

SHARON BOARD OF SELECTMEN

REGULAR MEETING

AUGUST 25, 2020

5:30PM AGENDA

In person and

VIA ZOOM

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/3629804673?pwd=bW5pelh2c2pkYnc1M1FnSERLQkh0QT09>

Meeting ID: 362 980 4673

Passcode: 3xWIHC

1. Adopt agenda
2. Public comment on agenda items
3. Minutes: 7/28/20
4. STEAP Grant applications
5. Storm
6. Community Update
7. Adjourn

State of Connecticut  
Office of Policy and Management [www.portal.ct.gov/opm](http://www.portal.ct.gov/opm)  
STEAP Project Application, Analysis & Eligibility  
*Pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes Section 4-66g*

**APPLICATION FOR FY 2020 STEAP GRANT FUNDING**

Towns may submit one (1) STEAP application for one (1) project, with a maximum request of \$128,205. Complete instructions are outlined on pages 16 through 19 of this application.

You must save your completed application then attach your completed application along with all other required attachments to an email and send to:  
[opm.steapapplications@ct.gov](mailto:opm.steapapplications@ct.gov)

--- IMPORTANT ---

**DO NOT ENTER "SEE ATTACHED" IN SECTIONS THAT ASK FOR DETAILS.  
PLEASE PROVIDE THE REQUESTED INFORMATION ON THE ACTUAL APPLICATION UNLESS A  
SECTION SUGGESTS USING A SEPARATE PAGE OR ATTACHMENT.**

Applicant Town: Sharon Tax ID (FEIN) No.: Brent?

Authorized Signatory Full Legal Name: Brent Colley

Authorized Signatory Title: First Selectman, Town of Sharon

Authorized Signatory Email: Brent?

Authorized Signatory Phone Number: 860 364 5789 Extension:

Town Office Street Address / PO Box: 63 Main St. PO Box 385 Town Office Zip Code: 06069

Project Name/Title: Addition and Renovations, Hotchkiss Library of Sharon- Design Services and Exterior Improvements Phase

Proposed Project Street Address: 10 Upper Main Street Zip Code: 06069

If no project address is available, please provide street intersection detail.

Provide a list of all parcel numbers impacted by the project: 26-69

The 2020 round of STEAP grants will be funded from an aggregate amount of \$15,000,000. Individual grant award amounts will depend on the number of participating towns, and the number of qualified applications selected to receive an award. **Requested amount of STEAP Funding (\$128,205 max.): \$86,100**

Will this project offer a benefit to your community related to the COVID-19 Public Health and Civil Preparedness emergencies? Check one:  YES /  NO

If you answered YES above, please provide a brief explanation of how this project will benefit the community as it relates to the COVID-19 Public Health and Civil Preparedness emergencies:

**Hosting of public events and meetings is an important service that the library provides to the Sharon community. The architects will adapt interior elements to optimize our capacity for social distancing, both in today's Covid-19 era and in the future. An upgraded HVAC system will be designed with enhanced filtration to improve indoor air quality.**

Name, phone and email address of person preparing this application:

**David Moore, Architect, 860 364 5376, david.moore@snet.net**

Identify town officials and professionals that may be contacted with questions regarding this application:

Names, phone numbers and email addresses:

**Brent?**

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1.) Provide a description of the proposed project which includes the purpose of the project. Please be clear as to whether the funds you are requesting are for design, planning, site acquisition and/or construction. **Please be as comprehensive as possible in the description of this project (\*Note: only capital projects will be considered: new construction, expansion, renovation, or replacement project for an existing facility or facilities. Project costs can include the cost of land, design, engineering, architectural planning, and contract services needed to complete the project. For a description of expenditures that cannot be funded with STEAP funds, see page 4).**

The Hotchkiss Library is Sharon's most enduring cultural institution and a well-known architectural landmark. It was designed by Bruce Price, one of the premier architects of his age, and was completed in 1893.

The Library is owned and operated by a non-profit corporation, The Hotchkiss Library of Sharon, Inc., and lies within the Sharon Historical District which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Library operates as the only public library for the Town of Sharon. Today, it faces the challenge of integrating code mandated improvements and new technologies with the historic interior. Most urgently, the Library lacks an accessible entrance, an accessible bathroom, and adequate area for staff and storage.

The library's overall plan is to restore and refurbish the existing interior and construct a modest addition (500 to 800 square feet), which will be a sensitive complement to the existing structure. The addition will accommodate the required accessible elements and other new service areas. The circulation desk and Children's room may also be relocated to the addition; this would free up space for patrons to enjoy enhanced computer, programming, and work spaces for both individuals and small groups.

