



Eastern Regional Conference
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS



With COVID-19 cases spiking, state revenues crashing, and continued restrictions on the size of gatherings and on out-of-state travel, there would seem to be little cause for optimism for the future of a state government association like The Council of State Governments. CSG is heavily dependent, financially, on state dues support, and a significant part of our mission is focused on convening state officials. For the CSG Eastern Office, and the organization as a whole, the current conditions would seem to approach that of the perfect storm.

Despite these headwinds, I am optimistic about the future of CSG.

First, amid the massive social and economic disruption caused by COVID-19, CSG Eastern Office staff have been able to stay connected with our members. Since our office in lower Manhattan closed in late March, following Governor Andrew Cuomo's executive order that put New York "on pause," our staff has held more than 40 webinars, virtual committee meetings, and conference calls engaging more than 1,500 state officials from the region.

We have addressed issues including the impact of COVID-19 on farm and rural communities, the new urgency for rural broadband, and the virus' disproportionate effect on front-line health care workers and communities of color. Our Energy and Environment Committee continues to look at natural climate solutions in response to the dire threat of global warming, while our Canada-U.S. Committee focuses on the challenges of a closed border and bilateral relations during the coronavirus pandemic. The tragic killing of George Floyd spurred our Council on Communities of Color to host a series of

micro-summits designed to bring together state policymakers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to have difficult conversations regarding systemic racism in America. These conversations are necessary to address, at a policy level, the underlying problems of access to adequate health care or poor environmental conditions in many communities of color.

While I am proud of the programming we have offered during this pandemic, the cause for my optimism really rests with our members. I am so impressed with the time they have taken during a challenging legislative session to participate in our programs, to share what they are doing — what is working and what is not working — with their colleagues in neighboring states. The value of this information-sharing to state officials — the reason CSG was created by Colorado State Senator Henry Toll in 1933 — has never been more apparent than during the coronavirus pandemic.

This is not to say that the current crisis is the first to test our mettle or our value to the CSG East member states, territories, and provinces. In another national crisis — the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 — the Eastern Office was directly impacted as our offices, located in Five World Trade Center, were destroyed. All of our employees were able to evacuate safely, unlike the 2,977 workers and first responders who were tragically lost when the towers fell.

However, one of the most memorable positive developments for me, following the displacement of the Eastern Office staff, was the creation of a special CSG Eastern Office Recovery Fund by our member states. Over half the states in the region contributed to help our office relocate to new space in lower Manhattan. These funds were provided in addition to the ongoing dues we receive annually and included a special appropriation by the state of New York to help keep us in lower Manhattan. We were proud to be part of the economic recovery of lower Manhattan, particularly as the CSG Eastern Office has been

located in New York City since 1937.

In the months immediately following Sept. 11, we continued to staff our regional committees, plan for a major regional trade summit, convene more than 100 criminal justice and mental health policymakers to discuss the response to individuals with mental illness, and plan the 2002 CSG/ERC Annual Meeting. Despite nine separate office moves following Sept. 11, the work of CSG's Eastern Office continued, just as the work of state governments has continued throughout this pandemic.

In times of crisis like these, I am most reminded of why CSG was created. State officials know they cannot solve many of the problems they face alone. Early in the development of the COVID-19 crisis, seven northeastern state governors created a joint task force to examine options for reopening state economies while ensuring the safety of their respective communities. Governor Cuomo said, "What we do, I want to do on a coordinated basis."

In this season of thanksgiving, I am particularly thankful for the thoughtful participation of many state, territorial, and provincial officials across our region in our various training programs, webinars, and committee meetings over the past year. Their engagement with CSG gives me cause for great optimism in the future of The Council of State Governments as an essential organization serving the states. State governments and their leaders have shown time and again to be not only the innovators, willing to work collaboratively to tackle the most critical issues facing our nation, but also true champions of our democracy. They are my reason for enduring optimism for the future of CSG and our country.

Wendell Hannaford
Director, CSG Eastern Office

Wendell Hannaford is retiring after 42 years of service to CSG.

CSG East: Creating Policy Solutions

Since 1933, state officials have turned to The Council of State Governments (CSG) as an impartial source of research and information to help them meet the challenge of governing.

CSG, headquartered in Lexington, Kentucky, has four regional offices in the East, Midwest, South, and West.

CSG's Eastern Regional Conference (CSG East) has been located in New York City since 1937. Our team of experienced policy staff support legislative, judicial and executive-branch officials from our 18 member jurisdictions in areas relating to agriculture, Canada/U.S. relations, education, energy and environment, fiscal affairs, health, international trade, and transportation.

CSG East facilitates the exchange of ideas among its member states, provinces, and territories, promotes networking among members, and conducts fact-based research and analysis to help shape effective public policy.

We also conduct leadership training programs and advocate on the federal level for programs and policies beneficial to our region.

CSG East is here for you. Call, email, or visit us online at www.csg-erc.org.

The Council of State Governments

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In Rural New Hampshire, a Creative Model for Bridging the Broadband Gap

BY RONA COHEN



Credit: Lucy Weber

A crew from Consolidated Communications installs fiber-optic cable in Walpole, New Hampshire.

During a town meeting in January 2019, New Hampshire state Representative Lucy Weber listened skeptically to a pitch from a local telephone provider offering to bring high-speed Internet service to rural Chesterfield, located in the state's southwestern corner. Weber's low expectations stemmed from experience: she had sat in on several proposals from companies pledging to deliver broadband to rural communities, but the projects were never as affordable as promised.

"I thought we would be — once again — debunking a scam," said Weber, who lives in nearby Walpole, population 3,700.

But this time, Weber was impressed with what she heard. Chesterfield's officials had been working with the company Consolidated Communications to devise a business plan that residents and businesses could afford, and the resulting proposal seemed to give everyone a reason to support it. "That so seldom happens," said Weber.

The company was offering to partner with Chesterfield to string fiber optic cable to every home and business served by wired phone service for a price that

was competitive with the rates they were currently paying for slow service over aging copper wires. Under the deal, the town would issue a \$1.8 million, 20-year bond, and Consolidated would contribute \$2.5 million to cover the remaining costs.

Such a public-private partnership had never been formed before; in the past, telephone providers had balked at investing in rural broadband buildouts, which were less lucrative than laying down fiber in urban areas. But a 2018 state law made the financing costs more appealing: Senate Bill (SB) 170 allows municipal governments to issue bonds to build broadband infrastructure in places not served by commercial providers.

Under the proposal, Consolidated would pay back the bond and finance the bond payments through a \$10 monthly service fee paid by subscribers. Subscribers would get high-speed Internet at a competitive price, and taxpayers wouldn't get stuck with the bill.

That detail was particularly important to residents averse to new taxes, and the enthusiasm in the room that January night was palpable. "The guy in town who was the most obstreperous 'Don't raise my taxes' guy

stood up and said, 'I know what you think I'm going to say, but I think this is the best possible plan and I think you should vote for it,'" said Weber.

They did. It occurred to Weber that Chesterfield's unique approach could help other rural towns overcome the digital divide.

When Weber returned home to Walpole, she emailed her town selectmen with details of what she had learned, asking to be put on the agenda for their next meeting. From there, things moved quickly: A broadband committee was formed, and 14 months later the town had voted to issue a bond and form a public-private partnership to construct a fiber optic network. Several other towns followed suit.

A need for fresh approaches

A few months after the Chesterfield meeting, Weber shared details of the town's plan with elected officials from other states searching for affordable strategies to bring broadband to local communities. CSG East's Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee hosted the meeting, the first in an ongoing dialogue that convenes state officials with experts in the field who are working on practical solutions. During the past two years, the committee has met with representatives from the banking industry, telecommunications, nonprofits, farmer-owned cooperative Land O'Lakes, the U.S. Senate, and state agencies to explore rural broadband from multiple angles.

While the Chesterfield model would not be appropriate for every town or possible in every state, it is emblematic of the fresh approaches needed for rural towns to access a technology that has become an economic necessity.

Experts have long been concerned that disparities in broadband access across American society could have adverse economic and social consequences for those left behind. A 2014 study led by a researcher at Oklahoma State University found that rural communities with broadband service have higher economic growth than those without it.

"Anytime you can guarantee people really good Internet access, that's something that translates in terms of dollars on a house and resale value and attractability and everything else," said Weber.

The urgency has intensified as the coronavirus pandemic has shifted everything to online platforms — including school, business, and health care.

