

CEDS Spotlight: Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region

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CEDS Spotlight

A Showcase of Best Practices from Across the Country



The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) has the potential to be a true road map that brings together many voices from your region to form a common vision for economic prosperity and resilience. Through the CEDS Spotlight case studies series, the NADO Research Foundation is highlighting best practices and innovative elements of CEDS planning, development, and implementation from EDDs and other regional development organizations across the country.



- Located in Southeastern Connecticut, serving 22 cities and towns
- Mission: seCTer is the lead regional economic development resource, stimulating growth and prosperity in Southeastern Connecticut. Its mission is to make the region stronger and more vibrant by 2030.
- Regional population: 299,400
- Regional employment sectors: Defense & Advanced Manufacturing / Tourism / Healthcare

"We need our CEDS to be nimble and flexible, something that is adaptive for the good times and the bad times," says Nancy Cowser, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region (seCTer), based in Groton. As the region's Economic Development District, seCTer is tasked with guiding economic development and consensus-building across 22 cities and towns. The nimble nature of their CEDS proved extremely valuable during the last rewrite process, as the region's fortunes shifted following a slow recovery from the recession.

A mix of setbacks hit Southeastern Connecticut hard in recent years, including a statewide fiscal crisis, layoffs in the government sector, the downsizing of Pfizer, company closures, and natural disasters including Superstorm Sandy. Additionally, demographic impacts such as low population growth and an aging population put a strain on the region's tax base and finances. "In 2014, Southeastern Connecticut was ranked #244 in the country in terms of economic recovery from recession – the bottom of the pile. By 2017, we had risen to #4," says Cowser.

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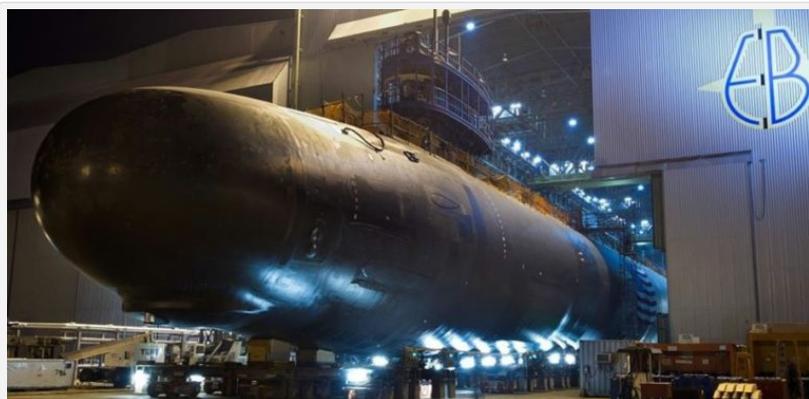
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This boost had much to do with the region's defense industry, centered around [General Dynamics Electric Boat](#) and the Naval Submarine Base New London (both located in Groton). An increase in submarine production has led to the creation of 2,000 new Electric Boat jobs in Connecticut just last year. It is expected that Electric Boat will have 13,000 Connecticut-based employees by 2034. Additionally, there is a major opportunity to grow the supply chain businesses that support major defense contractors. "Workforce development is now front and center as an economic development priority for our region, as well as placemaking and housing – the things that make people and their families want to live here," says Cowser. This means tapping into the region's assets, such as cultural, arts and tourism destinations, including two large Native American casinos that are growing and diversifying.



An increase in submarine production has led to the creation of 2,000 new Electric Boat jobs in Connecticut just last year. It is expected that Electric Boat will have 13,000 Connecticut-based employees by 2034. (Photo: US Navy)

With this in mind, seCTer's [2017 CEDS](#) broke with previous iterations and moved beyond a standard list of projects towards one that identifies the region's assets and opportunities. According to Cowser, the process has shifted the general attitude from a "woe is us" mentality to one of "let's rally together as a region" to foster a conversation about what is possible. The CEDS, written by seCTer's then-Director of Economic Development Juliet Hodge, clearly notes this new approach: "Previous CEDS focused heavily on municipal and business 'tactical' projects without fully articulating any regional strategy that they contributed to. This CEDS presents a regional strategic plan that reflects the collective input, desire, and recognition of the need to nurture and create a diverse, inclusive economy for Southeastern Connecticut."