The use of contemporary technology, including access to the internet and to external digital libraries will be enhanced. Hosting of public events and meetings is increasingly important to the Sharon community, and interior elements will be adapted to better support this function. The capacity for social distancing, both in today's Covid-19 era and in the future, will be enhanced. HVAC systems will be upgraded. The use of HEPA filters and other measures to improve indoor air quality are planned.

Several exterior capital improvements have been identified which cannot wait until the addition and restoration are designed and put out to bid.

Although the exterior has been generally well preserved through the years, the two original stone chimneys need repair, repointing and new stainless-steel flue caps. The library's existing 1" water main was corroded and inadequate. It has just been replaced with a new 4" ductile iron main which has the capacity to accommodate new accessible restrooms and a future fire sprinkler system.

The overall plan will have 2 phases:

The Design Services and Exterior Improvements Phase (work that this grant is applied for) includes 3 elements:

1. Architectural services for the addition and restoration: QA+M Architects from Farmington have been contracted to provide services. Conceptual Design and Programming phase services are currently underway and are not part of the grant request. The remaining phases (Design Development, Construction Documents, Bidding

Services and Construction Administration) will occur within the anticipated contract term and are included in the grant request.

2. Chimney Repairs: These are essential repairs to preserve the historic exterior. The library has accepted a bid from an experienced Sharon mason and the work is "shovel ready".

3. Water main replacement: This work is complete; grant funds are not being requested for this work because it occurred prior to the grant period. The work was paid for by the Town of Sharon and is included in the grant application because those payments are "matching funds" which may include expenditures incurred before commencement of the grant period.

The last phase of the overall project will be the Construction Phase.

2.) How will this project impact and benefit the community? Please include any projected economic impact and job creation or retention estimates.

Sharon is a small rural town; many residents lack broadband internet service. The Library provides free Wi-Fi and internet access on public computers. This ongoing need for equitable information access has only become more evident during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. For many facing uncertain economic futures and lacking internet connectivity, or even basic computer hardware, the Library is the place where they can research and search for jobs, draft resumes, and apply for employment and submit job applications electronically.

In addition to this positive economic impact, this project will benefit the community by:

- Providing a handicapped-accessible entrance and restroom.
- Preserving and enhancing one of Sharon's historical landmarks.
- Enhancing the Library's ability to host public events and meetings.
- Improving community access to the internet and digital resources.

The Library has evolved into a true community center. Strong libraries transform lives and transform communities.

3.) What, if any, planning or design work has begun or been completed on this project?  
Conceptual Design and Programming phase of architectural work is in progress.

4.) Is the proposed project consistent with the State Plan of Conservation and Development?  
YES or NO      Brent?

5.) Is the proposed project consistent with your local Conservation & Development (C&D) Plan?  
YES or NO  
Brent?

Last date local C&D Plan Adopted: Brent?

6.) (mm/dd/yyyy)

7.) Will the project require the conversion of lands currently in agricultural use to non-agricultural use?

YES or NO **NO**

8.) Does the project area contain prime or important agricultural soils that are greater than 25 acres in area?

YES or NO **NO**

9.) Does this project impact state-owned property (i.e.: state facilities, state roads and/or bridges, state parks, forests or other state-owned land.) If yes, please provide the location and a brief explanation.

**NO**

10.) Will any project related activities be conducted within a floodplain\*?

YES or NO **NO**

(\*If you answer "yes" to question 10, please be advised that the provisions of the Dept. of Energy and Environmental Protection's Flood Management Certification are applicable.)

11.) Describe the environmental and social impacts of the proposed project. For example, impacts related to traffic, floodplains, natural resources/wetlands, endangered species, archeological resources, historical structures, neighborhoods, utilities, parks, cemeteries etc. (If necessary, attach response in a separate document with the following heading: "Environmental & Social Impacts".)

The proposed project will have a physical impact on the library which is an historical structure. It is a contributing structure within the Sharon Historic District which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The building's exterior has been well maintained, and a "Statement of Historical Significance" written in 2008 notes the "remarkable integrity of the interior". A significant portion of the overall project involves restoration of interior elements. All work on the overall project will be done to ensure the least impact on this historic structure. There are no other known environmental impacts.

