOG provides, CRCOG should continue to refine its communications strategy to educate members and stakeholders about our work.

Goals:

1. *Create a forum for substantive policy discussions related to key issues, challenges, and opportunities facing our members and the region.*
2. *Refine CRCOG's communications strategy to promote awareness of CRCOG's work and services, build our professional network, and elevate issues of critical regional importance to the attention of elected officials, municipal staff, and other key stakeholders.*

Action Steps:

1. *Schedule periodic in-person Policy Board meetings to discuss a substantive policy topic, such as housing, workforce development, or Complete Streets.*
2. *Schedule substantive policy discussions with CRCOG's Legislative Committee at key points throughout the legislative session to track and respond to relevant legislation.*

Governance and Communications

Action Steps (continued):

3. *Build a network of local public information officers and communications staff to share information across the region.*
4. *Continue CRCOG Who, CRCOG What, CRCOG Why campaign to promote awareness with our members and the general public.*
5. *Continue CRCOG staff visitation program with member municipalities.*

Federal Infrastructure Funding

Over the past year, CRCOG has added dedicated staff to assist our municipalities with preparing competitive applications for funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and other federal programs. CRCOG has started offering a new service to screen local infrastructure projects for federal funding and will work to expand this service to include other types of local projects and funding sources. We understand that these funding programs may be time-limited and that it is important to capitalize on these opportunities.

Goal: Assist our members with leveraging maximum funding from BIL, IRA, and related infrastructure grant programs.

Action Steps:

- 1. Continue to assist CRCOG members with preparing competitive applications for funding under the BIL and screen local infrastructure projects for potential funding sources.*
- 2. Build relationships with funding agencies and host workshops and seminars to feature best practices and new technologies.*
- 3. Add services to assist members with the application process, such as a grant newsletter and resources to conduct a benefit-cost analysis (BCA).*
- 4. Advocate for concerns expressed by member municipalities to assist them with overcoming barriers that hinder their participation in federal funding opportunities.*
- 5. Apply for planning grants and implementation grants for regionally significant projects and to accomplish CRCOG's strategic priorities.*

Economic Vitality

CRCOG's team is currently updating our Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and we recently received our Economic Development District (EDD) designation from the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA). Previous CEDS documents have suffered from a lack of resources to implement the strategies outlined in the plan. Following through on implementation will help promote economic vitality and quality of life in the region.

Goals: Implement the key recommendations in the CEDS, including support for workforce development initiatives, facilitation of mixed-use, mixed-income, and transit-oriented development, and the creation of a regional business recruitment and retention program focusing first on the business sectors that are identified in the CEDS.

Action Steps:

- 1. Add resources to coordinate implementation of the CEDS and promote equity.*
- 2. Continue to develop CRCOG's Brownfields Remediation Program.*
- 3. Establish an implementation committee and core CRCOG team that meets regularly to pursue priority CEDS goals as well as identify and apply for funding or other opportunities that enable implementation of the CEDS.*
- 4. Build and support a network of local government economic development professionals and other regional stakeholders, including arts and cultural institutions.*

Regional Housing Strategy

Housing, particularly affordable and workforce housing, is a critical issue across our region. Housing supply impacts our residents' quality of life and the economic competitiveness of our towns and region. CRCOG is well situated to play a leadership role in this policy area by convening stakeholders and helping to guide and facilitate the development of a comprehensive housing strategy for our region. The regional housing strategy should not seek to employ a one-size-fits-all model but instead provide a range of options that municipalities could apply and adapt based on their own needs.

Goal: Assist member municipalities across the region with increasing access to quality housing for people of varying income levels.

Action Steps:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive housing strategy for our region in partnership with housing-based organizations and other stakeholders.*
- 2. Develop a housing toolkit, including model regulations and policies, based on recommendations outlined in the strategy.*
- 3. Seek support and funding to implement strategy recommendations.*
- 4. Implement the HUD-funded grant assistance program for Low to Moderate Income (LMI) homeowners with crumbling foundations.*
- 5. Increase housing supply by continuing to implement CRCOG's Brownfields Remediation Program, prioritizing brownfields redevelopment within transit-oriented corridors.*

Regional Environmental Services (Recycling and Waste Management, Environmental Planning, and Stormwater Management)

CRCOG's core environmental services and programs include our Brownfields program, air quality reporting, the development of actionable climate action plans through the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG), and the Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan update. Climate mitigation and adaptation strategies are becoming more prevalent to help regional and local governments cope with changing weather patterns and related damage to infrastructure and private property, and loss of natural resources.

Municipal waste management, stormwater management, and other environmental issues represent significant challenges for many of our municipalities, who could benefit from a regional approach to build, maintain, and operate critical infrastructure.

