



Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program: CFDA Number 20.940

## **CONSERVE8: Connecting Neighborhoods to Stimulate Economic Revitalization, Vitality, and Equity across CT Route 8**

### Narrative:

The Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments (NVCOG) is requesting \$1.44 million in funding under the USDOT *Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program (RCP)* to assess the impacts that the construction of the Route 8 Expressway has had and continues to have on the communities and neighborhoods through which it passes. The proposed study, referred to as CONSERVE8: Connecting Neighborhoods to Stimulate Economic Revitalization, Vitality, and Equity across CT Route 8, will be conducted in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT), the Connecticut Metropolitan Council of Governments (MetroCOG), and the Northwest Hills Council of Governments (NHCOG).

The NVCOG serves as the designated metropolitan planning organization for the Waterbury urban area as and is the co-host agency with MetroCOG for the Greater Bridgeport-Valley MPO, which has jurisdiction over a portion of the of the Bridgeport-Stamford urban area. The NHCOG is a rural transportation planning agency.

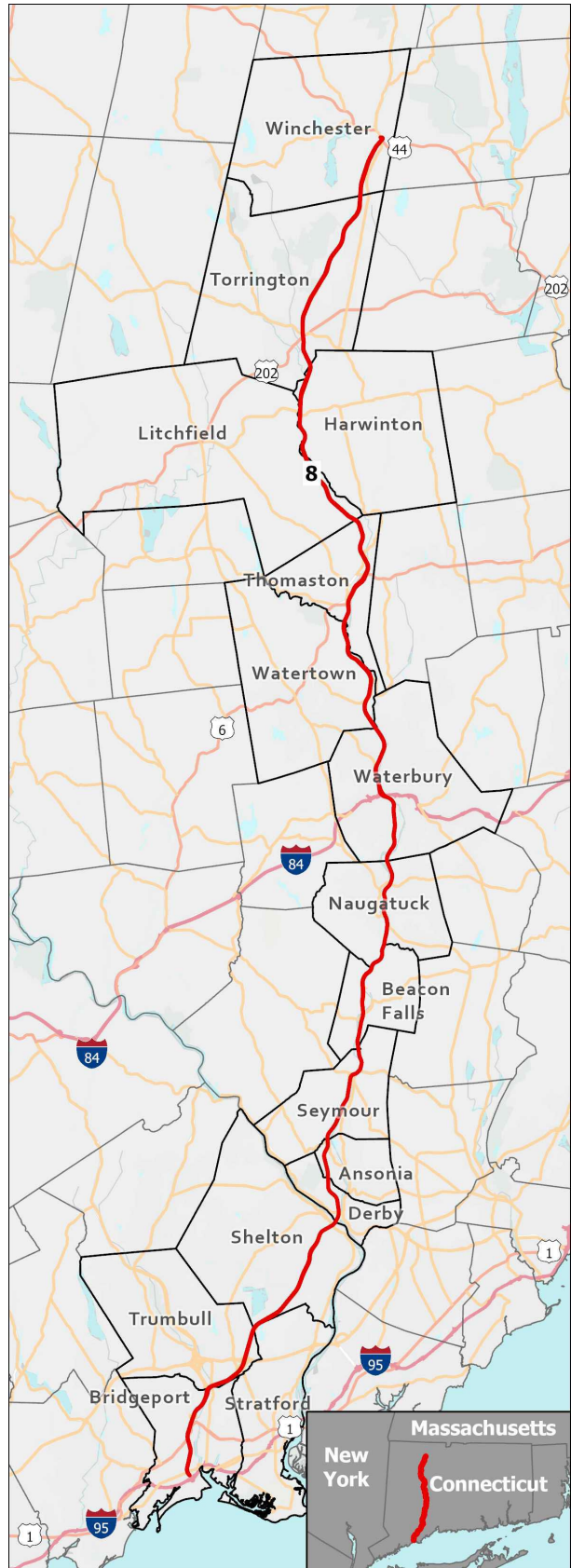
The Route 8 Expressway, a 58-mile highway, was built over the course of 35 years with the first section completed in 1951 and the last in 1982. It was intended to provide a north-south limited access freeway from Bridgeport at I-95 to the Massachusetts state line and replace its original designation along a network of two- and four-lane roadways, many sections of which served as the “main street” through several downtown areas.