Enhancements to the Hotchkiss Library will have a positive social impact in Sharon. Public libraries provide a safety net and serve all who enter. By achieving accessibility, all residents will be able to utilize its services and participate in its programming. The Hotchkiss Library is the cultural center of the Town of Sharon, providing free programming, materials, and services, all of which are designed to improve and enhance the lives of Sharon's residents, whether in the form of new books, films, lectures, computer access, craft workshops, children's story hours, or digital resources. This

**project creates enhanced spaces for community groups and safe spaces for social interaction for an often isolated and aging demographic, as well as for younger residents.**

12.) Is this project a phase of a larger plan? YES or NO **YES**

If YES, please complete a through e below.

If NO, skip to #13.

a.) What phase are you applying for? **Design Services and Exterior Improvements**

b.) How many phases are there in total? **2**

c.) What state agency/agencies administers/administered the previous phase(s)?

Agency Name: **N/A** or n/a

d.) Who is/was the state agency contact person for this project?

Agency Contact Name: **N/A** or n/a

e.) Attach additional information regarding the overarching, long-term plan if applicable. Attachment heading should read "Long Term Plan".

Attached: YES or NO **YES- the overall description is also included as part of the project description in Item 1 above to provide needed context for the grant project description.**

13.) What is the amount of Town/Local matching funds for this project?

Amount \$ **34,840**

14.) Project Funding – And STEAP Fund Use/Budget

Please complete the attached Funding and Budget Worksheet. The purpose of the work sheet is to reflect how much money has already been spent on the project, how much money will be spent on the project moving forward, what types of expenditures you will use the STEAP funds for, and how much match funding the municipality is committing to the project. You are reminded that STEAP funds cannot be used as a municipal "share" or "match" for any other state or federal grant, and no other state or federal grants can be used to satisfy the "match" for this grant application.

15.) Please summarize amounts and types of funds, if any that have been expended to date for this project.

**\$16,920 paid to date by the Town of Sharon**

**\$17,920 committed to be paid by the Town of Sharon prior to the grant period  
\$19,000 paid by the MJPM Foundation**

16.) If this is not part of a multi-phase project, has any work already begun? If yes, please summarize.

17.) If this is a multi-phase project, please provide a brief summary of the work completed to date.

**Conceptual Design and Programming phase of architectural work is in progress. The water main has been replaced.**

18.) Should this project be awarded a STEAP grant, how soon after our contract is fully executed, would STEAP funded project work begin? (CHECK ONE BOX BELOW)

30 days  60 days      90 days      90+ days

19.) Will this project move forward if the requested STEAP funds are not awarded or are awarded only in part? Please explain.

**Yes, but the project scope and its beneficial impact on the community might be reduced.**

20.) Was this project not selected in a previous round of STEAP grants? **NO**

21.) Will this project require a referendum/legislative body vote? If "no", check this box Brent? and skip to question 23. If already approved by vote, enter vote date here Brent? and skip to question 23. If to be voted on in future, enter projected date of vote here Brent?. If your application is selected for an award, the project must be approved by vote within 30 days of being notified of the award. A copy of the municipality's approval of the project, whether in resolution format or memorialized in meeting minutes, must be submitted to the administering agency.

22.) Has this project been rejected at a previous referendum/legislative body vote? YES or NO  
**NO.** If yes, what has changed that leads you to believe that it will pass at the next referendum/legislative body vote?  
**Brent?**

23.) Has there been, or do you anticipate a measurable level local opposition to the project which may interfere with the expedient use of grant funds should this project be selected for an award?  
**NO**

24.) Is there any other relevant information you feel may be helpful, please include it below:





**Include the following material with your completed and signed application:**

1. Site location indicated on a flood map
2. Property boundary map
3. Two separate real estate appraisals, if land acquisition is proposed. ***\*Note: STEAP funds cannot exceed the appraised value established in the appraisals***
4. Project plans / concept plans
5. Proposed project schedule and duration of project (or project phase) to be funded by these STEAP funds should they be awarded
6. Project cost estimates supporting the request for funding
7. List of necessary local, state, and federal permits and approvals required for the project; list the status of each if applicable
8. Environmental site assessments (if applicable)
9. Any town resolution(s) in support of application for this grant and/or resolutions in support of the project for which you are seeking this grant. (An authorizing resolution to apply for this grant is not required, however other resolutions will be required as part of your contracting process should you be selected to receive an award.) A sample resolution is provided on page 19 of this document.
10. Municipal Certification of Eligibility for OPM Discretionary State Funding (rev. 03/26/18) (Please see the COVID-19-Related Information related to this certification by clicking [THIS LINK](#))
11. Budget Worksheet that has been provided with this application
12. Acceptance & Certification (pages 17 and 18 of this document)