Though not a geographically large area, Southeastern Connecticut has a mix of urban, rural, suburban, and tribal communities. Therefore, public engagement was particularly important – in both the collecting and synthesizing of information to establish the region's vision. SeCTer organized four sub-regional SWOT meetings led by members of the CEDS Committee while the [Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments](#) organized a region-wide event. (Though it does not write the CEDS, the COG, along with the workforce investment board, serves as a key partner to collaborate on region-wide issues).

The outreach process was highly inclusive and included a mix of stakeholders across sectors, geography, age, education level, and more. The voice of the region is evident in the final CEDS document, where numerous call-out boxes appear throughout the pages labeled "What We Heard" and feature regional views on key themes such as governance, resilience, transportation, and quality of life. As part of the pivot towards implementation, a marketing subcommittee was established to promote and brand the region as a whole, which is particularly important in Connecticut with its town-based, rather than county-based, government.

As the backbone organization spearheading the CEDS planning and implementation effort, seCTer is key in fostering partnerships, supporting local champions, and tracking progress. This means knowing when to lead, when to delegate, and when to partner on projects and implementation efforts. As Cowser notes, it is important as an economic development organization to recognize that your role is "not to do everything, but to galvanize stakeholders, stay accountable to the plan, and be transparent through the process." With the region's new CEDS serving as a guide, Southeastern Connecticut is well-prepared to face whatever lies ahead – and help play an active role in shaping that future.

4.2.1 GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

The first and perhaps the most vital Broad Goal is to achieve greater regional efficiency and sustainable fiscal stability. Central to the ability to achieve this outcome are collaboration, regional alignment, and agility. Each town and city in the SECT region has a role to play in the regional economy. Failure to recognize *the region* as the economic unit is short-sighted and contrary to the direction the global economy is taking us.

The pool of available state and federal resources is shallow, and the providers are looking for their investment to have more of a multiplier effect. The traditional provision of matching funds is no longer sufficient to secure state and federal investment. Resources must be leveraged on a much greater scale that is tipped toward fiscal self-sufficiency and capacity building. Scarce resources will force competitors to collaborate and fuel efforts to create a more unified and streamlined regulatory process. This process must be agile enough to keep pace with dynamic markets and to eliminate barriers to much needed investment in the region.

Based on public input, the following objectives were identified in relation to Governance Systems and Structures:

- 1A Create a culture of collaboration and coordination to increase regional efficiencies and reduce competition for resources. *Are we working together to achieve efficiencies?*
- 1B Reduce barriers/uncertainty for developers to attract development and facilitate investment in the region. *Are people and companies investing in the region?*
- 1C Build social capital - "cultivate" community leaders. *Are our citizens engaged?*
- 1D Have a greater presence in Hartford to better influence decisions impacting SECT and ensure equity of opportunity for SECT. *Do we have good representation in Hartford?*

WHAT WE HEARD

- Region lacks coordinated leaders and visionaries.
- No influence in Hartford - SECT overlooked - Not enough clout to ensure equity of opportunity.
- Current mindset values local benefits (often short term) over regional benefits (longer-term/sustainable).
- Outdated regulations and lengthy permitting process are barriers to investment and diversification.
- Fiscal instability/uncertainty in Hartford for local support - burden to towns falls on inefficient property tax system.
- Lack of regional coordination resulting in inter-municipal competition for resources and development (Grand List).
- High cost of living and cost of doing business a barrier to growth (over regulation and over taxation).

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[An Interview with Nancy Cowser, Executive Director, Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region](#)

What does the CEDS mean to your region? How has it helped shape the conversation about regional economic development?