The first section completed, referred to as the Ansonia-Derby-Shelton Expressway, passed directly through the downtown areas of Derby and Shelton. Subsequent extensions were constructed in the late 1950s and early 1960s through downtown Seymour and south end of Waterbury. The section through downtown Seymour was built as an elevated viaduct that effectively split the downtown from a nearby commercial corridor as well as access to the Naugatuck River. The section through Waterbury bisected the Brooklyn neighborhood in two.



Perhaps the most detrimental addition to the Route 8 Expressway was the construction of the interchange between Route 8 and I-84. Completed in 1966, the interchange was built as multi-level stacked facility that provided all direction connections between the highways as well as access into and from the adjacent downtown Waterbury area. It became known as the “MixMaster” because of the numerous on-and-off-ramps and connecting service roads. At the same time, the highway was extended to Watertown and a section was built through Litchfield, Harwinton and Torrington. In the 1970s, construction was focused on the southern end of the corridor, first with the connection at I-95 in Bridgeport and the extension through Trumbull and then with the completion through Shelton. At the same time, the expressway was competed to Route 44 in Winstead, its current terminus. Gaps remained in the highway until the early 1980s. One was located near the Merritt Parkway, which was closed in 1982 when a major interchange was constructed. The other missing section was through Beacon Falls and the Naugatuck State Forest. Because the alignment was directly adjacent to the Naugatuck River, within a tight valley, construction needed to follow the curvature of the river while limiting possible degradation of the river.

Over the past 40 years since the Route 8 Expressway was completed, the highway has become a constant part of the fabric of the region. However, it created a physical barrier through the region that split neighborhoods, limited mobility to local services and prevented access to the primary natural resource of the region – the Naugatuck River. While residents have become accustomed to the presence of the Route 8 Expressway and have learned how to live within its shadows, opportunities exist that can reconnect the neighborhoods and facilitate travel across, over or under the structure that is Route 8. This proposed study will identify the strategies and actions to reconnect the fabric of



the region, broken by the Route 8 Expressway, and reduce the negative effects of the highway. The study will focus on financially and physically feasible improvements that can be implemented in the shorter term while considering longer term improvements in key locations. These improvements include expanded active transportation connections, improved transit connections, and mitigation strategies that make the existing structures less intrusive. Within the region, micro-mobility – walking/rolling, cycling with or without assistance, and e-scooters – have all grown in popularity, and the study will consider infrastructure improvements to support these users. Enhanced or improved transit connections is also a key aspect to reconnecting communities within the corridor. Possible actions will be broken into early action, mid-range, and long-range solutions.

## I. Outline

The Route 8 Expressway corridor is a diverse mix of densely populated and built-up urban area, lower density suburban area and more rural communities. It begins in Bridgeport and passes through Waterbury before terminating in Winchester. Over its 58-mile length, Route 8 passes through many of the former industrial centers that grew up along the Naugatuck River and developed into compact downtown areas, with a mix of high-density residential housing located adjacent to factories powered by the river. These downtown areas became vibrant centers of activity where residents could work, shop and recreate all within walking distance. The neighborhoods that comprise the downtown areas were well connected and cohesive.

The construction of the expressway disrupted this land pattern and destroyed the vibrancy of the areas through which it passed. It contributed to the economic downturn of the region already hard hit by industrial relocations and natural disasters. The level of service provided by the expressway allowed residents to travel farther to access shopping and jobs, effectively damaging the economic base of the downtowns. In addition, the large swaths of land needed for the expressway had contributed to the area's economy but were taken out of a productive use.

At the local level, the large amounts of land needed for Route 8's right-of-way further weakened these downtown areas and had the deleterious effects of separating residents from town centers, creating barriers to safe walking and contributing to the decline of many communities that is just now beginning to reverse. The loss of residential properties also reduced the number of people who could support the businesses that remained, and countless historic structures were also lost.



As a result, these once prosperous cities suffered decades of disinvestment and population decline. More importantly, many of these highway projects were built through lower income, racially diverse and vibrant neighborhoods that were destroyed by the highway construction and disconnected from the fabric of the community. These neighborhoods ultimately deteriorated.