## ACCEPTANCE & CERTIFICATION

(Page 1 of 2)

**This Acceptance and Certification must be read and signed by the Authorized Signatory of the municipality in order for the municipality/project to be considered for STEAP funding.**

My signature below, as Authorized Signatory of the Town of Sharon, indicates acceptance of the following and further certifies that:

1. I understand that should this grant application be approved I will be required to sign an assistance agreement/contract with the assigned administering agency delineating the terms and conditions of this grant;
2. I will comply with any grant terms and conditions required by the administering agency;
3. I understand that various permits and permit-related documentation may be required by the administering agency as required by either the Connecticut General Statutes or Connecticut regulations, including but not limited to a Flood Management Certification;
4. I understand that funding associated with this grant application is one-time in nature and that there is no obligation for additional funding from the Office of Policy and Management or the State of Connecticut;
5. I understand that if this project warrants a Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) review pursuant to Sections 22a-1 through 22a-1h of the Connecticut General Statutes that I will comply with such an environmental assessment. Further, if a CEPA is required, I understand that there are costs associated with such a review and that the municipality is in a position to continue with the proposed project despite this cost;
6. I understand that this application will be examined by the Intergovernmental Policy and Planning Division of the Office of Policy and Management for consistency with the State Plan of Conservation and Development and that I may be contacted if additional information is required for that review;
7. I understand that projects which convert twenty-five or more acres of prime farmland to a nonagricultural use will be reviewed by the Commissioner of Agriculture, in accordance with Section 22-6 of the Connecticut General Statutes;
8. I understand that I am responsible for meeting the requirements to remain eligible for discretionary state funding as outlined at [this link](#).

**ACCEPTANCE & CERTIFICATION**

(Page 2 of 2)

9. I will supply the Office of Policy and Management with all documentation supporting my authority to enter into an assistance agreement, including but not limited to applicable certified minutes and by-laws from the town denoting my authority to apply for the grant and the authority to enter into such an agreement should a grant be awarded;
10. I understand that if this application leads to the award of a STEAP grant for this project, that no payment will be made for project expenses incurred prior to the start date, unless such expenditures are satisfactorily determined by the administering agency to be allowed pursuant to the **\*COVID-19-Related Provision** (page 3) or after the end date as set forth in the fully executed contract; and
11. I have read, in full, all pages of this application package, entitled Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP) Guidelines and Application.

Authorized Signatory's Name (Please Print)

Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Date

**You must save this completed application, then attach your completed application, the separate completed budget workbook, and all other required attachments to an email and send to:**

**[opm.steapapplications@ct.gov](mailto:opm.steapapplications@ct.gov)**

**MUNICIPAL CERTIFICATION OF RESOLUTION**

Below is the suggested format for the municipal certification of the town's resolution which authorizes the Chief Executive Officer of the municipality to accept a STEAP grant and enter into any required contracts/agreements necessary to facilitate such grant. The title of the Chief Executive Officer can be changed to reflect the appropriate title with respect to your municipality's form of government (i.e., Mayor, Town Manager, First Selectman, etc.).

A copy of the relevant resolution shall accompany the below certification. The below certification must be printed on the municipality's letterhead and must bear the official seal of the town/town clerk. For embossed seals with no ink, please darken the impression with graphite so it will be visible on the scanned document.

Required language to be included in the town's resolution appears in the indented portion of the certification below.

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**Municipal Certification of Resolution - STEAP 2020**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, Town Clerk of the Town of \_\_\_\_\_, a municipality organized and existing under the laws of the State of Connecticut, hereby certify that the following is a true copy of the resolution adopted at the Representative Town Meeting of said municipality at the Regular Monthly Meeting held on \_\_\_\_\_ (month, day, year):

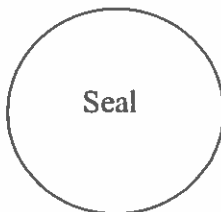
“RESOLVED, that First Selectman \_\_\_\_\_ (name) be, and hereby is, authorized to accept on behalf of the Town of \_\_\_\_\_, a 2020 Connecticut STEAP Grant in the amount of \$\_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ (project description); and

FURTHER RESOLVED, that First Selectman \_\_\_\_\_ (name) is hereby authorized to enter into and execute any and all agreements, contracts and documents necessary to obtain said 2020 STEAP Grant with the State of Connecticut.”

