Remarkable things happen when we CONNECT

Report to the Community, 2015-2016
In the last few months we’ve been asked to speak about the work of this organization more times than I can count. And after every presentation, the comments sound very similar and range from “Wow, I can’t believe municipalities in your area choose to sit down and talk to each other,” to “this seems like something that everyone should be doing, but it certainly isn’t happening where I live.” To hear an outside perspective on our everyday work really makes me take a moment to reflect on the uniqueness of our organization, and our incredible membership.

None of CONNECT’s members are required to come to our table. This is a voluntary organization made up of some of the most talented and dedicated public servants in the region. Our members work tirelessly for the benefit of the residents of their municipalities, and also see the value in collaborating with their neighbors to benefit the residents of the region as a whole. Understanding that relationships across borders are worth cultivating and that regional approaches are sometimes most effective, allows our work to make a true impact.

It’s been an exciting year for CONNECT, one that saw a change in leadership and the appointment of new staff, the welcoming of additional communities, the tackling of new policy initiatives, and many lively meetings and discussions between our membership that continues to grow stronger by the year.

I am honored to have been selected to serve as Executive Director and I look forward to continuing to collaborate with CONNECT’s members, partners and funders to bring neighboring communities together to advance smart policy that benefits our region’s urban core.

Kristen Michaels
Executive Director
2015-2016 Officers
Thank you to our 2015-2016 Officers who dedicated their time and leadership to CONNECT.

William Peduto, Chair
Mayor, City of Pittsburgh

Mark Sampogna,
First Vice Chair
President of Council,
Green Tree Borough

Mary Ellen Ramage,
Secretary/Treasurer
Manager, Etna Borough

Marita Garrett,
Second Vice Chair
Vice President,
Wilkinsburg Borough

Kathy Coder, Immediate
Past Chair
Councilwoman,
Bellevue Borough

2015-2016 Member Municipalities

Aspinwall Borough
Baldwin Borough
Baldwin Township
Bellevue Borough
Brentwood Borough
Carnegie Borough
Castle Shannon Borough
Churchill Borough
Crafton Borough
Dormont Borough
Edgewood Borough
Etna Borough
Forest Hills Borough
Green Tree Borough
Heidelberg Borough
Homestead Borough
Ingram Borough
Kennedy Township
McKees Rocks Borough
Millvale Borough
Mount Lebanon
Mount Oliver Borough
Munhall Borough
O’Hara Township
Penn Hills
City of Pittsburgh
Reserve Township
Robinson Township
Ross Township
Rosslyn Farms
Scott Township
Shaler Township
Sharpsburg Borough
Stowe Township
Swissvale Borough
West Homestead Borough
West Mifflin Borough
West View Borough
Whitehall Borough
Wilkinsburg Borough
Serving residents day in and day out is not an easy task. Being connected to fellow managers, councilpeople, and commissioners who are facing similar issues to share experiences and best practices has proven to be one of the most valuable benefits of CONNECT.

Monthly Executive Committee meetings bring together these municipal leaders to collaboratively tackle common problems. These meetings also provide a great opportunity for outside organizations to reach this cohort of decision makers. The Port Authority of Allegheny County, the Allegheny County Health Department, Allegheny County’s Department of Human Services, ALCOSAN, Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, the Allegheny Conference, and 3 Rivers Wet Weather, just to name a few, are partners of CONNECT and regular attendees at these meetings where they share updates and information straight from their organizations, and hear the issues that are confronting local governments directly from their representatives. This integrated network of relationships has led to increased communication and collaboration region-wide.

CONNECTING NEIGHBORS: AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING WE DO
“The work being done by the municipalities and the municipal officials who are part of CONNECT is exceptional. These community leaders recognize that policy issues are not defined by municipal borders, making their collaboration an important part of positioning our region to continue improving and moving forward for generations to come.”

Rich Fitzgerald, Allegheny County Executive

“The City and the surrounding municipalities all have the same goal—to serve our residents effectively, efficiently, and equitably. CONNECT brings us together to address common problems collaboratively, which leads to regional solutions that benefit us all.”

William Peduto, Chair, CONNECT, 2015-2016
Mayor, City of Pittsburgh
Dozens of municipalities. Aging infrastructure. Billions of gallons of water. Federal regulations tightening by the year. When it comes to our region’s sewer system, it’s hard to know where to begin.

In 2013, CONNECT and 3 Rivers Wet Weather (3RWW) partnered to establish the Sewer Regionalization Implementation Committee (SRIC) that brought together regional stakeholders to implement a process for sewer regionalization, the transfer of ownership of multi-municipal sewer lines and wet weather facilities from the municipalities to ALCOSAN, as this is seen as the most cost-effective way for the region to meet the demands of federal, state, and county administrative orders that require compliance with the Clean Water Act and the control of sewer overflows.

The SRIC met regularly throughout 2014, and in early 2015, 3RWW and CONNECT joined ALCOSAN in presenting the recommendations to ALCOSAN customer municipalities through a series of outreach meetings. Over the last year, ALCOSAN engaged a consultant and asset service company to work with the communities that share the candidate trunk sewers for regionalization.