More than 19 million Americans lack a broadband

connection, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which the agency defines as 25 Mbps (megabits per second) download speeds and 3 Mbps upload speeds — though experts note that this definition is misleading, because those speeds are extremely slow compared with fiber optic service, which can deliver data at speeds up to 1 gigabyte per second (Gbps).

Some 80 percent of those households are in rural areas, according to a 2018 FCC report. Several factors, including terrain, population density, and demographics, discourage the buildout to rural and low-income areas, because those projects typically result in a lower return on investment for broadband providers.

New Hampshire ranks twenty-third in terms of access to broadband, with only 37 percent of residents able to obtain an Internet speed of 1 Gbps, according to Broadband Now, a website that helps consumers find and compare Internet providers. Some 40 percent of residents live in rural areas, and even in communities with some access there can be areas where density is too low for companies to profit from investments in new infrastructure.

That's where SB 170 comes in. The legislation creates a model that offers incentives to companies that would otherwise have little interest in investing in rural areas. By granting communities across New Hampshire the authority to issue bonds to build the infrastructure for their own broadband network, it enables lower financing costs for the companies they partner with.

Counting the 'unserved'

In addition, the legislation encourages more granularity in assessing towns in need than does the FCC, which is required by law to collect broadband information. Start-

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"Anytime you can guarantee people really good Internet access, that translates in terms of resale value and attractability and everything else."

**New Hampshire state Representative
Lucy Weber**

CCC Micro-Summit Series Explores Policies to Keep Communities of Color Safe During a Global Pandemic

BY RONA COHEN



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Last spring, as COVID-19 spread throughout the nation, it became clear that the health crisis was amplifying challenges that have long existed in underserved communities. School closures created uncertainty about the availability of school lunches; remote learning would be impossible for families that lacked laptops and an Internet connection; and COVID-19 could be more severe in residents living in high-pollution areas, research showed.

As the weeks wore on, the protests over the death of George Floyd placed an even sharper lens on systemic racism by focusing public attention and outrage at police violence in Black communities.

During a series of virtual meetings that convened members of CSG East's Council on Communities of Color (CCC), participants said these challenges presented policymakers with a unique opportunity to advance long-overdue policy changes to improve the lives of people of color.

"I want to thank the protestors. They've created an environment that allows us to get into this conversation," said New York state Senator Kevin Parker, who chairs the CCC, during a virtual micro-summit hosted by the CCC in early June. Parker, a leading proponent of police reform, sponsored several bills in a package of sweeping police reform legislation that Governor

Andrew Cuomo signed into law later that month.

The meeting was among more than a dozen virtual micro-summits organized by the CCC during the second half of the year at the request of Parker and other members. The conversations convened state officials with experts from sectors including health care, academia, and small business associations to explore the gaps in public policy and suggest ways to creatively collaborate with state and local policymakers, and communities, to address them.

The micro-summits were moderated by CSG East Senior Fellow Charles Ellison, who hosts the "Reality Check" show on Philadelphia-based WURD Radio. Recordings of the conversations are available on CSG East's website. Below is a summary of some of the topics that were addressed.

Strategies for communicating with at-risk constituents: the importance of trust

Data show that economic disparities and underlying health and environmental factors have caused COVID-19 to have disproportionate impacts on communities of color. Residents of these communities are more likely to die from the virus than white people living elsewhere, due to lower rates of health insurance and higher rates of chronic health conditions that make complications

from the disease more likely. Those risk factors underscore the need to relay fast, accurate information to the public to slow the transmission of disease. This urgency is amplified in neighborhoods with a history of neglect and lack of access to proper medical care, where suspicion of government institutions and elected officials runs high.

“People remember when there was a time when they experimented on the Black community,” said Ivan Walks, a primary care doctor who directs the Washington, D.C., Department of Health, during a micro-summit in April. “When I had to deal with anthrax in D.C., what I [heard] in my community was, ‘This is like Tuskegee.’”

Walks was referring to the infamous 40-year syphilis study on 600 Black men conducted by the Tuskegee Institute in conjunction with the federal government. The researchers who led the study did not inform the men of its true purpose and withheld treatment, and their actions resulted in widespread suffering and deaths that could have been avoided. The experiment sparked a deep mistrust of public health officials among many African Americans.

Walks said that elected officials who are known and respected in a community can work to overcome this mistrust by personally vouching for government leaders and health officials and hosting public events with them.

He pointed to a virtual town hall held by Pennsylvania state Senator Vincent Hughes in April to help constituents apply for federal stimulus checks. Some 2,000 people attended the event. Hughes invited speakers from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and from the Pennsylvania Office of Unemployment Compensation. Walks said the IRS is not typically a trusted member of the community, but people were willing to listen to a representative from the agency because Hughes asked them to come.

“He is the one who is trading on his credibility when he brings them in. So people in the community will say, ‘Hey, they’re coming in with someone who we know. We’ll let him in,’” said Walks.

Local religious institutions also play an important role in educating residents about available resources. Their extensive neighborhood connections can enable them to check in on vulnerable households even when they are barred from holding public gatherings, said Nicolette Louissaint, executive director of Healthcare Ready, a nonprofit that works with the public and private sectors to strengthen health care supply chains.

Representatives of religious institutions can also provide “easily digestible” information about COVID-19 to counter the misinformation that can travel quickly across the Internet, and they can help people access life-saving services such as dialysis and diabetes treatments, said Louissaint.

“The more that we support the ability to extend the capacities [of] those existing organizations that have those reaches and have those tentacles in the communities, the more we can see who is left out,” she said.

The racial wealth gap

Others said the health crisis was amplifying the challenges confronting businesses in underserved communities, which have trouble accessing capital even in flush times.

“What is specifically happening to Black-owned businesses is what always happens to us. This is not new,” said Tara Dowdell, who runs a strategic communications and marketing agency that works with socially conscious businesses and organizations. “The disparity that exists, the financial and racial wealth gap, is basically the same as we’re seeing now. We’ve always struggled to get the resources that other businesses get.”

Dowdell said that as small businesses applied for stimulus funds from the Paycheck Protection Program, authorized by the \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus, Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act package that President Donald Trump signed in late March, policymakers should have pressured banks to lend funds to businesses in underserved communities. Banks needed



to be certified by the Small Business Administration to participate in the program.

The rollout of the first round of funding, totaling \$349 million, was criticized for a lack of transparency and loopholes that enabled large, public companies to secure funds ahead of small businesses, many of whom were shut out of the program when it ran out of money 13 days after it launched. Much of the money reportedly went to larger banks that lent to big companies seeking sizable loans or with whom they had existing relationships. Some of those companies returned the money after public pressure, which is a testament to the important watchdog role that the media can play, said Dowdell.

“We can use the media to drive the conversation, to put a spotlight on the issues,” said Dowdell. “We’re not going to have this chance again until the next crisis.”

The ‘pandemic’ of racism

During a micro-summit in June, Khalilah Brown-Dean, associate professor of political science at Quinnipiac University, warned of possible cascading socioeconomic impacts among people of color from the current health crisis, such as the potential for widespread job losses that would cause people to lose their homes. In May, the U.S. jobs report found that while overall unemployment declined, the jobless rate rose slightly for Black Americans, to 16.8 percent from 16.7 percent in April.

“I think we cannot [overestimate] the importance of dealing with the COVID pandemic at the same time that we are dealing with this pandemic of anti-Black racism that’s been here since the founding of this country,” said Brown-Dean.

She urged policymakers to be aware of how their actions affect communities of color. “For every bill that comes through your legislature, think about what that impact will be and then what are you willing to do to offset that impact,” she said. In addition, Brown-Dean called for the creation of a “racial trauma fund” to make mental health services available for people of color, particularly children, who have witnessed violence.

Christina Greer, an associate professor of political science at Fordham University, said that many voters do not know who their local or state officials are or the power they have to enact policies that affect their lives. She was hopeful that the dialogue sparked by the nationwide protests will motivate more people to get to know their elected leaders and advocate for their interests.

“What inspires me now is that so many people are waking up to see that they can have positive change.

They can make demands to change not only who’s in power but the conversations they’re having once they’re there,” said Greer.

In education, ‘inequity across the board’

Education experts told a micro-summit in September that even before the pandemic hit, the education system was in a state of emergency in communities of color.

In Philadelphia, persistent funding shortfalls have left schools in disrepair, with asbestos and mold problems, slow Internet connections, and a dearth of laptops to provide to students learning at home.