AND I DO FURTHER CERTIFY that the above resolution has in no way been altered, amended or revoked, and is in full force and effect.

AND I DO FURTHER CERTIFY that \_\_\_\_\_ (name) is the first selectman of the town of \_\_\_\_\_, and has been since \_\_\_\_\_ (date of instatement).

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the seal of the Town of \_\_\_\_\_ this \_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2020.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature/Town Clerk  
Town of \_\_\_\_\_

**STEAP APPLICATION - 2020  
PROPOSED STEAP GRANT USE (PROJECT BUDGET)**

<b>TOWN NAME:</b>	Sharon
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b>	Addition and Renovations, Hotchkiss Library of Sharon- Design Services and Exterior Improvements Phase
<b>TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET:</b>	\$120,940.00
<b>STEAP GRANT AMT. REQUESTED:</b>	\$86,100.00

Please only list expenditures that will be funded by the STEAP grant you are applying for.

PROPOSED STEAP GRANT USE (PROJECT BUDGET)		
Expenditure Category	Description of Expenditure	Amount of STEAP Grant to be used (per category)
Professional Services	Architectural services- Design Development through Construction Administration	\$76,000.00
Acquisition		
Construction	Repair masonry chimneys	\$10,100.00
Renovation		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Other, describe:		
Total should equal 100% of STEAP amount requested:		\$86,100.00

The total should equal Column C, Row 33 on the Secured Funding Sources tab



**Answers to selected questions, in the order they appear in the application.**

Will this project offer a benefit to your community related to the COVID-19 Public Health and Civil Preparedness emergencies? If you answer YES, please provide a brief explanation:

Yes, this project will help the Town of Sharon become better prepared to handle public health and civil preparedness emergencies in the future. To put it bluntly, Sharon was not adequately prepared to enable residents to closely follow State and CDC recommendations to shelter in place and help prevent spread of the novel coronavirus. Lack of sufficient and ubiquitous internet access available to residents created a number of challenges that remain unresolved:

- The Town of Sharon does not have a broadband network in place to facilitate all communications and manage all civic affairs.

- Only about 77% of residents have reliable, affordable, unlimited access to FCC-compliant broadband in their residences and businesses under franchise agreements put in place by the town. This situation created:

- Unequal access to distance learning programs for our school-aged students;
  - Difficulty staying fully abreast of State and CDC Covid-19 mitigation recommendations. For many, information was limited to headlines on the evening news;

- Financial hardship for residents unable to work from home, and

- Medical difficulties for residents, especially those with chronic conditions, who were unable to avoid in-person visits vs. having telemedicine sessions with their doctors and other health care providers from home. Some simply delayed seeing their doctors for months.

Affordable and reliable access to broadband internet for every home and business will help all residents shelter in place safely without sacrificing their ability to live, learn, work, or receive medical care.

1. Provide a description of the proposed project which includes the purpose of the project.

The Town of Sharon CT is seeking \$60,000 to hire a private, technical consulting firm(s) to prepare a town-wide comprehensive plan for the design, engineering, construction, and financing of an open-access, 100% fiber-optic broadband network that can connect all of Sharon's government entities, every residence, and every business with ultrafast broadband internet connections. The purpose of the project is to identify a town-specific, feasible framework that Sharon can use to build broadband infrastructure capable of 1 gigabit end-user service speeds, as well as the capacity to increase bandwidth speeds in the future with minimal changes.



A key part of this project that the contracting firm(s) will develop is a business and financial plan to show how the network can be built, including all the costs and permits involved, and various scenarios focused on the town's options for sharing the ownership, expenses, and revenue from the network with new private-industry technology partners that will have the required expertise to maintain the network infrastructure as well as manage and operate the internet services that will be provided to all end users.

The goal of this project is to identify a viable roadmap to responsibly take back control of Sharon's internet access services which have been outsourced for decades to several third-party providers primarily as a very welcome remedy for the lack of television reception. Today their current infrastructure investments in Sharon, either alone or taken all together, are still not fully capable of meeting current internet access demand. Rightly, their business motivations are focused on return on investment for shareholders, not ubiquitous, affordable, reliable internet service for the entire Sharon community. In the same way the Town of Sharon ensures its children receive an education, roads get plowed in winter, volunteer fire and ambulance squads respond to emergencies, and new homes can get connected to the electric grid, Sharon wishes to reclaim civic responsibility for broadband internet access, this new necessity of modern life that the pandemic has so brightly illuminated.