## II. Study Purpose

This study aims to identify strategies to better connect neighborhoods to commercial areas, public transit, and city centers, emphasizing those traveling by or relying on a non-automobile mode. Mitigation efforts will be broken into early action, mid-range, and long-range solutions. While the study will focus on feasibility and cost effectiveness in its proposed solutions, all options that will benefit our communities will be considered.

## III. Project Area

The preliminary project study area extends along the Route 8 Expressway from its interchange with I-95 (mile marker 0.0) to its terminus at Route 44 in Winstead (mile marker 58.3). Additional focus will be provided to the short section of Route 44 that travels from the Route 8 terminus west through Downtown Winstead within the town of Winchester. The study will conduct an assessment of the highway's impact over the entire corridor and recommend systemwide improvements. It will also focus on key areas and neighborhoods that were most impacted by the highway and have suffered the more significant burdens of the transportation projects. In these areas, more detailed analyses will be completed and more site-specific actions will be developed to address identified issues and concerns.

The following locations, listed in a south-to-north direction, have been identified as the initial, key priorities for this project:

1. Downtown Bridgeport – Route 8 was built along the west edge of the downtown area and separated the West End from the downtown. It also eradicated numerous residential properties located adjacent to the downtown. It also split the Golden Hill neighborhood from the Hollow with a cut that created a canyon-like gap between the two neighborhoods. North of downtown, the highway cut a path through the city effectively dividing it in two sections.
2. Downtown Shelton – The downtown area of Shelton was the city's economic core as the home of several factories and high density, multi-family residential. It was home



to many restaurants, commercial businesses and government offices. The initial section of the highway split the downtown area and separated the residential areas to the south from the city's center of activity. Later construction relocated Route 8 from a two-lane road (Bridgeport Avenue) to a four-lane expressway. This section had the effect of creating easy access to prime development parcels which resulted in businesses leaving the downtown area and accelerating its decline. This study will focus on the section between Constitution Boulevard and the Commodore Hull Bridge, which carries Route 8 over the Housatonic River.

3. Derby – The City of Derby is the smallest city in Connecticut by area, but Route 8 carves a wide swath that divides the city in two and separates the east side from the downtown. The gateway into the downtown from the east is the imposing elevated section of Route 8 as it extends from the Commodore Hull Bridge and the large interchange with Route 34. The study will focus on the entire length of Route 8 through Derby from the Commodore Hull Bridge to Ansonia City Line. A key area will be in vicinity of Griffin Hospital and the neighborhood around Seymour Avenue. The highway's proximity to Griffin Hospital impedes access to it and creates unattractive connections from adjacent neighborhoods.
4. Ansonia – The Route 8 Expressway passes west of the downtown area and direct impacts were avoided. However, the alignment did split neighborhoods and limited connections. In addition, the interchanges tended to be located in these neighborhoods, further disrupting these areas. The focus will be on section parallel to Wakelee Avenue approximately between Division Street and Great Hill Road.
5. Downtown Seymour – The north edge of the Seymour downtown area is along the Naugatuck River. Route 67 (Derby Street) follows the same alignment and provides local access into the downtown. Several businesses have storefronts directly on Route 67. Route 8 was built through the downtown as an elevated structure that followed the river. Because of limited space, the expressway was built over Route 67, creating an intimidating aesthetic for anyone walking underneath it. The project will assess how to make this section less imposing for pedestrians and how to better connect the downtown to the commercial strip to the west.
6. Beacon Falls – Until the expressway was completed in the early 1980s, Route 8 was the town's "main street." The expressway drastically altered how travelers could access the downtown area and diverted large volumes of traffic from downtown businesses to the new expressway that bypasses the area.
7. Naugatuck (including Union City) – The impact Route 8 has had on the Borough has been the visual separation of the east and west sides of the town. While the



Naugatuck River divides Naugatuck, the barrier is not as imposing as the Route 8 Expressway. The highway is elevated through much of the town and the numerous interchange ramps are dangerous to negotiate. Few are willing to walk to the downtown from the east side, even though several bridges provide a way to cross the Naugatuck River, because it would require walking under the elevated structure of Route 8 or crossing complex interchanges. The study area in Naugatuck will be between Route 63 and Route 68.