The outreach has been successful; to date, more than 250 miles of pipe have been identified as candidates for transfer. CONNECT is continuing to serve as a partner in this effort, ensuring that communication channels remain open between parties and that progress is ongoing. Transfers are expected to formally commence in 2017.
A municipality paves a road. Six months later, a utility company digs up the newly paved road to access the necessary infrastructure to make essential repairs. This scenario, all too common, is both expensive and frustrating for both parties, as well as inconvenient for local residents.

With 130 municipalities, dozens of utility companies, and numerous authorities all operating in Allegheny County—and a network of aging infrastructure in constant need of repair—avoiding costly duplication and inefficient investment in construction and reconstruction is a daunting task.

Enter CONNECT. In 2015, CONNECT served as the host for two Utilities Summits that brought together representatives of CONNECT municipalities and the major utility companies to begin to identify ways to reduce this duplication of road repair. What emerged was a commitment on behalf of all parties to work collaboratively to better coordinate infrastructure planning, and a charge for CONNECT to continue to host regular stakeholder meetings to facilitate this coordinated planning, and to identify and procure a common data platform that allows municipalities and utilities to electronically track paving plans to identify opportunities for collaboration.

A steering committee was formed, and to date, much progress has been made towards the selection of the data platform, and CONNECT has continued to host face-to-face meetups with municipalities and utilities to foster these important relationships. Substantial savings on both sides have already been realized and lines of communication have been developed.
CONNECTING FOR POLICY: BLIGHT

Blighted and vacant properties have devastating effects on neighborhoods and municipalities.

In 2015, CONNECT selected GRB Law to serve as special “blight council” to CONNECT, providing legal advice and representation on matters regarding blighted, vacant and abandoned housing (specifically Act 90- the Neighborhood Blight Reclamation and Revitalization Act and the Abandoned and Blighted Property Conservatorship Act).

This spring, GRB Law hosted a Blight Workshop for CONNECT municipalities, where they shared tools and resources for combatting blight, and reviewed actual problem properties in CONNECT municipalities, developing customized action plans for each. GRB has been meeting one-on-one with CONNECT municipalities to discuss their blight needs and current efforts, and has contracted with individual municipalities to guide them through various legal processes. As additional CONNECT municipalities take advantage of this program, a slate of “best practices” will be developed, and cross-boundary approaches to tackling these issues will emerge.

CONNECTING FOR POLICY: CONNECT COMMUNITY PARAMEDIC PROGRAM

Operating since 2013, the CONNECT Community Paramedic Program has provided a new level of non-emergency, in-home care to patients throughout Allegheny County. While the full results of the first two years of the pilot program have yet to come in, early results show that the program has generated more than $2 million in gross savings, serving a population of over 280 patients. Additional Program benefits have included decreased emergency department and EMS utilization, more effective use of limited EMS resources, better-coordinated care between local social service agencies, and better care and follow-up services for patients relying on emergency services. We are eagerly awaiting the full report, and are working with our partners, UPMC’s Center for Emergency Medicine, the Allegheny County EMS Council, UPMC and Highmark to secure funding to ensure continued program operations.

Thanks to its successes, the Program has been featured in numerous national publications, and is offering trainings to outside organizations that are interested in starting their own community paramedic programs.
“Ongoing communication between the City of Pittsburgh and the surrounding communities is vital if we are to move the region forward. Transportation, health, blight, and utility coordination remain topics that know no boundaries and demand comprehensive, coordinated solutions. CONNECT provides the forum for discussion and sharing of best-practices on these and other matters critical to our members.”

Mark Sampogna, Vice Chair, CONNECT, 2015-2016
President of Council, Green Tree Borough

To learn more about some of our other policy priorities for the coming year, read the full slate of resolutions that were passed at our Seventh Annual Congress that was held on April 21, 2016 at bit.ly/connect7th.
“A true benefit of CONNECT is that by meeting regularly with fellow CONNECT members, we are able to be aware of the unique challenges that neighboring communities face and collaborate on initiatives to strengthen us—which makes for a stronger County. Seeing the successes of my fellow CONNECT members provides inspiration for my work in my community.”

Marita Garrett, Second Vice Chair, CONNECT, 2015-2016
Vice President of Council, Wilkinsburg Borough

FUNDING

CONNECT is primarily grant-funded, with approximately 75% of annual funding coming from foundations and 25% from municipal contributions, including Allegheny County. In 2016, CONNECT completed year three of a three-year funding cycle and thanks to the incredible commitment of our foundations, we are embarking on a new two-year funding cycle.

A huge thank you to our funders for their continued support of our work and to our municipal members who continue to provide financial contributions that demonstrate their commitment to our organization. We’d also like to thank the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh for their institutional support.

STAFF

CONNECT welcomed new staff in 2015. Kristen Michaels was named Executive Director, becoming CONNECT’s second Executive Director since the organization’s inception in 2009. Shortly thereafter, Lindsay Angelo joined the team as Project Manager. Dr. David Miller continues to serve the organization as an advisor.