This CEDS represents a break from tradition in that it almost insists on a much-needed break – from the traditional practice of completing isolated projects without identifying the regional strategy to which they contribute, to a more collaborative and coordinated approach to economic development that begins with a formal recognition of the benefit of operating as one united region. The high-level Regional Vision and broad objectives developed are meant to redirect the conversation to ideas about innovation, connectivity, resiliency, and more and activate existing stakeholders by providing a more flexible framework to work with.

How have you incorporated the concept of resilience into your CEDS?

Resiliency was looked at in two ways: disruption caused by climate change, critical to the large part of our region that is shoreline, and disruption that occurs as we transition from a transaction-based economy to a more transformational economy. The CEDS intentionally pulls the focus back to building the capacity, systems, and networks critical to the region's ability to continuously adapt to any disruptions in the economy – environmental and otherwise.

What ways have you developed and nurtured partnerships with both traditional partners and underrepresented groups?

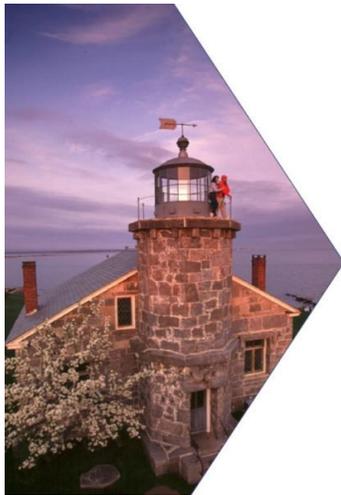
Incredible effort was dedicated to gathering public input from all corners of the region and across all sectors. By intentionally refocusing on the region as the economic unit and providing the flexibility to allow all advocacy groups to participate in the implementation of the CEDS, we hope to repurpose and reenergize not only our strong traditional partners but to also galvanize local civic pride to inspire new stakeholder engagement from underrepresented groups.

How have you taken your CEDS process from planning to implementation? Any strong examples?

The purpose of the CEDS is to provide a framework from which to proceed and to which local plans can align to gain validity and strength. A marketing subcommittee has been created to help raise awareness that the region is the economic unit and to date many municipalities and advocacy groups are engaged in efforts that relate to one or more of the objectives in the CEDS. Three new subcommittees have been formed to help move key actions identified in the CEDS forward: Resiliency, Transportation, and Business Education and Appreciation. seCTer began its implementation efforts by acquiring the data tools/software necessary to establish baseline data and key metrics for the region relating to livability, competitiveness, resilience, and quality of life. This data is reported semi-annually.

Envisioned to serve as a catalyst to develop a regional network to support innovation, The Thames River Innovation Place (TRIP) has been established and is growing. The TRIP projects all tie into the broad goal of transforming the region's systems, structures, and physical landscapes into those that are highly connected and innovative. Projects include community center beautification and branding (New London/Connecticut College placemaking initiative); collaboration with UCONN on developing a CT Undersea Supply Chain Consortium in direct response to the labor and materials needed by General Dynamics/Electric Boat's ramp up of submarine production; a Trolley Project to connect people from transportation centers to commercial centers; and the creation of a concierge service for individuals and

families thinking of moving into the region. Ongoing work of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, The Southeastern CT Cultural Coalition, and Thames River Heritage Park, is also deeply embedded in many of the goals and objectives of the CEDS.



2017

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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- ▶ View seCTer's 2017 CEDS [here](#)
- ▶ View the CEDS Public Input Summary [here](#)
- ▶ Want to learn more about this CEDS? Contact Nancy Cowser, Executive Director, at NCowser@secter.org

Click [here](#) to access additional case studies in the CEDS Spotlight series

Do you have a best practice or innovative approach to developing, designing, and implementing the CEDS? Contact NADO RF Associate Director Brett Schwartz at bschwartz@nado.org.

This case studies series is presented through NADO's [Stronger CEDS](#), [Stronger Regions](#) program, funded through a generous grant from the [US Economic Development Administration](#).



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