Sharon is a picturesque rural town nestled in the hills of Northwest Connecticut. With only 1,975 homes and 112 miles of roadway, our town does not have the population density to convince any of the current providers to invest even more to make service available to every home and business, much less to persuade any major company to spend the estimated \$5.6 million it would take to build a full fiber-broadband network that can serve all the needs of Sharon, its residents, and businesses right now and well into the future.

To thrive as a desirable place for families to live, raise their children, run a business, work, and grow old, Sharon cannot continue with so few digital methods for purveying government services, less than equal access to learning resources for its school-aged children, less than minimal standards for business and telework, and inferior digital options for health care for our residents. Our town leaders have tried for years, without success, to persuade existing providers – Comcast, Frontier, Optimum, Spectrum Business, HughesNet, ViaSat, AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, and T-Mobile – to fully upgrade their internet and/or mobile networks to make sure they are available to every residence and business.

Today, 25 miles of our roads (22+%) and at least 297 homes (15%) are still without mobile phone access, even though cell service became commercially available in CT more than 35 years ago. Driving in those "dead zones," is a significant safety concern. Drivers in need of assistance are known to get out of their cars after a mishap and walk along the roadway until they can get a signal on their phone to call for help. Drivers who cannot walk must rely on the kindness of strangers, when they happen to come along.

We have recognized if we don't do it, no one else will. This grant is the next logical step in our carefully considered plan to hasten the pace of our broadband infrastructure improvement program.

2. How will this project impact and benefit the community? Please include any projected economic impact and job creation or retention estimates.

Having a map that gets Sharon closer to 100% broadband connectivity for government, residences, and business can revitalize the economic development prospects for the Sharon community. Sharon should be a magnet for young families given its rural charm and proximity to major population centers, but instead it is stuck in a downward demographic spiral with residents 65+ now making up 36 percent of its population, according to CERC data. To compare, that age group is just 16 percent of the state's population. The median age in Sharon is 59, compared to 41 for the state. In large part, Sharon has struggled to attract young families and new businesses because the lack of reliable broadband limits the kinds of careers they can pursue. Indeed, the four largest employers in Sharon in 2018 were Vassar Health Connecticut (which owned Sharon Hospital), Athena Healthcare (which operates a nursing home), Region One School District, and Upcountry, a local company that mows lawns and landscapes properties for wealthy weekenders.

Sharon is on a dangerous precipice of losing its vibrancy and becoming a "barbell" community, with a small handful of very wealthy landowners on one side and everyone else on the other struggling to make ends meet due to limited ability to improve their prospects for lack of high-paying jobs here. Although Sharon's median household income is \$81,442, higher than the \$73,781 for the state, according to CERC data, wealth is concentrated in few hands. Its poverty rate is 12.5%, higher than the state's 10.1%. Sharon residents are business-minded – 28% of its residents are self-employed, more than double the 10% level for the state – but their businesses struggle to gain more than regional customers in part because of the lack of broadband connections.

Alarming, Sharon Hospital (now part of the NuVance Health network, which serves 1.5 million people in Western Connecticut and New York's mid-Hudson Valley) began the process of closing down its maternity operations in 2018 because the low number of births made it difficult to attract doctors to practice here. After a community outcry, the Hospital agreed to keep its labor and delivery operations for now, but there is no certainty that it will continue to do so unless the number of births starts to rise. Enrollment at Sharon Center School declined by 4.7 percent between 2017-2020, according to CERC data. The decline is even more stark when combined with numbers from our regional high school. Together, the two schools lost 100 students 2016-2019, a 16.5 percent decline.

When Covid-19 hit and shelter in place orders became common, the lack of reliable internet and cell phone service escalated from an irritant to an acute daily problem.

\*Distance learning from home became impossible for students with families who are without broadband connectivity (approximately 23 percent of homes). Some students were

forced to sit outside the local library (which has free wifi as part of the CEN fiber-optic network) to take instruction, get assignments, and do their homework. This solution is not exactly a viable option when the weather gets cold.

\*Families who had been relying on wifi hotspot devices and cell phone boosters that piggyback an internet connection to create better “reception” found that when every member of their family was home and working online, also competing for signal with the family members of neighbors, reliable connectivity became spotty and connection speeds slowed to a crawl. Residents using lower-cost wifi resellers such as Tracfone and Unlimited LTE were left scrambling when AT&T decided to shut off access to its tower to the resellers, claiming the tower was overloaded.