8. Waterbury (South) – Like many older industrial cities, Waterbury comprises many distinct neighborhoods. In the area south of I-84, Route 8 split several of these neighborhoods, especially the Brooklyn and Platts Mills sections. As in other sections, Route 8 was built on fill that elevated it over the surrounding areas. Connections between neighborhoods cut-off by the highway are limited, and the elevated viaduct created a visual barrier. This barrier is especially problematic along Charles Street and South Leonard Street. In addition, access to and exit from Route 8 are located within residential neighborhoods and cause unsafe pedestrian movements.
9. Waterbury: I-84/Route 8 Interchange Area – The interchange between I-84 and Route 8 was completed in the mid-1960s. It is referred to as the MixMaster because of the numerous ramps that connect the two highways and the highways to local streets. It is a multi-level stacked structure that divides the area into four quadrants, prevents access to the Naugatuck River and severely limits pedestrian and bicycle movements across the area – the elevated structures are intimidating and uninviting. The CTDOT is currently conducting a Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) study that is investigating the long-term replacement and reconstruction of the interchange. The project is referred to as NewMix in deference to it focusing on the interchange’s replacement. As part of the NewMix PEL study, strategies and actions to enhance mobility for all travelers will be developed. This proposed study will be coordinated with the NewMix PEL study underway by the CTDOT, and proposed concepts advancing from the PEL study will be incorporated into this study.
10. Waterbury (North) – North of the NewMix study area, Route 8 continues to divide and disconnect the city’s Browns Meadow, Bunker Hill, Fairmont, and West Side areas.
11. Torrington – North of Waterbury, Route 8 passes through less developed areas and bypasses downtown areas in Thomaston, Litchfield, and Harwinton. As the highway approaches the City of Torrington, it provides a direct connection to the downtown area but separates the east and west sides of the city just of downtown into more distinct areas.
12. Winchester (Winsted Section): The Route 8 Expressway terminates at Route 44, just at the edge of the Winchester (Winsted) downtown area. Route 44 west of the terminus acts as an extension of the expressway, carrying much of the Route 8 traffic to points west. Route 44 separates the downtown area from the Mad River and residential neighborhoods to the south, including the area around Highland Lake.



#### IV. Anticipated Deliverables

The NVCOG will serve as the prime applicant and administer the study. Substantial coordination will be carried out throughout the project, and the project will be based on a community-centric approach that targets areas disrupted by the expressway. The goal is to develop and identify reconnection solutions that meaningfully redress inequities, restore communities, are based on creative place-making, celebrate local history and culture, and benefit economically disadvantaged communities. Two advisory groups will be established to guide this project. A Project Advisory Committee (PAC) will be assembled and be the representative community advisory group. It will be made up of members of the respective Councils of Governments participating in the study, representatives of cities and towns along Route 8, and key corridor stakeholders, including public transit operators serving the corridor (CTtransit, Valley Transit District, Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority, and Metro-North Railroad.), regional business councils and chambers of commerce, economic development corporations and neighborhood advocacy groups. The second committee will provide more technical advice and offer guidance regarding feasibility of possible actions and strategies. The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) will be made up of municipal engineering, planning or public works staff and CTDOT project development and traffic engineering staff.

The NVCOG intends to engage a consultant to conduct this assessment. The following tasks will be accomplished during the project:

1. Assess current conditions on Route 8 and surrounding local streets. Traffic data will be collected, and a safety analysis will be completed that focuses on pedestrian and bicyclist crashes. This analysis will also take into consideration locations where ramps intersect with local streets and the accommodations in place to ensure safe crossing by pedestrians and bicyclists
2. Develop and implement a public engagement plan to ensure community input is gathered and considered, and that the public and stakeholders are proactively informed about all aspects of the project. A project website will be developed to share project information and solicit input.
3. Conduct an historical evaluation of the neighborhoods that were impacted and split by the Route 8 Expressway, document how the neighborhoods existed before the highway was constructed and compare to the current layout.
4. Extract demographic data representing a time before the highway's construction and current characteristics, including housing stock, income levels, racial make-up and population.
5. Determine and analyze future travel conditions, using CTDOT accepted estimation methods and considering all projects currently underway or planned for Route 8. The potential growth in pedestrian and bicyclist volumes in vicinity of interchange ramps will also be estimated, and the impact of these projections on surrounding communities will be analyzed.
6. Develop a toolkit of possible strategies and actions to reconnect neighborhoods. A long list of mitigation and action strategies will be divided into early-implementation, mid-range, and long-term. Mitigation strategies will examine the potential infrastructure changes that can be made to improve connections and safety.