Goals:

1. *Implement key recommendations in CRCOG's waste management study to develop a more sustainable waste management system for the region.*
2. *Develop a long-term plan to significantly improve stormwater infrastructure across the region, implementing nature-based solutions where appropriate.*
3. *Work to meet goals set by state and federal governments to address climate change.*

Action Steps:

1. *Re-establish the Central CT Solid Waste Authority (CCSWA) to help implement the recommendations outlined in CRCOG's recent waste management study.*
2. *Conduct a grant-funded stormwater management study to analyze the condition of existing infrastructure and to identify needed improvements and regional solutions, including the potential for stormwater authorities and utilities.*

Action Steps (continued):

3. *Utilize the Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan and CPRG to prepare climate action plans for the region and seek funds to implement key recommendations.*
4. *Continue to implement the brownfields program and proactively seek projects that abate pollution, particularly in our disadvantaged communities which are often disproportionately impacted from pollution and heat island effects.*

Coordinated Approach to Road Safety, Complete Streets, and Multi-use Trail Projects

As the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), CRCOG is ideally situated to provide a comprehensive approach to thinking about the region's roads, corridors, greenways, and trails. We are currently working on many aspects of road and traffic safety, complete streets, and multi-use trail projects, including an update to the Regional Transportation Safety Plan, the East Coast Greenway Gap Closure Study, and the RAISE (Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity) grant project to close trail gaps in New Britain and Plainville. CRCOG endorses a vision zero approach (set goals to significantly reduce fatal and serious injury crashes) to improve traffic safety. To be most effective, CRCOG's Vision Zero efforts will focus on an interdisciplinary approach that includes elements of planning, engineering, enforcement, and public education.

Goals: Work to dramatically improve safety for all road users in an equitable way and to promote micromobility and Complete Streets.

Action Steps:

- 1. Incorporate a Vision Zero approach into the Regional Transportation Safety Plan update.*
- 2. Complete the Roundabout Screening Study, the East Coast Greenway Gap Closure Study, and various corridor studies.*
- 3. Take on new initiatives such as the Regional Bicycle/Pedestrian Priority Network Plan, offering bike/ped count and walk audit as additional services.*
- 4. Continue to help member municipalities seek funds for Complete Streets and related implementation projects.*

Enhanced Bus and Rail Service

As the region's MPO, CRCOG plays a significant role in transit planning, with a focus on rail and bus service. The state has begun to unveil its recommendations from the Greater Hartford Mobility Study (GHMS), which would benefit from CRCOG's support. We can also advocate for enhanced bus service throughout the region, including the implementation of transit priority corridors, increased transit service in rural areas, the potential expansion of CTfastrak, and improvements along the Hartford Line (station construction, double-tracking, replacement of Hartford rail viaduct and CT River bridge).

Goals:

1. *Collaborate with CTDOT, member municipalities, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), and other stakeholders to improve passenger service on the Hartford Line.*
2. *Help shape the GHMS and advocate for the implementation of recommended projects.*
3. *Work with CTDOT and transit operators to enhance bus service, including paratransit, throughout our region.*

Action Steps:

1. *Re-establish the CTfastrak/Hartford Line Corridor Advisory Committee to support continued state investment in these transit assets.*
2. *Continue to participate in the development and implementation of the GHMS.*
3. *Conduct a comprehensive service analysis to analyze transit needs around the region, including rural and other underserved areas.*
4. *Assist member municipalities with grant opportunities to improve service.*

Public Sector Workforce Development, Shared Services, and Direct Services

Public sector workforce development is a new focus for CRCOG that emerged from consistent feedback we received from member municipalities about their difficulty with recruiting and maintaining staff in a variety of local government occupations, ranging from code enforcement to public safety. We are approaching this issue in collaboration with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM), Capital Workforce Partners (CWP), UConn's School of Public Policy, and others to develop a talent pipeline for key municipal occupations. With respect to shared services, we have three Regional Performance Incentive Program (RPIP) grant projects underway for animal control, assessment, and code enforcement/building inspection. These RPIP projects are designed in large part to address workforce shortages faced by CRCOG members. CRCOG's enhanced GIS & Data Center provides direct services to member municipalities, including mapping and data to support environmental justice, housing, transportation, and other projects and initiatives.

Goals:

1. *Work with member municipalities and other key stakeholders to develop a talent pipeline for key municipal occupations.*
2. *Help member municipalities share services to capture economies of scale and improve service quality.*
3. *Provide direct services through CRCOG where desired and feasible.*

Action Steps:

1. *Continue to coordinate the work of the Public Sector Workforce Task Force to develop a talent pipeline for key municipal occupations.*
2. *Successfully implement the three RPIP-funded projects.*
3. *Refine and build out CRCOG's GIS & Data Center to serve our members and CRCOG staff.*
4. *Develop a municipal resource library with toolkits, model regulations and policies, best practices, and other information to serve member municipalities.*

Action Steps (continued):

5. *In collaboration with State agencies and other key stakeholders, assess workforce recruitment and retention within the region's public safety services, with initial focus on EMS systems, and develop an action plan to implement desired improvements.*

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

In conclusion, we appreciate the opportunity to engage in the strategic visioning sessions with our Policy Board and staff team. We look forward to updating our mission and organizational values and the opportunity to *lead* on a set of strategic priorities to best serve our members and the region.