\*Families with satellite service quickly discovered that their internet service is not only unreliable but also effectively metered, which means quickly reaching data caps and the need to buy more, can make service unaffordable.

\*Families with DSL service found that they did not have enough bandwidth to hold Zoom calls for work or watch videos. Frontier Communications, the local DSL provider, declined to upgrade years-old modems for its customers, subjecting them to security risks in addition to balky connections. Frontier, which is operating under bankruptcy protection, did not sign the FCC pledge not to kick off subscribers who fell behind in paying their bills.

\*Meanwhile, professionals from New York (two hours away by Metro North train) and Boston (three hours away via the Massachusetts Turnpike), who brought their families to live in their second home in Sharon and escape the virus riding roughshod in their city, soon recognized that their internet services did not supply the bandwidth speed to support the robust data needs of their telework. Here’s one specific example of a family with three children who tried to fix its problem: the family’s home sits 1,000 feet from another house that is wired for Comcast cable internet. Comcast told the family it would cost \$22,750 to extend the wire to their home, even though there is already conduit in the ground through which the wires could be run. The family cannot afford that additional expense. Many other families have been quoted comparable amounts, making the costs of cable internet connection in the 22% of unwired roads out of reach for ordinary families.

The town would be well-positioned to gain population, strengthen its tax base, and diversify its community if it could deploy a town-wide high-speed broadband network. Indeed, without immediate action, Sharon may miss the opportunity created by the pandemic to reverse its negative demographic trends.

The top story in the local newspaper on July 29 was headlined: “Brokers Respond to ‘Panic Buying’ and Bidding Wars,” an account of the suddenly booming real estate market here as people flee surrounding cities because of the pandemic, able to do so because of the new work-from-home protocols taking hold. Closed home sales in Litchfield County are up 4 percent over last year (1,058 sales) and the total volume of houses sold has soared 21 percent. Brokers are quoted saying the towns of Sharon and Salisbury are driving the sales growth in the Northwest Corner. Meanwhile, weekenders already pre-disposed to like daily life in Sharon may be easily persuaded to spend an extra day or two or a full summer in town.

These new families need broadband access to put down permanent roots here, and if they do so, it follows that birth rates will start to increase at Sharon Hospital and school enrollments will reverse their steady slide. Having extra head count in town, to shop, eat out, etc. would be its own small boom to the local economy. With a broadband network, more home-based businesses could flourish, corporate-level remote working would be possible, distance learning for students and continuing education and online training for their parents would be accessible. Broadband infrastructure would help address the mobile phone issue and telemedicine could flourish.

Telemedicine would certainly strengthen the business of Sharon Hospital. In addition to telemedicine, telehealth is also a very important piece of Sharon's economic development plan. Telehealth—the provision of non-treatment services like training, continuing education, medical conferences, etc.—offers an enormous potential economic opportunity for Sharon that towns without hospitals can only dream about. Sharon Hospital is the town's largest employer and could be a centerpiece for telehealth services.

A fiber-optic network could also make possible deployment of a mobile network that would be more comprehensive and reliable. The only lighted fiber-optic line in town is the one that runs for a few hundred feet down Main Street operated by the Connecticut Education Network (CEN). Access is limited to the Hotchkiss Library of Sharon and Sharon Center School. Even our municipal offices at Town Hall are not on the CEN network because it is very expensive to connect and was never designed to be a ubiquitous solution for municipalities across the state. It is our hope that this state-of-the-art education network would be eventually connected to the larger fiber-optic network that we could build.

All of these economic development initiatives rely on the presence of a robust broadband network.

3. What, if any, planning or design work has begun or been completed on this project?

Sharon is a member of the Northwest Hills Council of Governments, which has leveraged funding from the State of Connecticut Regional Performance Incentive Program and other grants to prepare two detailed regional studies of broadband and mobile availability as well as a recently released deployment guide:

- Rural Broadband Study (2017-2019)
- Broadband and Mobile Technical Assessment (Dec. 20, 2018)
- Deployment Guide for Fiber Optic Broadband in Litchfield County (June 2020)

The first two studies provide excellent baseline data for the region. For Sharon specifically, there are detailed maps, including ARC/GIS town parcel and address point data showing broadband and cell availability and dead zones.