“For places like Philadelphia and other cities in Pennsylvania school districts that have majority people of color, this virus has shown the level of inequity across the board in almost every area. It’s almost like having a scab taken off where you can see the wounds of the inequity that’s causing all of the issues that we’re facing now,” said Gregory Holston, senior advisor on advocacy and policy for the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office, during the discussion.

But having access to a computer and a fast Internet connection does not guarantee academic success. A student may sit through an entire virtual class, but learn nothing because they aren’t engaged, a phenomenon that Jamila Newman, project director at The New Teacher Project (TNT), a nonprofit, calls a “false positive.” The organization works to improve the quality of teaching in high-need schools.

Newman said students should be encouraged to do more independent, self-guided learning. Others called for educators to embrace project-based lessons that encourage students to learn together online, as well as “competency-based education,” which refers to a system of instruction and assessments that enables students to learn at their own pace and advance when they can demonstrate that they have mastered a subject.

“We need to think about architecting education as opposed to reconstructing what we had before,” said Khalilah Harris, managing director of K-12 policy at the Center for American Progress. “The fact of the matter is schools weren’t working for Black and brown children pre-pandemic, and so going back to what we had before seems quite nonsensical.” ■

You can access recordings of the CCC micro-summits on CSG East’s website at <https://csg-erc.org/ccc-covid-19-micro-summit-project/> and on the CCC YouTube page at <https://tinyurl.com/yyl4rpus>. For more information about CCC’s work, please contact CSG East Senior Policy Analyst Debbie-Ann Paige at dpaige@csg.org.

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ing in 2019, the agency assumed responsibility for developing a comprehensive map of broadband access in the United States. The data is critical to local communities, because the FCC uses it to determine where to direct billions of dollars per year to deploy broadband in unserved or underserved areas. However, much of the current data has been criticized as incomplete or misleading.

For example, a unit of geography such as a census tract or a census block is considered “covered,” and ineligible for federal funding, if at least one business or residence in that area can obtain broadband. Experts have shown this practice is problematic because the blocks vary in size. For example, eight blocks on the FCC maps are the size of Connecticut. In Alaska, one block is the size of New Jersey, said Brent Legg, vice president of government affairs at Connected Nation, a nonprofit that provides broadband mapping services for states and local communities, during a CSG East meeting in 2019.

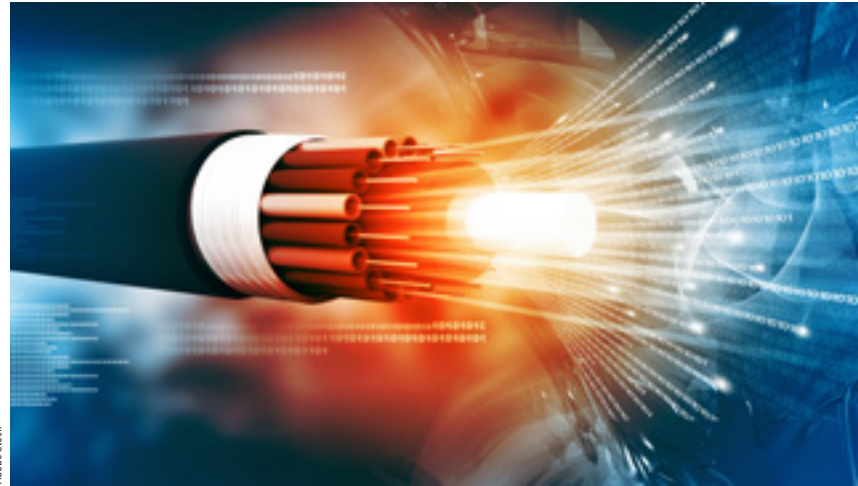
Last March, President Donald Trump signed a bill that will create a process to improve the accuracy of the FCC broadband maps. The legislation was co-sponsored by U.S. Senators Maggie Hassan and Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire.

In the interim, New Hampshire’s new law essentially motivated towns to challenge the maps, said Weber. To qualify for bonding, a new broadband network must connect residents that are considered “unserved,” which the law defines by individual homes, rather than by census block. “My map would say I’ve got perfectly good service, but I don’t,” said Weber.

In Chesterfield, Consolidated Communications has agreed to build out fiber optic to every home and business in town that is served by copper wire. The company is also doing the same in Walpole and four other towns with a combined population of 8,000; the towns authorized a total of \$13 million bonds last April. Walpole’s network is expected to be completed in 2021.

Weber said the process in Chesterfield and Walpole progressed quickly because Consolidated Communications already owned the poles and existing copper wire. The deal enables the company to replace the wire with fiber using significantly less investment of their own funds, and because fiber optic is more durable than copper wire, it significantly lowers maintenance costs over time.

Not every community will find the Chesterfield



Adobe Stock

model feasible, depending on specific circumstances.

Some small New Hampshire towns, concerned that the costs of deploying a broadband network will be too great on their own, are working together to expand access. A state law enacted in June, House Bill 1111 (2020), enables multiple towns to form “communication districts” and bond together to build broadband infrastructure that crosses town lines, thus spreading out the costs to create economies of scale. The program is modeled after sewer districts in the state, which are able to apply for grants and loans, issue bonds, and charge user fees, but do not have taxing authority.

As 2020 draws to a close, some rural towns could benefit from federal support flowing from the \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provides funding for broadband infrastructure to enhance telehealth, distance learning, and job training, among other provisions. New Hampshire set aside \$50 million toward connecting underserved areas of the state, though a requirement that broadband networks be up and running by December 30 could limit the number of projects that can feasibly be completed, said Michelle Cota, a broadband specialist in Shaheen’s New Hampshire office, during a virtual discussion hosted by CSG East in August.

Still, Cota was optimistic that creative thinking at all levels of government is moving New Hampshire in the right direction.

“There hasn’t been a silver bullet, but so far we are seeing a lot of positive influence coming from a number of places,” said Cota. “I think there’s a lot we can do to encourage the flexible combination of private investment, local, state, and federal spending to keep us moving forward to close that rural divide.” ■



States Turn to Nature-based Solutions to Address the Climate Challenge

BY RONA COHEN

Research shows that sequestration could provide one-third of the cost-effective emissions reductions needed to keep the global rise in temperature below 2 degrees Celsius, in line with the goal of the Paris Agreement.

In late December 2019, a group of officials from five northeastern states met in Hudson, New York, to consider ways to enlist nature in the fight against climate change.

On a large screen, they viewed images of growers practicing no-till farming and using cover crops, methods that keep carbon in the ground while making soils healthier and more resilient to flooding, drought, and erosion — and also help a farmer's bottom line.

Dr. Sara Via, a professor at the University of Maryland who is an expert in soil carbon sequestration, explained that Maryland farmers have been sequestering carbon for years through agricultural practices used because they improve water quality. Until recently, however, no one thought to measure how much of the carbon captured by plants from the sun was being stored in the soil.

When they did, the results were promising. Via's research suggests that in Maryland, these practices have captured several million tons of carbon while also saving farmers millions in energy and labor costs. Increasing their use could store far more carbon in future years, said Via.

"Land-based carbon sequestration has proven to be an effective way to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. It's practical, and low cost, and we can do it right now," said Via.

The discussion, organized by the CSG East Energy and Environment Committee, carried a sense of urgency. Research shows that the global community is not reducing carbon pollution fast enough to avoid dangerous warming and that enhancing the ability of trees, soils, crops, and other "natural solutions" to suck carbon dioxide out of the air will be essential to avoiding the worst impacts from climate change. The officials were hoping to catalyze those practices on a regional scale.

Healthy soils

The meeting launched an informal working group that met virtually more than a dozen times over the course of 2020 with representatives of state agencies, academia, and nonprofits. Members learned from experts who are working to develop better methods to quantify how much carbon is stored through different farming and forestry management practices, and devising creative financing tools to incentivize their use.

Credit: Photo courtesy of Felix Mittermeier.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, humans have pumped around 2,000 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, largely from the burning of fossil fuels. Climate scientists warn that even if the global community were to cease to emit carbon today and transition entirely to emission-free renewable forms of energy, that “legacy” carbon would still be there, warming the atmosphere for decades or more.

Taking carbon out of the air by harnessing nature’s vast ability to store it in soil, trees, and crops could hold the key to “drawing down” greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and doing it in an affordable way. A 2017 report published in the *Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences* found that sequestration could provide one-third of the cost-effective emissions reductions needed to keep the global rise in temperature below 2 degrees Celsius, in line with the goal of the Paris Agreement.