7. Based on public and stakeholder input and community outreach and needs, preferred actions will be identified.
8. Prepare an implementation guide that includes budget estimates, potential funding sources, and project prioritization. The implementation guide will examine how to turn proposed mitigation strategies into projects.
9. Prepare a final report containing all elements of the project. The final report will be provided to the CTDOT, the three regional planning organizations, and all impacted municipalities.

## V. Community Characteristics

The proposed project area extends over the entire length of the Route 8 Expressway, a distance of 58 miles, and passes through 16 municipalities in three state-designated regional planning regions. Two of the regions serve as federally designated MPOs. The corridor has a total population of 567,580 residents as of the 2020 Census. Of this total, 50.4% are nonwhite or people of color, with 26.2% identified as Hispanic or Latino and 16.2% as Black or African American.

More images, background studies, and previously designed improvements can be found at <https://nvcogct.gov/reconnecting-communities-program-convert8-additional-materials/>



The Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) develops a list of the 25 most distressed communities in Connecticut based on a number of factors including per capita income, percentage of population living in poverty, and unemployment rate. Of the 16 municipalities along the Route 8 Expressway corridor seven are included on the DECD distressed communities list: Ansonia at #3, Derby at #6, Waterbury at #8, Bridgeport at #11, Winchester at #14, Torrington at #15, and Stratford at #24.

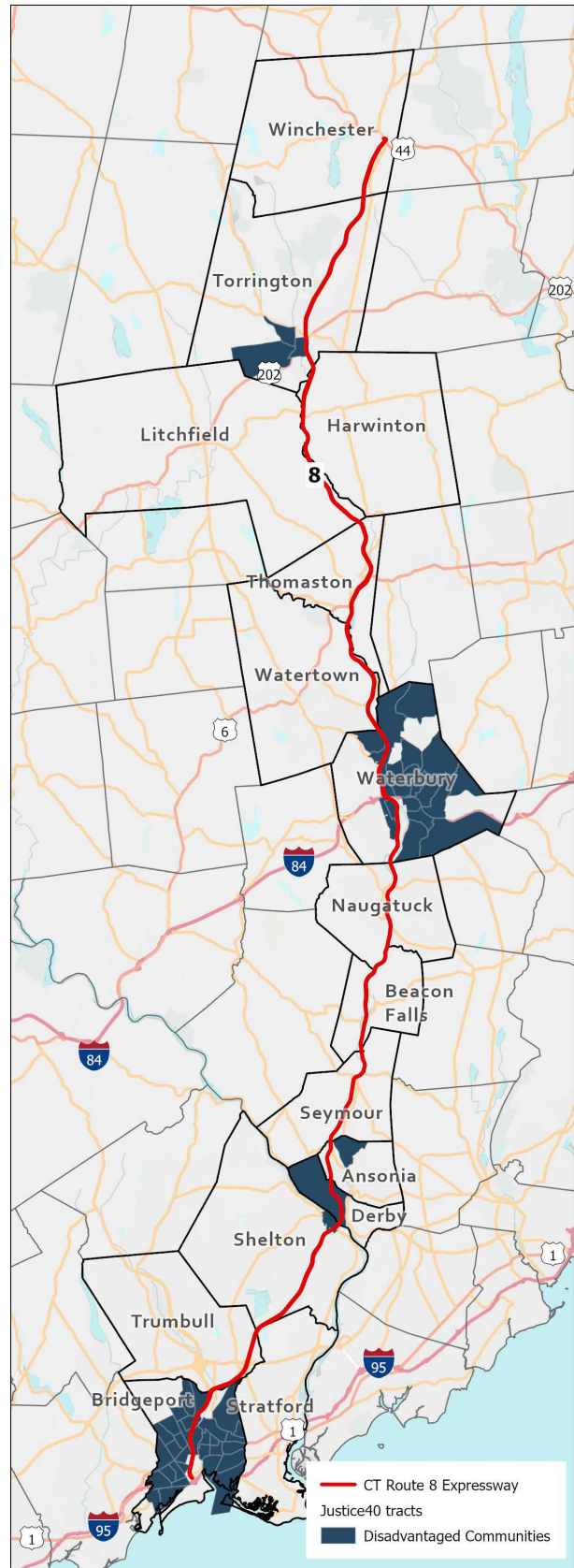
Average household income varies through the corridor, ranging from a low of \$61,667 per household in Bridgeport to a high of \$153,210 in Trumbull. The average household income for the corridor is about \$84,647. Per capita income ranges between \$24,430 and \$51,689, with an average for the corridor of \$33,613. About 14% of the population within the corridor lives below the poverty level.

