



## Connecticut Equity and Environmental Justice Advisory Council (CEEJAC)

### Water Subcommittee Meeting Minutes

April 23, 2024, 5:30 – 7:30 PM ET

[Link to the recording](#)

This is a public meeting, the recording, slides, agenda, and meeting minutes will be posted on the [Connecticut Equity and Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#) website.

Disclaimer: Please note this is not a word for word translation.

#### **CEEJAC Subcommittee Members: (full registrant list below)**

- [Chair] Cierra Patrick, Economic Development Manager, City of Groton
- Maisa Tisdale, Executive Director of The Mary & Eliza Freeman Center
- Sharon Lewis, Executive Director, CT Coalition of Economic and Environmental Justice (CCEEJ)
- Denise Savageau, Chair, CT Council on Soil and Water Conservation
- Mary Pelletier, Director, Park Watershed Inc.
- Anne Hulick, State Director, Clean Water Action (CT)
- Alicea Charamut, Executive Director, Rivers Alliance of CT
- Lori Mathieu, Environmental Health and Drinking Water Branch Chief, in for Commissioner Manisha Juthani, Department of Public Health

1. **Welcome and Introductions, Cierra Patrick**
2. **Context for Subcommittee, Graham Stevens, Bureau Chief of Water Protection and Land Reuse (WPLR)**

DEEP does a lot on protection of waterways. The Urban Waters Initiative had capacity and funding to engage on this pilot project. DEEP used funding from US EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and directed funding to understand community needs and relationships along the watercourse for water planning, restoration.

Largely, this project was on water quality improvements in urban setting, which is more difficult because most urban watercourses are further downstream and restoring that water to its intended uses becomes more challenging. We want to unlock the potential of

communities who are well poised in water protection to partner and restore vital water courses.

### **3. Overview of Urban Waters Initiative, Abbie Winter, Program Manager of UWI and Environmental Analyst, CT DEEP**

- Mill River Watershed in New Haven County – covers 38 sq miles over 7 municipalities. Diverse watershed covering rural, suburban, and urban areas (most developed). Runoff and combined sewage overflows from large rainstorms causes water impairment in this area.
- This project was inspired by a Bronx River project in 1997, success is largely connected to data driven decision making and community involvement.
- Mill River watershed was selected because of urban area and robust existing partnerships. Involved Mill River Watershed Association and others in a steering committee with DEEP staff. The Committee solicited applications for projects with a goal to give stakeholders opportunity to develop and implement projects. Fair Haven – well-resourced and while in between two watersheds, didn't want to exclude.
- Project was determined by steering committee – had 2 focuses: community science (led by Southwest Conservation District), and community outreach and engagement (led by Save the Sound)
  - Community Science program = Collaboration with Sound School + Gather New Haven
    - spearheaded research to collect water quality data
    - hosted outreach events on the shoreline
    - set up a bacteria analysis lab for samples in the watershed – to be available to universities and science groups
    - deployed booms for floatable trash collection and analysis to get an idea of the largest source of debris in our waterways
    - art projects and displays

### **4. Community Engagement in Urban Waters Initiative**

- **Anthony Allen, Director of Restoration Strategy, Save the Sound**
- **Xochitl Garcia, Community Leader for Urban Waters Initiative, Bilingual Environmental Consultant in New Haven**

#### **Anthony Allen**

DEEP went to the community and said that we have funding and asked for proposals for how to improve the stewardship of the lower Mill River. 20 groups came together in conversations over 7 months, brainstorming ideas. Save the Sound and Southwestern Conservation District – asked for 2 proposals from the 15-20 organizations. Started to think about what are the cohesive projects that could

come about – community science and community outreach engagement (led by Save the Sound + lots of partners).

- Our partner organizations included environmental organizations, but then you also see core organizations in the neighborhood like Fair Haven Community Health Care or Fair Haven Library. Some people came at the beginning, but others we invited later in the process.
- Save the Sound’s role – focused on hiring community leaders and conducting a photovoice project. Used photovoice to start a conversation and then help move project forward. Then we also had photos that we could use at a later community exhibit.
  - Recruiting Community Leaders – invited representatives from four community partners who formed a selection committee. Put up a job description and put it out to the community and didn’t ask for a resume, or asked people to send a statement of interest and your work in the neighborhood and 3 references. Personal referrals to the role were successful in getting people to apply.
- Lengthy gap of time between fleshing out the project and identifying a cohesive project to the point where we had a contract. Added new partners and also lost some partners.