The deployment guide provides initial estimates of the total costs per town for installing a full fiber-optic network. The estimated cost for Sharon, with its 112 route miles, as mentioned

earlier, is \$5.6 million. The Guide has an excellent summary of the technical and strategic steps that each town needs to take.

These resources were developed jointly with Northwest ConneCT, a non-profit collaborative that advocates for high-speed broadband access for 25 towns in the Northwest Corner, [northwest-connect.org](http://northwest-connect.org).

In Sharon specifically, building a broadband network is becoming the top capital spending priority for the town. An all-volunteer Sharon Connect Task Force is surveying residents about their broadband needs and their level of satisfaction with the status quo. Early results show that more than 90% percent of respondents are unhappy in some way with their current internet service (mostly too slow, too expensive, or not available at their home or office). The data is being used to help the Sharon Board of Selectmen make decisions about how to address this vital need, including applying for a STEAP grant to be able to afford the necessary design, engineering, and financial study. Once the study is complete, they can present a concrete plan for a town vote to approve a bond package to help pay for the cost of constructing a network.

Describe the environmental and social impacts of the proposed project. For example, impacts related to traffic, floodplains, natural resources/wetlands, endangered species, archeological resources, historical structures, neighborhoods, utilities, parks, cemeteries, etc. (If necessary, attach response in a separate document with the following heading: "Environmental & Social Impacts".)

The project for which we seek funding will have no environmental impacts.

The network building project, identified by the STEAP grant project and adopted by the Board of Selectmen, would also have little to no environmental impact because the design plan will rely primarily on using the municipal gain space on telephone poles to string new fiber-optic cabling wire. To the extent that engineers determine any new poles need to be installed, each one would either replace an old, existing pole that is at the end of its useful life, or would be erected as a new pole in the town's right of way space along existing roads; essentially in the same way that electrical wires and telephone lines are strung already. The engineers will also review state-commissioned maps to identify any capital construction sites that may need to be carefully coordinated with State of Connecticut agencies. However, we do not anticipate any environmental impacts or challenges.

The social impact would be enormous, as previously described in our answer to Question 2. The economic divide in Sharon is stark, and lack of universal broadband access and reliable cell service only exacerbates the gap between the haves and have-nots. **Deploying a fiber-optic network along all town roads and into all neighborhoods would be the single most effective thing the town could do to close that gap and ensure Sharon's viability into the future.**

11. Is this project a phase of a larger plan? YES

a.) What phase are you applying for?

Phase two

b.) How many phases are there in total?

Five:

Phase 1 – Data Gathering

Phase 2 – The Project to Design and Price a Network

Phase 3 – Board Approval and Town Vote to Finance It

Phase 4a – RFP to Construct It (simultaneous with 4b)

Phase 4b – Invite Private-Sector Partners to Operate and Maintain It

Phase 5 – Launch Services Over Broadband Network

c.) What state agency/agencies administers/administered the previous phase(s)?

N/A

d.) Who is/was the state agency contact person for this project?

N/A

e.) Attach additional information regarding the overarching, long-term plan if applicable. Please reference the Deployment Guide attached.

18. Should this project be awarded a STEAP grant, how soon after our contract is fully executed, would STEAP funded project work begin? (CHECK ONE BOX BELOW)

30 days

19. Will this project move forward if the requested STEAP funds are not awarded or are awarded only in part? Please explain.

Deploying a robust, town-wide broadband network is becoming Sharon's top capital-spending priority. If we do not receive this grant, we will have to cut other expenses in our budget, which is already strained because of the pandemic, to find the funds for the next phase of this project. We are eager to get this project going as quickly as possible to have the best opportunity to keep as full-time residents many of the new families that are trying out living here during the pandemic.

This is also a good time to lay the groundwork for a major construction project. Sharon has only six more years until it pays off its previous major bonding project to fix local roads. Interest costs on those 10-year bonds are starting to drop, providing some of the revenue the town could use to finance the broadband project. The town does plan to issue another \$2.2 million in long-term bonds in 2021 to refinance a bond anticipation note the town took out in May 2019 to co-finance the construction of a new transfer station.

20. Was this project not selected in a previous round of STEAP grants?

No

21. Will this project require a referendum/legislative body vote?

No (if no, skip to question 24)

24. Is there any other relevant information you feel may be helpful, please include it below.

Please see letters of support from our State Representative, State Senator, and the president of Sharon Hospital. Building a robust, town-wide broadband network is the single most-important act Sharon can take to restore economic vitality, boost opportunity, and protect the health and well-being of its citizens.