Soil experts say a critical step forward involves reversing tilling and other industrial farming practices that destroy topsoil by depleting it of important microbes, bacteria, fungi, and other organic matter that keeps carbon in the ground. From the late 1880s to 1985, agricultural soils have lost at least half of the organic carbon that was present before industrialization, said Jennifer Moore-Kucera, climate initiative director at American Farmland Trust, in testimony before the U.S. House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis in October 2019. About a third of the carbon in the atmosphere has been linked to the clearing of forests and the cultivation of land to produce food, she added.

“If we want to achieve drawdown, we have to start to farm and grow our plants and trees in an entirely different way,” said author and environmentalist Paul Hawken in the 2020 documentary *Kiss the Ground*. “The very practices that heal our soils will also heal our climate.”

Via said her own research revealed that from 2006 to 2018, Maryland farmers sequestered 6 million metric tonnes of carbon in the soil, which is equivalent to taking 1.3 million cars off the road. The reduction was roughly equal to the avoided emissions over the same time period from the state’s participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, the 10-state cap-and-trade program to reduce carbon pollution from large power plants in the Northeast.

The farmers stored carbon through no-till farming, in which cropland is used for production without disturbing the soil through tillage. Soil that isn’t tilled protects carbon from loss, increases microbial growth,

“Our journey to increase carbon farming practices has been slow, but rewarding. The work we have done through CSG



has moved the conversation forward, underlining the important interface of climate control and agriculture.”

**New York state Assemblymember
Didi Barrett**

and leads to more plant growth. They also planted cover crops, which also help store carbon while increasing soil health and reducing erosion.

Maryland has found particular value in cover cropping, which reduces agricultural runoff and is central to the state’s strategy to restore the Chesapeake Bay. Since the early 1990s, Maryland has been paying farmers to plant cover crops, and today, nearly half of the state’s farmland uses them, compared to less than 4 percent nationwide.

Green financing

But paying farmers and forest landowners specifically to remove carbon from the air is still a recent concept.

Globally, a mere 3 percent of total financing for climate mitigation is directed to nature-based solutions. During the United Nations Climate Action summit in 2019, a coalition of nations led by China and New Zealand released a “manifesto” calling for bold action to scale up investments in the sector. “World leaders should do all within their power to ensure that nature’s transformative potential is fully valued and realized in decision-making especially in relation to climate action,” the document says.

A growing list of companies, including Shell and Amazon, have announced major investments in nature-based offsets to meet internal carbon reduction goals and showcase their green credentials. Earlier this year, Microsoft announced it would devote \$1 billion to speeding the development of carbon capture technologies.

In the United States, a consortium of food giants, producers, and nongovernmental organizations has raised \$20 million to launch a voluntary marketplace for carbon and water quality credits generated by



Credit: Alicia Pimental/Chesapeake Bay Program (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Crop residue from no-till agriculture at Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.

farmers and ranchers in the Midwest and western United States by 2022. The CSG East working group learned about projects being developed in the Northeast to generate carbon offsets for urban forestry projects, and about others targeting small rural landowners, who would earn income from offsets in exchange for implementing sustainable forest practices that help sequester and store more carbon.

The working group explored innovative financing mechanisms that could facilitate such programs, including the use of state revolving funds to provide credit enhancement for sequestration projects and help project developers access private capital. Members met with officials from the Connecticut Green Bank to learn about its first-in-the-nation Green Liberty Bonds, which are enabling individuals to invest in clean-energy projects, and discussed the potential to apply them to sequestration projects.

Maryland state Delegate Dana Stein said these virtual conversations have helped inform legislation that he plans to introduce next session calling for the state to plant 5 million trees beyond its current tree-planting goals over 10 years. The bill also calls for a 60 percent cut in economywide carbon emissions by 2030, up from

the current 40 percent target, and it would compel the state to achieve net-zero emissions by 2045.

“CSG has been instrumental in connecting me with potential funders of sequestration efforts,” said Stein, who is vice chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee. “Thanks to the virtual meetings organized by CSG’s Eastern Region, I am now confident that the 5 million tree initiative I’ll be sponsoring next year in Maryland will include nongovernmental funding.”

Quantifying the benefits

Stein has been a champion of natural climate solutions in Maryland. Legislation that he sponsored in 2017 led to the creation of the state’s Healthy Soils Program, which provides research, education, technical assistance, and financial incentives to farmers who implement practices to increase organic matter, improve the soil’s ability to hold water and nutrients, and sequester carbon.

Via said that these advances in Maryland will be amplified with additional research on carbon sequestration, since different soils can store varying amounts of carbon due to climatic conditions, management practices, and other factors. Although changes in carbon

storage over just a year or two can be hard to detect directly in a particular field, researchers have developed sophisticated ways to combine long-term data with computer modeling of local conditions to accurately determine the amount of greenhouse gas reduction attributable to agricultural practices at a statewide level.

Compiling better data is also essential to maximizing carbon storage in forests, which is where the lion's share of carbon sequestration is occurring. Forests account for 90 percent of land-sector sequestration in the United States, and they offset nearly 15 percent of total U.S. carbon emissions, according to the nonprofit American Forests.

A federal analysis released during the Barack Obama administration calculated that sequestration could offset up to 45 percent of economywide emissions in 2050, with U.S. forests playing a central role. The increase would require expanding forests by 40–50 million acres over the next 20–35 years — equivalent to recovering one-third of U.S. forestland that has been lost since the industrial revolution.

During a virtual discussion with Maryland environmental agency staff, the CSG East working group learned how the state is using high-resolution lidar mapping of the state's forest biomass to obtain more accurate data on its sequestration potential. The data will be combined with satellite imagery showing how much forest the state is gaining or losing on an annual basis and how much carbon is associated with those changes. That information will be integrated into the state's 2030 climate plan, which calls for projects including enhanced forest management, tree planting, and wetland restoration on state and private lands. The state had previously relied on less-precise federal data, some of which was out of date and did not provide site-specific information, such as changes in land use.

The project's methodology will be made available to other northeastern states that are exploring ways to maximize nature-based solutions. New Jersey and Maine have identified sequestration in forests, agricultural lands, and potentially “blue carbon” — coastal ecosystems such as tidal salt marshes and seaweed habitats — as pivotal to their efforts to slash economy-wide emissions at least 80 percent by midcentury. In New York, a 2019 state law mandates carbon neutrality by 2050, with 15 percent of emissions reductions coming from carbon offsets including sequestration.

“We know that in order to do this, the agricultural sector is going to have to reduce its greenhouse footprint



Credit: Alicia Pimental/Chesapeake Bay Program (CC BY-NC 2.0)

A sample of healthy soil.

and increase sequestration efforts,” said New York Agriculture Commissioner Richard Ball during a press event on November 12 announcing the launch of a two-year “carbon farming” pilot.

The pilot will test agricultural practices that mitigate carbon emissions and store carbon in soil that is specific to the Hudson Valley, which is dominated by diverse small farms, including vineyards, orchards, and vegetable and livestock producers. Twenty-two farms are participating across five upstate counties.

Until now, most of the existing data on carbon-friendly practices have been generated from large-scale farms in other regions that primarily grow row crops, said Brian Scoralick, executive director of the Dutchess County Soil and Water District, which is leading the pilot.

“Here in the Hudson Valley, we don’t have a lot of those large-scale acreage row crop systems,” said Scoralick during the press event. “The intent is to get the soil’s baseline data, do some implementation, and then do periodic soil tests and follow up over two years. We’re trying to come up with some measurable numbers.”

The pilot was created following the passage of a 2018 bill sponsored by state Assemblymember Didi Barrett, who was an early champion of farming methods that lock carbon in plants and soils and promote soil health. The coronavirus pandemic delayed the launch of the pilot, which had been slated to begin last spring.

“Our journey to increase carbon farming practices in New York state and throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions has been slow, but rewarding,” said Barrett. “The work we have done through CSG has moved the conversation forward, underlining the important interface of climate control and agriculture.” ■

ETC Embraces Digital Trade Missions

BY RONA COHEN



Credit: Veronique Cavallier

ETC has helped northeastern companies attend trade shows overseas, such as InfoSecurity 2017 in London, Europe's largest cybersecurity trade show. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, trade shows, like many other business ventures, have pivoted to digital platforms.

Last June, Zeynep Turk sat down at her computer and pitched Maine's educational institutions to school counselors all over the world.