### **Xochitl Garcia**

- Photovoice – you have to convince people to be a part of the program and maintain attention in the program. Persistence in getting people interested to join us. Role was focused on people who speak Spanish and melissa was focused on English. Gave an introduction to photovoice and orientation to Fair Haven. There was a range of understanding of the history of Fair Haven – ex. Why is there one abandoned street called Water St?
- Had participants work independently to take pictures on their own time. But when we did it as a group we had a better response rate. Wanted to emphasize the history of the neighborhood itself. Developed 5 themes in the collection of photos – it started out by taking pictures that seemed interesting, but we wanted to home in on why these pictures matter.
- **Overview of 5 Major Themes:**
  - Green and Blue Spaces – people can exist without pressure of consumerism. Limited access to rivers (ex. Dead end roads or no trails to get to it). People will make a way to get to it because there are people who use the rivers for food but they are not looking whether they should be consuming fish.
  - Trash Travels – litter is a big problem in Fair Haven. We think about where it comes from, no waste disposal infrastructure and had conversations about

how to address this problem. Need to involve government entities. Residents will put out their own trash bins to encourage disposal.

- Abandoned Buildings – formerly Strong School and was supposed to be converted mixed residential building.
- The Homeless/Shelterless - use secluded spaces in the neighborhood to create a sense of belonging.
- A Safe Place? - division of Fair Haven and East Rock is I-91. You can see stark contrast of pedestrian safety. East Rock tends to have wider and cleaner sidewalks and more greenery. Fair Haven has compact and dense, overcrowded areas. Photo shows that infrastructure doesn't promote safe livelihoods like being able to cross the street.

- **Community-derived solutions – community charrettes**

- Get live inputs of the event, received variety of contributions to actively draw and map.
- Defined types of projects that could be actionable. Didn't limit to what Save the Sound could do – they were more focused on the 5 themes to encourage folks to get more action-oriented.
  - Green and Blue Spaces – increase outdoor connection through better facilities and events. Not just about parks, but like restaurants not having outdoor seating. Thinking about environmental quality and stewardship as direct relationship with your environment. If your space is hectic, you won't take your time outside.
    - Ex. Criscuolo Park – lots of things happen there, want more investment in existing green space.
  - Trash Travels – learned that there is someone in Fair Haven who walks up and down Grand Ave to pick up trash on a regular basis. Led to creative campaigning around litter.
  - A Safe Place? - creating more spaces for people to hang out outside, like improving crosswalks, bus stops, bike lanes, and outdoor seating. Making the environment a better place to be and would also care about their space.
- Leading to Phase 2 – doing workshops to get into and develop project briefs – what do residents want to see happen, identify community leaders, funding sources, potential costs.

## 5. Q&A/Discussion:

- Cierra – when do you expect to finish the second phase?
  - Anthony - Funding expires Sept 30, 2024. We understood that when you engage in this type of work, there is not a defined endpoint. DEEP allocated

funding to keep this going in the next year. Funding sources result in gaps between projects, so you also need to think about the next thing.

- Xochitl – we did have to restart conversations from the beginning. Restarting the fire. The second focus is more involved activities with an established park to gain trust in a physical space.
- Cierra – Can you talk about how to keep community engaged?
  - Xochitl – it involves a lot of different steps, comes down to people’s communication style. You send a generic email and the responsiveness to those emails is not very high. Asking people how they are doing and give people a phone call. People are really responsive to this.
  - Anthony – Covid taught us a lot because mass vaccination taught us collective capacity and trusted partners and efforts.
- Cierra – how did you engage municipal leaders?
  - Anthony – that was one of the things that organizations like Save the Sound can bring to this kind of work. We have contacts with the city, so we can reach out directly to get folks to come. There’s an intense focus from the city on the Mill River District. They just got \$5 million to do improvement and extension of public spaces. They are focused on the Mill River Trail. There needs to be a balance of what residents want and what city wants to happen.
- Sarah Huang (CT DEEP) – how would you pitch the idea of engaging with non-environmental organizations in projects that focused on the environment?
  - Xochitl – important for community partners to see that they are being welcomed to the table and are still being cared. When I’m talking to non-environmental organizations, it’s about the cultural or invisible identities, so needing to include the intersectional values of livelihoods.
  - Anthony – when people talk about community engagement, we acknowledge that people are struggling to put food on the table, talking to them about solar panels is not going to be the first thing on their minds. One way to think about this is to meet people where they are at. That doesn’t mean that you the organizer or project manager doesn’t mean that you meet people where they are at, but you can build partnerships with groups who are seeing people in different parts of their lives.
- Cierra – How can people to do this elsewhere?
  - Abbie – we want people telling us that they want to do this in their community.