Mobility is critical to the health, welfare, and well-being of a community. Without good mobility choice, residents will not be able to access services, jobs, and health care. The Route 8 Expressway split neighborhoods and restricted access to downtown areas. As formerly vibrant downtowns lost jobs, population and commercial activities, residents were required to travel farther to access these services, almost exclusively by automobile. Today, car ownership or consistent access is almost a requirement for residents to travel around their home community as well as the region. The lack of vehicle access poses a significant transportation barrier that causes disparities in access to employment opportunities, health care, food, and other basic services. The proposed study will help reverse this trend and convert these areas into a more

accessible and walkable environment that will be safe for all travelers, especially those who are more vulnerable.

The proposed project will protect human health and the environment by providing mobility options, open space and recreational amenities (especially by reconnecting people to the Naugatuck River) and will directly benefit Historically Disadvantaged Communities, Areas of Persistent Poverty and Environmental Justice populations that have been disproportionately overburdened by the transportation systems in their areas and the lack of access to environmental benefits. The USEPA Environmental Justice (EJ) Screening and Mapping Tool identifies Census Tracts within the project area as ranking disproportionately higher than the region, state, and nation on various environmental indicators, including pollution and sources, socioeconomic, health disparities, climate change, and critical service gaps. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) created a Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool to better identify disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution. The tool is intended to provide important information for the *Justice40 Initiative*. The map at right shows the Census Tracts within the project area that have been identified as areas of concern. There are *Justice40* tracts in six municipalities along the Route 8 Expressway, with an EJ population of 206,902 people or about 37% of the total population within the corridor.

People living in the project area are exposed to higher levels of air pollution and toxins, such as fine particulate matter, ozone, and diesel particulate matter, that increase cancer risks and respiratory hazards. These residents are exposed to levels that are higher than other parts of Connecticut and the nation. By reducing the reliance on the automobile, reconnecting communities and providing mobility options,



the excess exposure to harmful air quality can be reduced and mitigated.

## VI. Project Readiness

The NVCOG will act as the fiduciary and administrator of the program and will coordinate conduct of the project with the CTDOT, MetroCOG, NHTCOG and municipalities along the corridor. The NVCOG has extensive experience managing and administering federal grants and programs and is the designated recipient of Federal Transit Administration funds under the Section 5307 capital program, recently completing a major renovation and expansion of the maintenance and administration facility of the Valley Transit District. Past projects that were administered by the NVCOG include the design of the reconstruction of Route 34 (FHWA), design of renovation of the Derby-Shelton bridge (FHWA), design of spot improvements along Route 67 (FHWA) and conduct of the Alternative Modes Study for the Waterbury Rail Line Corridor (FTA). The NVCOG also oversees the West-Central Connecticut Brownfields Partnership and the Connecticut Land Bank, and recently received a \$3.9 million assessment grant from the US EPA.

The NVCOG works extensively and proactively with member municipalities and has established good working relationships with the partners in this study. The *CONSERVE8* application was endorsed by the NVCOG Board and demonstrates the willingness of the chief elected officials to support the project. Additional support is indicated in the letters from municipal elected officials, regional planning staff, state agencies, and community-based organizations that are attached to this application.

The project schedule for the proposed activities is shown below and provides for 24-month completion timeline.