Turk, who directs a state program that recruits top international students to Maine high schools, colleges, and universities, was participating in a virtual match-making program hosted by the U.S. Commercial Service. Over the course of four days, Turk marketed scholarship opportunities and study programs in Maine to university partners and student agents in other countries, then followed up with conversations on Zoom, Skype, and WhatsApp.

Normally those conversations would occur in face-to-face meetings in a conference center overseas, but the pandemic has forced industries that rely on global markets to get creative. With stay-at-home orders in effect in many countries and U.S. states, trade shows, like many other business ventures, have pivoted to digital platforms.

"In this new world, we're all trying to adapt and change and continue to help the businesses that we work with," said Turk.

The June trade show, called the "Educator-to-Educator Virtual Connection Program," required Turk to make some adjustments at first. The inability to make eye contact, shake hands, or offer candy and other giveaways made the conversations with her foreign counterparts less personal. But there were advantages to meeting virtually, too.

Knowing that approximately 400 trade show participants would be online during a specific block of time made it easier for Turk to fill her schedule with back-to-back meetings, a luxury that was rarely possible at physical trade shows. And getting up early to accommodate different time zones was worth avoiding jet lag, or lost luggage, or hours of downtime sitting in a convention center booth.

"You could be talking to someone from South Africa

at 2 a.m. and then right after that talk to someone from Turkey, and then someone from Vietnam, followed by someone from India,” said Turk, who serves as president of the board of the Eastern Trade Council (ETC), CSG East’s affiliate. “That was an amazing way to connect with so many people from all over the world in a very efficient [period of] time.”

Another plus was the \$250 participation fee, which was cheap compared to the expense of international travel. “It was a low-cost way to explore opportunities and promote your services and programs with contacts all over the world,” she said.

The new normal

Turk and other members of ETC are hoping to make those types of connections possible for companies in the Northeast, through one or more digital trade missions in late 2020 or early 2021 and virtual educational programs.

ETC has made a tentative agreement to partner with New Jersey-based Kallman Worldwide, which organizes the Paris Air Show and other major trade conventions, on a digital trade mission to connect defense industry manufacturers and suppliers with potential clients in England or other European countries.

While the details of the mission were still being negotiated at press time, ETC members were hoping to include approximately 15 northeastern companies, whose representatives would be able to participate in meetings with at least three potential clients over Zoom or a similar platform. Kallman would serve as matchmaker, identifying and vetting interested companies in a target country and arranging virtual meetings with their top officials.

Such a “matchmaking” service is not typically included in a traditional trade show entrance fee, and it is one way in which virtual engagement could add value, said Turk. It “gives more opportunities, like pre-vetted and prequalified meetings, instead of just going to trade shows and hoping for the best,” she said.

The meetings might be preceded by a day of presentations to educate U.S. companies on market conditions, compliance, and regulatory issues in the target country. The timing of those meetings could be flexible, perhaps spreading out over several days or a few weeks to accommodate different schedules, an advantage over a traditional trade show that is condensed into a few days.

The U.S. companies would pay a \$2,000 upfront fee to participate, and state trade offices would arrange to



Participants in an ETC trade mission to Germany in October 2019. From left: Kathy Therieau, director of international trade programs at the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation; Connecticut state Representative Robyn Porter; Zeynep Turk, senior trade specialist at the Maine International Trade Center.

have a portion reimbursed through the federal State Trade Export Promotion (STEP) grant program, which offers states matching funds to help small businesses enter foreign markets. The grants, which are administered by the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Office of International Trade, are usually provided to finance in-person trade shows and trade missions. But given widespread cancellations of in-person events, the SBA is currently permitting the grants to pay for digital and virtual activities.

The STEP grants can be used to cover between 50 percent and 90 percent of fees to digital trade shows and to access training and consulting services to help companies break into foreign markets, which could mean paying a few hundred dollars — a small fraction of what a business would pay to attend in person. The availability of federal aid for those services has been a boon for some small-to-medium companies that wouldn’t normally have the budget to travel to an overseas trade show, said Kathy Therieau, who directs international trade programs for the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation.

“This is a good time for small- to medium-size companies to dabble, to put their foot in the water,”

Continued on page 26

Food Insecurity and Health: A Multi-sector Approach

BY SHIRLEY GIROUARD



New York Army National Guard soldiers and staff of the nonprofit Feeding Westchester distribute food to people in need of food assistance during the coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a spike in requests for food assistance across the nation, amplifying a crisis that was already afflicting tens of millions of Americans.

Approximately one in nine Americans does not have steady access to a sufficient, nutritious food supply, and food insecurity disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including communities of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and low-income groups. Older adults are the fastest-growing segment of the population impacted by food insecurity, and having one or more chronic health conditions can further limit their access to food. Many seniors are forced to choose between food and medical care.

Last August, the CSG East Health Policy Committee hosted a discussion on an innovative initiative in Brooklyn, New York, focused on reducing food insecurity and promoting healthy eating among older adults. The project was a collaboration among agriculture, health providers, and academia.

The collaboration

The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSAM) approached the State University of New York (SUNY) Downstate Health Sciences Univer-

sity in late 2018 to develop, implement, and evaluate a yearlong intervention aimed at reducing food insecurity among older adults. The project, funded by a contract with NYSAM, was led by the SUNY College of Nursing and included cross-disciplinary subcommittees to address the teaching, learning, research, and service needs of faculty and students.

The project targeted Brooklyn because of its comparatively high rates of food insecurity. Some 31 percent of Brooklyn residents live below the poverty level, and 29 percent do not have a primary care provider. Health disparities are great, and diabetes and obesity are significant health issues in the community. It was clear that older adults in the community would benefit from interventions to promote healthy eating.

At the time the project started, 9.2 percent of older adults were thought to be food insecure. In recent months, food insecurity has been exacerbated given the economic downturn, food distribution problems, social distancing, and other challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the current rate of food insecurity is likely to be much higher.

The highly collaborative project engaged community leaders and created a screening tool to identify seniors in need. Screenings and education about healthy eating

were provided at 12 health fairs sponsored by churches, senior centers, civic organizations, and other community organizations. The fairs included popular giveaways to participants, who received a shopping bag with a logo encouraging healthy eating for older adults. The bag contained water bottles, vegetable peelers, jar openers, a magnetized healthy food shopping list, information about nutrition in Spanish and English, maps of Brooklyn farmers markets, and \$10 in farmers market coupons.

A total of 390 older adults were screened at the health fairs. Participants were asked about the resources available to help them access and afford healthy foods, along with their food preferences and any chronic health conditions. The average age of those screened was 73.3 years; 83 percent were female; and 88 percent were nonwhite. More than 200 of those screened (54 percent) were at high or moderate risk for food insecurity, with two of the 12 locations accounting for more than two-thirds of those at high risk. Slightly over half of those screened said food insecurity was related to insufficient finances or health conditions, and nearly half said that mobility issues hindered their ability to obtain sufficient food. More than half of the participants had one or more health conditions, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease, and 39 percent had three or more conditions.

The project also provided maps of food resources in Central Brooklyn, including the location of farmers markets, food pantries, full-service grocery stores, food kitchens, offices where participants could apply for benefits from the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and a culinary institute that provided special prices for seniors. The project was shared with nurses, other health care providers, and public health agencies at national and regional conferences.

Next steps

The project demonstrated the need for collaboration among stakeholders to integrate food insecurity screening, assessment, patient education, treatment, and referrals into primary care practices. The screening tool designed for the project was found to be helpful in identifying levels of risk to triage resources to those most vulnerable.

Going forward, project participants said there is a need to create targeted programs and policies for communities with high food insecurity risk that address cultural, literacy, mobility, access, and health disparity issues. More research is needed to assess the impact of

Compared to the 11.5 percent of the U.S. population that experienced food insecurity in 2018, three CSG East jurisdictions had rates above the national average. The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not report food insecurity rates for Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands, but the Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics estimates that 33 percent of Puerto Ricans are food insecure.

In Canada, the national average for food insecurity is 12.7 percent. Three CSG East Canadian associate member provinces have rates that are higher than the national average.

US Food Insecurity Rates by State

Maine	12.9%	Maryland	11.0%
Delaware	12.6%	Pennsylvania	10.9%
Connecticut	11.9%	New Hampshire	9.3%
Rhode Island	11.4%	Massachusetts	8.9%
Vermont	11.3%	New Jersey	8.7%
New York	11.1%		

Source: Feeding America, 2018.