- Graham – Funding that we had was a onetime source of funding. Having a clear need in our communities can help us seek additional funding. Proud of the investment that community put into this effort. Federal funding is often very constrained focused on outcomes and outputs – but this funding source didn't come with those strings attached.
- Chris Bellucci (CT DEEP) – this is one of the first closely tied into community projects that we've done. If you imagine us going to the community about our water quality pitch, it wouldn't be successful. We're trying to work with EPA to allow us to have flexible projects. We'd like to do this in other places, and ideas are welcomed.
- Cierra – is this the first time that you worked together?
  - Anthony – for some of us, yes but not all of us. We have trusted partners who were engaged in the original conversation and had energy to help with the project. Pre-existing relationships helped to make collaboratively work towards something. But for others, we also were building new relationships, like Mary Wade (senior living home).
- Mary Pelletier (Park Watershed, Inc.) – a lot of resources in CT have gone to the coastal communities. We have been working since 2003, EPA is working with different groups in the city, but not necessarily bringing us together. Does DEEP have different strategies for different regions of the state for what areas will be prioritized?
  - Graham – we don't have a different strategy for different communities. We share a strategy of water restoration across the state. This is the first real pilot approach that we've done in a community.
- Xochitl – on a more personal level, one of the challenges of a designated community leader is to be mindful of the amount of cultural, social, environmental aspects that affect me as a community leader. It can be exhausting. It's good to have a team to divide the labor as equitable as possible.
  - Cierra – need investment and support from an overall team.
  - Kathy Fay – Follow up to last couple of statements, when it's outside of realm of water issues, when it comes to EJ communities, it's easy to pick up a few people to be a conduit to the community. It's really easy to cherry pick gatekeepers to communities. And oftentimes they want to step out of the role and let others step into it. We need to be mindful of that when we go forward for all EJ projects.

- Denise Savageau (CT Council on Soil and Water Conservation) – it's hard to work with urban centers where people haven't been connected. This group can look at how we can make sure that the communities that we work with are engaged right from the start. We do planning without them, but we need to make sure that we are bringing them in. Such as when projects are first conceived, we need to make sure that we are bringing communities in first – this was a recommendation from GC3.
  - Example - There's a management plan being developed for Long Island Sound. Are we engaging the EJ community on this update – people need to understand that they can bring this back to their communities.
    - Update of Long Island Sound Study Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan - <https://longislandsoundstudy.net/about/ccmp-revision-updates/>
  - Another issue is that watersheds that are already developed means its okay to keep developing in them. We're not going to get better if we just keep developing on them – need to take it seriously to manage upstream and downstream.
    - Ex. West River – putting solar panels and cutting forest, we have a management plan that says we shouldn't have any more impervious cover. 410 Denslow Road, Hamden, CT - Large scale solar clear cutting 7.9 acres in West River Watershed that has significant flooding and water quality issues. Project is just upstream from EJ communities. This project is seeking to provide community solar for West Haven. Watershed plan calls for keeping green infrastructure in place in [https://portal.ct.gov/csc/3\\_petitions/petition-nos-1601-1700/pe1627](https://portal.ct.gov/csc/3_petitions/petition-nos-1601-1700/pe1627)
- Mary – need to bring in EJ communities. Encourage DEEP to bring us all together in different communities.
- Cierra – we have these watershed plans, how do action items feed into a community driven process?
  - Graham – trying to learn about what that connection looks like. See how that project is building capacity for prioritization and community engagement and request for assistance for different watershed-based initiatives. Over the course of next several months, we'll understand how to translate community engagement aspect to direct restoration efforts.

## 6. Announcements:

Abbie Winter – The plan that guides the conservation of Long Island Sound is getting a major revision. The [Long Island Sound Study](#) (LISS), an estuary program, is working to revise the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) used to guide conservation work around Long Island Sound.

That means...If you live, work, or play in the Long Island Sound region, this plan could affect on-the-ground projects near you. If there are environmental challenges in your life and community that you want to make sure are addressed, let us know! This is YOUR opportunity to help steer conservation funding decisions for the next 10 years.

Want to share your thoughts? Attend an upcoming public meeting!

The public is invited to attend an in-person or virtual public engagement session in May to learn about the CCMP and to provide input on the CCMP revision process.

#### In-person Sessions

- Wednesday, May 8, 2–4 p.m. and 6–8 p.m., Lighthouse Point Park, 2 Lighthouse Rd, New Haven, CT
- Wednesday, May 22, 2–4 p.m. and 6–8 p.m., NYSDEC Division of Marine Resources, Kings Park, NY
- Tuesday, May 28, 2–4 p.m. and 6–8 p.m., Alley Pond Environmental Center, Queens, NY

#### Remote Sessions

- Saturday, May 11, 1:00–2:30 p.m.
- Tuesday, May 14, 3:00–4:30 p.m. and 7:00–8:30 p.m.

Read more and access the registration link [here](#)! You can also submit your comments any time by emailing [LISoundPlan2025@gmail.com](mailto:LISoundPlan2025@gmail.com). Ideally, please comment end of June!

In Fall 2024, come see the draft plan and provide feedback. Visit our webpage [LISstudy.net/plan](https://LISstudy.net/plan) to share your thoughts, view updates, or sign up to be notified about future public meetings.

Any organization interested in helping raise awareness about this process can contact Jimena Perez-Viscasillas at [jbp255@cornell.edu](mailto:jbp255@cornell.edu) for copies of the CCMP revision brochure



**Meeting Participants:**

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