

# With roundtables, cultural coalition aims for regional focus

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New London — The kind of limitation implied in lists of the top things to do in any given municipality, such as Niantic or East Lyme, is no longer making sense to Barbara Goodrich.

Many millennials and newer residents of New London "don't see those same boundaries that we do," said Goodrich, City of Groton planner and a New London resident. "They don't get why we're scared to cross the bridge."

She was speaking to the focus on regionalization that Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, is trying to push.

The coalition was founded in November 2013 and held its first New London Roundtable event in December 2015. But Thursday marked the first time that representatives from Groton gave presentations at one of the events.

It's part of an effort Bury has been developing over the past several months to shift the New London Roundtable to a Thames River Roundtable — and then "creep" toward Norwich, she said.

The Thursday afternoon roundtable was held at the Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication. It featured Town of Groton economic and community development manager Paige Bronk, Goodrich and state Rep. Chris Soto, D-New London.

Bronk discussed marketing efforts, property redevelopment goals, incentives and other initiatives in Groton, while Goodrich focused on the similarities and differences between Groton town and city functions. Soto discussed the new state House budget proposal and the expected vote on July 18.

After the roundtable, Bury and coalition board Co-Chairman Preston Whiteway scrambled to see how the proposed budget would affect their organization.

Bury's takeaway: There are a lot of cuts in arts and cultural organizations across the board, and the Connecticut Office of the Arts funding is reduced but at least not eliminated. She said she'll need more time to otherwise assess the proposal's impact.

Outside of budget questions, a focus of the meeting was on methods and advantages of breaking down traditional town borders when talking about economic development and innovation.

It's a "New England phenomenon" that "we don't really think about market forces," Bronk asserted. "We think political boundaries dictate what people do. They don't."

As an example, he noted that he often hears people in Groton say they're going to Trader Joe's in Warwick, R.I., the chain's closest store.

Soto said that a major impediment to regionalization is that "the only way municipalities can raise revenue is through property taxes, and that's really what creates these silos."

This mindset is in part why he's in favor of the budget proposal to raise the statewide sales tax from 6.35 to 6.99 percent and to give individual cities and towns the option of raising it to 7.99 percent, with the extra 1 percent going to the municipality.

Some places and projects where Bury envisions cross-community collaboration include the Thames River Heritage Park and the Thames River Innovation Place.

"If we start to include Groton, then we open up to more Thames River projects," Bury said, "but also Electric Boat hires affect everybody."

Her concern is figuring out how to convince people at Electric Boat to stay in the area.

Last year, the coalition sent out surveys to Electric Boat employees, asking what they thought of activities and offerings in New London. The survey went out not only to New London employees but also to Groton and Rhode Island workers, and it didn't ask respondents to specify where they live or work.

So, the coalition again is tackling the issue of Electric Boat employee satisfaction. This summer, the organization will be holding two focus groups, one in New London and one in Groton, with 50 or 60 Electric Boat workers.

The New London Roundtable does not meet over the summer, but Bury said she will share the results of the focus groups at its next meeting in September. She expects that meeting to be held with the New England Science & Sailing Foundation at Ocean Beach on Sept. 28.

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