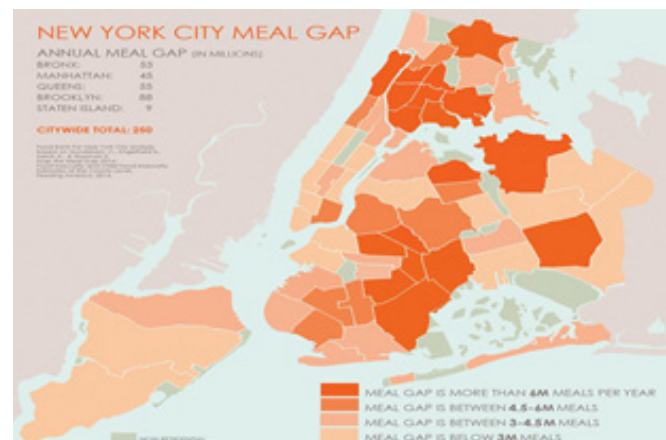
Canadian Food Insecurity Rates by Province

Nova Scotia	15.4%	Quebec	11.1%
Prince Edward Island	14.0%	Ontario	Not available
New Brunswick	13.0%		

Source: Statistics Canada

the interventions — for example, to measure the use of farmers market coupons in the short run and the impact of various interventions on rates of food insecurity over time. More knowledge about the problem, what works, and for whom can be helpful in the design of community and state policies and programs.

CSG East's Health Policy Committee will continue to focus on food insecurity in its 2021 agenda, guided by the interest of the co-chairs in "social determinants of health," which refer to the economic and social conditions in the places where people live and work that influence health risks and outcomes. ■



States, Grappling with Massive Revenue Losses, Seek Long-Term Fix for Transportation Budgets

BY RONA COHEN, DON HANNON, AND STEVE HEWITT



Adobe Stock

After stay-at-home orders took effect last spring, traffic volumes on the region's roadways declined sharply, leading to a steep drop in revenue from tolls and motor fuel taxes that help fund highways and transit systems.

When governors began enacting stay-at-home orders last March amid the coronavirus pandemic, state transportation officials saw a crisis unfolding before their eyes.

Ridership plummeted on the region's public trains and buses, and highway traffic volumes declined, leading to a steep drop in revenue from tolls, motor fuel taxes, general sales taxes, and other sources that help fund highways and transit systems.

By July, more than \$8 billion in transportation projects planned in 14 states had been canceled or delayed, according to the American Road & Transportation Builders Association, and public transit systems reported massive losses.

"Our story is, I suspect, similar to most every other state's stories: It's a story of collapsing revenues at a moment in time when we don't have tremendous financial support for transportation," said Pennsylvania state Representative Mike Carroll, speaking at a virtual roundtable hosted by CSG East's Transportation Committee in August.

The roundtable offered committee members an opportunity to share strategies for addressing the funding gaps and to voice their long-standing support for a federal plan to provide stable funding to maintain the nation's aging highways, bridges, and public transit systems. Officials warned that without an immediate infusion of federal aid, state and local projects would stall, leading to less safe roadways and massive layoffs.

States seek federal help as revenues drop

Even before the pandemic hit, state transportation budgets were facing significant shortfalls. For more than a decade, road and bridge improvements have been hampered by a steady decline in federal fuel tax collections flowing into the Highway Trust Fund and serving as the primary source of funding for highway and bridge infrastructure. The tax was not designed to keep pace with inflation: Its current value is around 40 percent of what it could buy in transportation improvements in 1993. An increase in fuel efficiency and a rise in electric vehicle ownership have further undermined

revenue, leading drivers to buy less gasoline.

The stay-at-home orders accelerated this funding crisis. In late March, with infection rates soaring in the Northeast, Vermont state Representative Patrick Brennan submitted testimony to Congress on behalf of the CSG East Transportation Committee urging passage of a multi-year surface transportation bill in 2021 with significant increases in federal funding. In 2019, the CSG East Transportation Committee had approved a resolution that offered a framework for federal investments in short- and long-term projects, including rural and urban transit systems, new highway construction, and maintenance of aging bridges. Those investments are critical now, given the massive reduction in revenues in the region due to the pandemic, said Brennan, who chairs the committee.

States in CSG East's region could experience a combined \$43.6 billion loss in revenue in fiscal year 2020, according to a July analysis prepared for CSG.

"Vermont, no different from any other state, relies upon a significant, long-term, federal level of commitment to support our nation's transportation system. Sustained federal investments at the local and state levels and extending to the regional level will immeasurably improve the condition of our transportation infrastructure, support good-paying jobs, and aid in our economic recovery," said Brennan.

Bracing for 'multiple years of financing uncertainty'

The plunge in revenues has been acute for metropolitan areas, where public transit serves as the backbone of local economies.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act enacted in March provided \$25 billion for public transportation. Still, an analysis commissioned by the nonprofit Transit Center found that public transit agencies nationwide face a shortfall of up to \$40 billion through the end of 2021.

At the peak of the pandemic last spring, ridership on the New York City subway system, the nation's largest, dropped by 92 percent. In August, officials at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority projected a \$16.2 billion deficit through 2024.

That month, officials at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA), which serves the greater Philadelphia area, said the agency was losing \$1 million a day and projected hundreds of millions in annual fare revenue losses through fiscal year 2023. That could trigger cuts in service, which would potentially affect

"Sustained federal investments at the local and state levels and extending to the regional level will immeasurably

improve the condition of our transportation infrastructure, support good-paying jobs, and aid in our economic recovery"

Vermont state Representative
Patrick Brennan



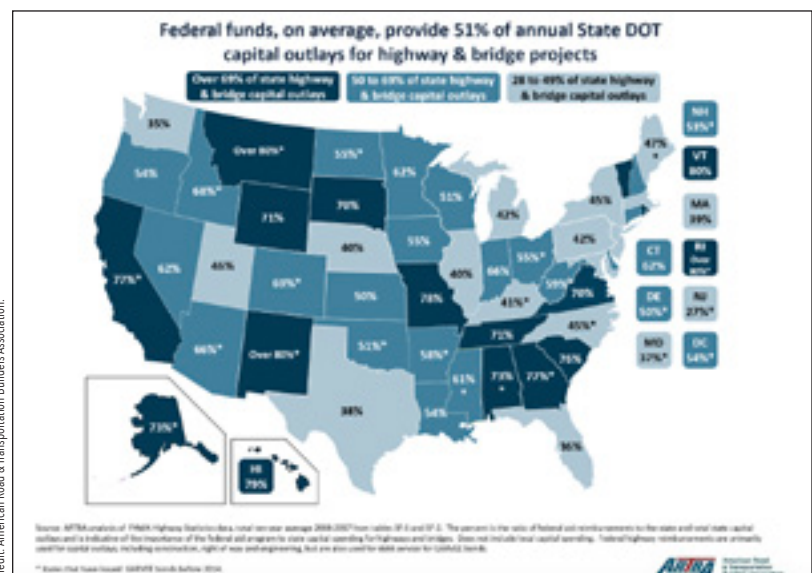
Credit: 2013 Wayne Fawcett ©

hundreds of thousands of bus and rail customers, they warned.

"The immediate financial impact of COVID-19 on SEPTA's operating budget has been nothing short of devastating, and we are bracing for multiple years of operating funding uncertainty that will challenge our ability to serve the diverse needs of our region," said Leslie Richards, SEPTA's general manager, in testimony provided during a hearing of the Pennsylvania House Transportation Committee on August 19.

The agency called for additional emergency federal and state funding to avoid massive service cuts and layoffs.

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The CSG East Annual Meeting



CSG East and the state of New Hampshire were unable to host our 2020 Annual Meeting this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so we moved the conference to a virtual platform. Throughout the month of August, we hosted a Weekly Webinar Series with nationally recognized speakers. In addition, all of our policy committees held virtual sessions during the month of August and throughout the spring and fall. Our Weekly Webinar Series included:

Health Care After the Pandemic

This conversation featured Leana Wen, an emergency physician and visiting professor of health policy and management at the George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health. Wen is an expert in public health preparedness and previously served as Baltimore's health commissioner. She is a contributing columnist for *The Washington Post*, author

of the book *When Doctors Don't Listen*, and a frequent guest commentator on the COVID-19 crisis. The session was moderated by Lisa Simpson, president and chief executive officer of AcademyHealth, and a nationally recognized health policy researcher and pediatrician.

