



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

145 Dennison Road Essex, CT 06426 | +1 860 581 8554 | www.rivercog.org

MEMORANDUM 011519

From: Samuel Gold, AICP, Executive Director
To: RiverCOG Members
Date: January 15, 2019
Re: **2019 River COG Legislative Agenda**

Increase Federal Transfers to Connecticut

Connecticut is a net contributor to the federal budget. The state should maximize transfers of federal dollars to Connecticut to keep more of our money local. The following ideas would further this goal:

COG Planning Region County Equivalency

- All nine COGs voted in 2018 to support the Census Bureau's recognition of COGs as the county equivalent for Connecticut
- Counties and County Equivalents are eligible for more federal grants than municipalities
 - Connecticut receives \$70 less per capita in federal funds than average
 - On average \$45 per capita in federal funds go to counties
- Six states have county equivalents recognized by the U.S. Census
- Allowing COGs to apply for federal grants to counties will result in more opportunities for grants and more competitive applications for federal funds
- Ultimately Connecticut will receive more federal dollars
- Federal recognition of COGs does not change CT Statutes or the status or powers of COGs
- Reject the Governor's Transportation Transition Team's recommendation to remake the COGs and their boundaries for a second time in a decade. This would take years and millions of dollars and would destroy the good will and cooperation between municipalities that has grown under the current COG geographies. Additionally, the progress made on getting COG geographies recognized as county equivalents would be undone, because U.S. Census Bureau wants to see longevity in county equivalents.

Enable Regionalism

There are statutory and contractual impediments to shared and regional services. Enabling legislation that allows municipalities to pursue cheaper ways of providing municipal services is necessary to realize any real savings and movement in this area.

The seventeen member municipalities of RiverCOG support regional services and actively cooperate and participate in a multitude of regional shared services (ex. regional schools and regional health districts). In every instance, the regional services that RiverCOG municipalities share save money, provide quality services, and were created via voluntary municipal action. Imposition of regional services from above could create more problems and increased costs, and will lack the local input and buy-in necessary for success. Municipalities must be empowered to work together and take on vested interests that keep them from working together.

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- Exempt regional services from collective bargaining agreements
 - Regional shared services that could save municipalities are thwarted by the individual collective bargaining agreements and units in each municipality
- Statutes that are obstacles to regional and shared services should be eliminated, such as allowing a regional department or contractor to be appointed for various municipal services instead of a specific person.
- Regionalism requires study and a transparent, inclusive, and bottom-up process where Chief Elected Officials and COGs are involved in shaping proposals
- Just because a service is provided regionally does not mean it saves money
- Recognize COG boundaries as county equivalents for use by federal funding programs and data collection
 - Will allow towns to partner with their COGs to access more federal funds
 - Will strengthen the new regions recently created by state statute
- Analyze the CT General Statutes systematically for mandates and language that impedes municipalities from cooperating or sharing staff and departments.

Allow Participation in a Regional Shared Service to Fulfill Statute Mandates on Municipalities

- For example, participation in a shared building inspector or assessor program would meet statutory requirements that each municipality have a building inspector and assessor.
- Enable regional wetlands commissions

Allow Specific Changes to Municipal Charters With Regard to Regionalism, Without Opening the Entire Charter Up For Debate

- Avoids local political resistance to opening up the entire charter for debate.

Allow Municipalities to Appoint Another Municipality as the Provider of Specific Contracted Services, Without Creating a Regional District

- Municipalities cannot currently share health departments and must instead create a new standalone health district

Adequately Fund COGs and Restore the Regional Performance Incentive Program for Regional Services Start Up Costs

- Regional Services Grants to COGs have been reduced well below budgeted amounts. COGs need to be adequately funded to be able to provide support for regional services.
- Regional shared services will cost money to set up. These costs are an impediment to implementation. The restoration of the Regional Performance Incentive Program to the statutes for regional services startup costs should be a priority.

Devolve Administration of More State Grants to the COGs Along the Lines of LOTCIP

- On many topics, COGs, overseen by CEOs, may be able to more efficiently and effectively program funds than state agencies
- A comprehensive study of state grants and programs would be required to identify the best opportunities

Mandate Relief

To assist municipalities that are being asked to do more with less state support, there needs to be thoughtful and significant relief from unfunded mandates. Cuts in support to municipalities or the imposition of new unfunded mandates result in increases in property taxes.

- All proscriptive fee amounts in statute should be reviewed to determine if adequate for a municipalities to recoup costs associated with the fee. An example would be dog licenses. Does the \$7 fee that is set in statute cover the costs of issuing the dog license and animal control in the municipality (especially considering a portion of the fee goes to the state)? Ideally municipalities should be allowed to set their own fee rates to recoup costs, as long as they are reasonable and not exorbitant.
- Municipalities should not be responsible for teacher pension benefits that the municipalities did not promise or control. If municipalities are to pay for their teachers' retirements, the municipality should have some say over the type and amount of benefits.
- The state should not mandate and earmark portions of town budgets
- Diversification of municipal revenues, such as increased fees or sales tax increment could help avoid property tax increases
 - School districts should be able to shrink budgets and find efficiencies as the school aged population declines across the state
- Reform special education
 - Transfer the burden of proof to the parents/student
 - Exempt special education costs from the MBR, so that the costs follow the student
- Reform elections
 - Streamline the number of staff required and training
 - Allow a single polling place in small towns that are in more than one district
 - Fund the Regional Election Monitor position at the COGs
- The raised thresholds on prevailing wage are helpful, but still unnecessarily inflate project costs for municipalities, particularly for renovation projects.
- Support innovation in school busing to allow the use of technology to implement a flexible subscription model that eliminates wasteful circuitous routes for students who seldom take the bus
- Probate court fees should be used to fully support the costs of probate courts

Investigate Implementing a Federal Tax Deductible Payroll Tax

- Maximizing federal deductions for Connecticut residents and businesses benefits the state economy
- Payroll taxes are deductible for employers
 - Employees' gross pay would decline, but net pay could remain the same if the payroll tax replaced state income tax withholdings
- Allow more Connecticut residents to claim their full SALT federal deduction, increasing refunds/ lowering federal tax liabilities

Transportation

- Provide a means of removing municipal appointees from transit district boards
- Maintain funding for 9 Town Transit, Middletown Area Transit, and Shore Line East
- Support the long planned Clinton Train Station
- Protect funding for the Local Transportation Capital Improvement Program (LOTICIP)
 - Allows more efficient use of federal funds on, fewer state assets
 - Defunding of LOTICIP will create havoc as state projects are delisted from the COG's transportation improvement programs

Infrastructure

- Municipalities and utilities on their own are not providing the infrastructures that are needed for economic growth
- State needs to assist the expansion of public water and sewer, fiber-optic and 5G cellular data, and energy (natural gas, solar, and car charging stations)

Other Priorities

- The budget implementer bill should not include anything but the budget
- Pursue efforts to keep Connecticut college graduates in the state, to address state's demographic challenges
- Create a pilot program to allow municipalities in the Lower Connecticut River Valley Region to enact a local property transfer fee for municipal conservation