Race, Racism, and the Law

Richard Rothstein, the author of *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, discussed the historic role of government in shaping structural and systemic racism in public policy, and the ways in which state governments should enact and enforce meaningful legislation to address equity in education, health, housing, the environment, and policing. Rothstein is a distinguished fellow of the Economic Policy Institute, a fellow of the Thurgood Marshall Institute of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and a fellow of the Haas Institute at the University of Califor-





nia, Berkeley. The program was moderated by Charles Ellison, veteran strategist; host of WURD Radio's *Reality Check*, based in Philadelphia; and senior fellow with CSG East.

Global Protest: The Movement Shaking the World in the Wake of George Floyd

In a dynamic keynote plenary session, political scientists Christina Greer and Khalilah Brown-Dean explored the global Black Lives Matter movement that erupted across three continents following the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, and the social, economic, public health, and political context surrounding this phenomenon. They discussed Greer's book, *Black Ethnicities*, and Brown-Dean's book, *Identity Politics in the United States*. Both speakers explored the causes and effects of anti-Black policing and how needed reforms are challenged by the current politi-

cal climate, and offered an examination of racism in government policies. The session was moderated by veteran strategist Charles Ellison, host of WURD's *Reality Check*, based in Philadelphia, and senior fellow at CSG East.

The 2020 Presidential Election

This webinar featured a pre-election forecast with political analyst Rachel Bitecofer, who hosts the popular podcast *The Election Whisperer*. Bitecofer is a senior fellow with the Niskanen Center in Washington, D.C., where she conducts research on elections and political behavior. During the webinar, Bitecofer discussed the 2020 presidential election and the growing influence of negative partisanship on election outcomes. The discussion was moderated by Baltimore-based journalist Sheilah Kast, who hosts WYPR Radio's *On the Record*. ■

You can access recordings of the webinars on the CSG East website: www.csg-erc.org.



U.S.-Canadian Border Closure Creates Hardship – and Opportunities – for Local Communities

BY DAVID BIETTE



Credit: DanwellShots for Adobe Stock.

The border closure has had a severe economic impact in both the United States and Canada.

Ryan Fecteau runs a gift shop in Ogunquit, Maine, which in the summer months is usually visited by Canadian tourists who spend freely in the seaside resort. This year, most of that traffic evaporated after the border was closed, although thanks to an influx of tourists from other states, business was not as gloomy as predicted.

Just down the road, many shop owners in the town of Old Orchard Beach were not as fortunate. With the border closed, hotels and motels that rely on repeat visits from Canadians saw a 60 to 70 percent decline in business. Retail shops in Houlton, near the border with New Brunswick, experienced a drop in sales as well after regular Canadian customers stopped coming. “We miss our Canadian friends,” Jane Torres, president of downtown Houlton’s County Co-op and Farm Store and executive director of the Greater Houlton Chamber of Commerce, told MaineBiz on August 24.

The once relatively open border between the United States and Canada — often described as the world’s longest undefended border — has been closed to “non-essential” traffic since March 23, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic impact of the

border closure in both countries has been severe. Although the bulk of trade between the United States and Canada has not stopped, cross-border tourism has evaporated, families remain separated, Americans with cottages just across the border in Canada have been unable to visit, and border cities such as Houlton — as well as Plattsburgh and Buffalo — have had a noticeable drop in shopping by Canadians.

Fecteau, who serves as assistant majority leader in Maine’s House of Representatives, said that many small businesses throughout the Northeast were hit hard by the closure, particularly those in coastal towns that rely heavily on tourists from Canada. Car traffic at the Champlain border crossing, the main New York-Québec border gateway, was down 96 percent in August compared with a year earlier. Canada’s travel and tourism industry, particularly in border communities such as Niagara Falls, has seen similar drops in car traffic.

“Unfortunately, the impact is going to be on small business owners and local communities who can only survive for so long without the revenue they are used to generating,” said Fecteau during a virtual meeting of CSG East’s Canada-U.S. Committee in August. The

meeting brought together legislators from Canada and northeastern states to discuss the impact of the border closure on the local economy.

Both countries review health conditions monthly and have repeatedly extended the border closure on a short-term basis. Given the rates of infection that are increasing slowly in parts of Canada but rapidly in parts of the United States, a longer-term plan for a formal reopening is not expected until 2021 at the earliest.

Businesses and policymakers have warned that the indefinite closure will have a negative impact on local border communities. In June, the 27 members of the U.S. House Northern Border Caucus called on the U.S. and Canadian governments to develop nuanced and particularized guidance for reopening the northern border that would “safely allow for reasonable travel taking into account public health considerations but acknowledging our unique interconnected economies.”

In October, U.S. Senators Susan Collins and Angus King of Maine and Maggie Hassan and Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire asked the federal government to reevaluate the restrictions on travel between the United States and Canada. They noted that the risk of transmission of coronavirus is low in the cross-border region and that the restrictions “put an immense strain on the communities that straddle the border along the world’s longest international boundary.” Both the U.S. and Canadian governments have discussed hosting more formal talks, but the situation remains static.

Garry Douglas, president and CEO of the North Country Chamber of Commerce in Plattsburgh, New York, said that the continued severe limitations on personal crossings will have a continuing impact on business in the North Country, particularly on retail activity through the holiday season.

“We can only encourage North Country residents to maintain their commitment to shopping and spending locally and push the computer mouse aside,” Douglas told the Press-Republican, a newspaper in upstate New York, on October 19. “We are working with partners on fresh campaigns to encourage this. And we again call on Washington to finalize and approve a new COVID-19 relief bill that includes a second round of the [Paycheck Protection Program] forgivable loan program for these impacted small businesses,” Douglas told the paper.

Less urgency on the Canadian side of the border

Despite the desire among U.S. residents of border regions to carefully open the border for personal



Credit: 2013 Wayne Fambush ©

“Unfortunately, the impact is going to be on small business owners and local communities who can only survive for so long without the revenue they are used to generating,”

**Maine state Representative
Ryan Fecteau**

visits, the majority of Canadians are not so sure they want Americans visiting Canada anytime soon. An early September poll showed that 90 percent of Canadians prefer to keep the strict border restrictions in place due to the high levels of COVID-19 in the United States. Unless infection levels across the United States can be reduced to levels seen in Canada and the U.S. Northeast, the border may be closed for a very long time.

The news is not all bleak, though. Gilles Bélanger, member of Québec’s National Assembly for the district of Orford, which includes the Canadian part of Lake Memphremagog that straddles the border, said that despite the absence of American tourists last summer, more Quebecers than usual vacationed in his region.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen that many people in Magog and in the surrounding communities,” said Bélanger.

The North Country Chamber’s Douglas had a similar observation, noting that much of the Adirondack region drew record numbers of downstate residents over the summer and into the fall, as they wanted to escape New York City and other urban areas but stay within the state. Many businesses in Lake Placid, he said, had one of their best summers ever.

Fecteau also noted an uptick in domestic tourism. Travelers from New York and New Jersey visited his store in greater numbers than in previous years, and their business actually led to an increase in revenue in September compared to 2019. “I have often heard remarks in the shop such as, ‘We came to Maine because it is safe here,’” said Fecteau. His store also increased its online sales to Canadian customers, and that business has cushioned the blow from the loss of visitors from across the border. ■

EASTRAIN: Bringing the Experts to You



Credit: Scott Spitzer Photography

Media coach Seth Pendleton leads a workshop during the 2017 Eastern Leadership Academy. Pendleton has been offering virtual training sessions through EASTRAIN.

CSG East's EASTRAIN brings seasoned experts to legislatures throughout the region for hands-on professional development courses designed to improve leadership skills.

EASTRAIN provides access to some of the top instructors in their fields. The programs are developed at the request of legislative leadership and customized to

meet the needs of members. Topics include conflict resolution and negotiation skills, leadership training, and civil discourse.

Some of the in-person and virtual training programs that EASTRAIN organized for CSG East member jurisdictions during the past year are shown in the box below.

Legislative Negotiation Strategies to Overcome Impasse and Build Agreement

Presenter: Kessely Hong, Ph.D., Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School

Virtual Leadership Communication: Skills and Best Practices

Presenter: Seth Pendleton, Partner, KNP Communications

Finding Your Legislative Voice

Presenter: Seth Pendleton, Partner, KNP Communications

Crisis Leadership in the Age of COVID-19

Presenter: Eric Stern, Ph.D., Professor, SUNY Albany

Legislative Leadership: Building a Culture of Excellence and Civility

Presenter: Scott Raecker, Director, The Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University

Managing Multiple Responsibilities and Setting Priorities for Maximum Impact

Presenter: Pam Vaccaro, President, Designs on Time



Credit: Scott Spitzer Photography



Credit: Scott Spitzer Photography

CSG East members participating in a workshop during the 2018 Eastern Leadership Academy on improving negotiation skills. EASTRAIN has been offering virtual trainings during the coronavirus pandemic.

Continued from page 15

said Therieau. “It’s also a good time to be planning for when the work world returns to normal.”

The future is digital

Therieau’s agency has been helping small businesses in Rhode Island access e-commerce platforms like Alibaba, Amazon, and Mercado Libre; create e-commerce sales and marketing strategies in Europe; and set up affordable distribution and logistics networks to seamlessly ship their products to customers. Companies can apply for STEP grants to reimburse them for up to three-quarters of the cost of setting up internationally focused websites that can accept payments from buyers outside the United States.

The government aid for digital export promotion and reduced need to travel to connect with buyers has made it affordable for some Rhode Island companies to increase their foreign sales during the coronavirus pandemic, despite an overall drop in exports, said Therieau.

The value of goods sold to foreign markets from the 10 ETC states fell by 14 percent from January through

August, compared with the same period in 2019, according to data from the World Institute for Strategic Economic Research, which compiles monthly trade statistics. The drop was nearly 10 percent in Rhode Island during that period.

With in-person trade shows canceled for the foreseeable future, state trade officials will continue to embrace nontraditional alternatives to support local exports. In addition to digital trade shows, northeastern trade directors are working with ETC to enhance export education through virtual briefings, including possible discussions with trade commissioners in the United Kingdom to discuss issues around Brexit.

“We’re seeing more of a willingness from upper-level officials to participate in these types of events,” said Therieau.

There is an expectation that digital communications will form a part of any trade promotion strategy going forward.

“Virtual is here to stay,” said Turk. “It’s not going to go away, and we want to embrace these new approaches to try to add value for our clients.” ■

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Commuter services in New Jersey were struggling as well. “On the busing side, we have a mix of public busing and private routes, and we have a concern that some of the private routes that were teetering on

solvency may close without federal support,” said New Jersey State Assemblyman Dan Benson, during the CSG East Transportation Committee’s virtual meeting.

A short-term fix

In September, Congress offered some relief. Lawmakers approved a one-year extension to a federal transportation law, the 2015 Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, which was set to expire on September 30. The law had allocated \$305 billion over five years for highways, public transportation, highway and motor vehicle safety, rail, research, and other programs. The extension provides resources to help keep the Highway Trust Fund solvent through the end of fiscal year 2020. It also allocates \$9.1 billion for the Federal-aid Highway Program and a \$3.2 billion transfer for mass transit, according to an analysis from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

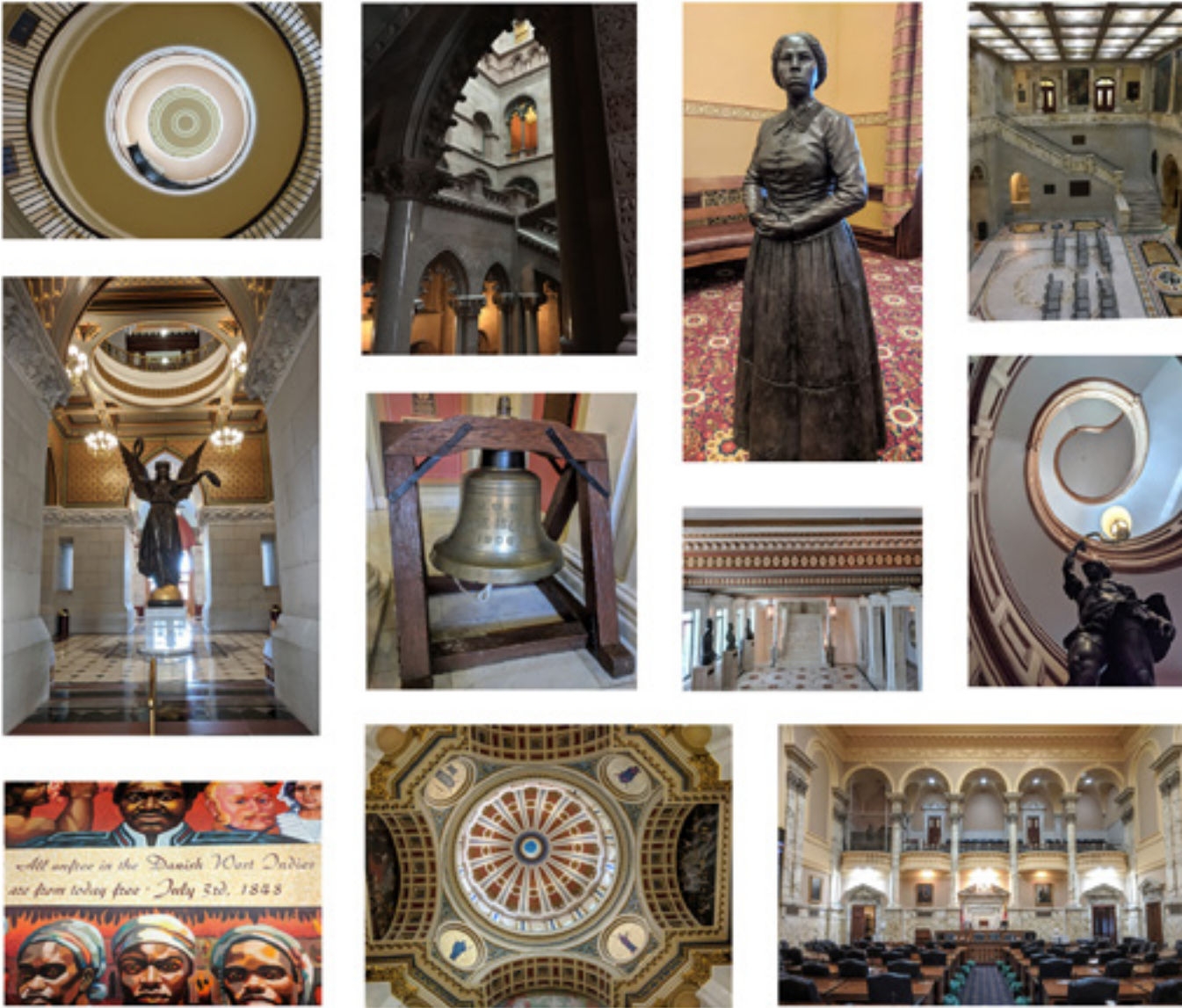
State officials cautioned that extending the FAST Act through 2021 is a mere temporary stopgap measure, given projections that the pandemic’s long-term impact could be worse than the 2008 recession. They vowed to continue to push for new legislation that authorizes stable, multi-year funding.

“We’re going to be hopeful that a transportation bill can be shepherded through next year,” said Carroll. ■



A passenger on the New York City subway on October 9. Ridership has plummeted amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Credit: David Biette



Front cover photograph (clockwise, from top left): Connecticut state Representative Kevin Ryan, CSG national vice chair-elect; Maryland state Delegate Joseline Peña-Melnyk; New York state Senator Kevin Parker; Maine state Senator Matthew Pouliot; Vermont state Representative Carolyn Partridge, former CSG East co-chair; Maryland House Speaker Adrienne Jones; Paul White, principal, The Karol Group; Delaware Lieutenant Governor Bethany Hall-Long; New Jersey state Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, speaker pro tempore; New Hampshire state Senator Sharon Carson, CSG East co-chair; Puerto Rico Senator Carmelo Ríos; Pennsylvania state Senator Judy Schwank

Back cover photograph (clockwise, from top left): U.S. Virgin Islands Senator Myron Jackson; Prince Edward Island MLA Michele Beaton; Connecticut state Representative Bob Godfrey, deputy speaker pro tempore and former CSG national chair; Maryland state Delegate Benjamin Brooks; Kathy Therieau, director, International Trade Programs, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation; New Hampshire state Representative Lucy Weber, speaker pro tempore and CSG East co-chair; Delaware House Speaker Peter Schwartzkopf; Maryland state Delegate Mark Chang; Terry Gerratana, senior adviser, Office of Health Strategy, Connecticut; Craig Hall, deputy director, Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council; Pennsylvania state Representative Ryan Mackenzie, former CSG East co-chair; Zeynep Turk, chair, Eastern Trade Council.



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