

Executive Summary

Connecticut's Regional Planning Organizations

In April 2007, the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee voted to study Connecticut's Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs). The focus of the study was on understanding the activities currently undertaken by each of the 15 RPOs, identifying additional services they might provide in the future, and suggesting ways to encourage regional collaboration among municipalities.

The overall goal of the recommendations adopted by the program review committee on December 20, 2007, was to encourage towns to continue to address issues through Regional Planning Organizations in order to foster the growth and development of regional activities in the state. The committee's findings and recommendations focused on three broad areas:

- the role, structure, and boundaries of Regional Planning Organizations;
- the relationship of the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) to the continued growth of regionalism in Connecticut; and
- the use of state funding as a means of increasing regional activities.

Study Methodology

During the course of the study, a variety of state agencies and organizations interested in regionalism were contacted for their perspective on the current and future role of RPOs in Connecticut. During the early months of the study, committee staff also visited the office of each of the 15 RPOs, interviewing the executive director, and in some cases, other staff and board members as well. In September 2007, the committee held a public hearing at which 16 people spoke or submitted testimony related to the topic of Regional Planning Organizations, including a panel presentation by the staff and board members of eight of the RPOs.

Another mechanism used to obtain information was a questionnaire sent to the chief elected officials in the state's 169 towns. The survey asked for their opinions regarding the roles, responsibilities, and current performance of the RPOs in their region, and what future tasks, if any, they would like those RPOs to undertake. A total of 101 of 169 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 60 percent.

Regional Planning Organizations

Regional Planning Organizations are statutorily authorized regional entities voluntarily established by the municipalities located within the 15 state-defined planning regions. There are three types: Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs), Regional Councils of Elected Officials (RCEOs), and Regional Councils of Governments (RCOGs).

The primary statutory responsibilities of all three types of RPOs are the same. However, with the exception of transportation planning, which already has a regional focus, and a few

state-mandated responsibilities related to conservation and development planning, most of the activities performed by each RPO are at the direction of their member towns.

The boundaries of the regions that the current 15 RPOs represent were developed by the state in the 1950s, based on an examination of a variety of factors and consultation with officials in the various regions. Since then, changes in the economy of Connecticut, housing patterns, environmental concerns, and technology in general have occurred and are continuing to occur. OPM has statutory authority to designate or redesignate logical planning regions within the state, but the only change since the 1970s has been the assignment of a previously unaffiliated town to a specific RPO. Municipal chief elected officials who responded to the program review survey overwhelmingly supported periodic re-examination of the planning regions. Given these factors, the program review committee believes OPM should be required to reexamine the boundaries of the state's planning regions periodically.

Issue of Regionalism

The need to address certain public policy issues on a regional versus an individual town basis has been recognized in Connecticut since the 1940s when the state legislature authorized the creation of regional planning agencies. In recent years, there has been growing interest nationally and in Connecticut in expanding efforts to plan and act on a regional basis. There are two major reasons: recognition that land use planning needs to occur in a more methodical and integrated manner in order to preserve the character of the state and reduce sprawl; and a realization that service sharing arrangements can achieve cost savings. Although most towns in Connecticut have embraced the use of regional entities for some purposes, there is less support for state-imposed joint efforts.

In its survey of municipal chief elected officials, the program review committee found there is no consensus on whether the state should build the capacity of RPOs to undertake state-mandated tasks on a region-wide basis. In addition, there is no agreement on whether certain land use decisions should be shifted away from municipalities to regional or state government. Most of those interviewed acknowledged that regional planning is important, and increasing collaboration among towns for the provision of certain services would be more cost efficient. However, almost all local officials opposed the idea of the state imposing mandates that would require specific functions and activities to be regionalized.

If towns are reluctant to readily participate in regional endeavors, the state can take action in four ways: offer incentives; impose sanctions; mandate specific activities be regionalized; or perform the activity itself. Over the years, the objective of state legislation in Connecticut related to regionalism has been to encourage, rather than require, towns to jointly cooperate. Thus, a major challenge for state policy makers is to balance regional needs that facilitate the long-term development of the state, with the long-held preference of retaining control and decision-making at the local level of government.

Plans of Development

Conservation and development plans are used at all levels of government to provide a vision and general idea of how land should be used to assure public health, safety, and welfare.

In Connecticut, conservation and development planning is statutorily mandated at the local, regional, and state level. The Regional Plan of Development, as the middle ground between the individual Municipal Conservation and Development Plans and the State Plan of Conservation and Development (State C&D Plan), is an important mechanism to balance local interests with the overall goals of the state. Although regional plans are purely advisory, they are key documents that link together towns with common interests, while supporting the overall goals of the State C&D Plan. Although a Regional Planning Organization must submit its proposed Regional Plan of Development to the secretary of OPM for findings to determine if the proposed plan is “not inconsistent” with the State Plan of Conservation and Development, the committee found no formal criteria existed to conduct such a review.

State statutes require that RPOs be notified about, and in some cases comment on, certain types of projects occurring within a region. Legislation has been raised since 1979 to allow RPOs to either comment on projects of regional significance or actually approve them, but in neither case has such authority been granted. The committee believes that allowing RPOs to comment on such projects would provide a broader perspective on development that occurs in one town, but has an impact beyond that town’s border, and those comments should be discussed in the context of the goals contained in the relevant Regional Plan of Development.

Regional Performance Incentive Program

Public Act 07-239 established a Regional Performance Incentive Program with an allocation of \$8.6 million to support regional cooperation. Under the act, RPOs are encouraged to submit proposals for joint provision of services that are currently provided by towns within the region of the RPO but not currently provided on a regional basis. There has been widespread interest in the program, with 11 of the 15 RPOs submitting proposals and 129 towns participating in one or more of them. Several other states in the Northeast also operate similar programs. The program review committee believes the idea is a good one, but a few modifications should be made in the existing program.

Recommendations

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee adopted the following recommendations:

- 1. All three types of Regional Planning Organizations currently allowed under Connecticut law -- Regional Planning Agencies, Regional Councils of Elected Officials, and Regional Councils of Governments -- should continue to be authorized.**
- 2. Chapter 50, Part IV, of the Connecticut General Statutes shall be amended to add a definition of the term “Regional Planning Organization.” The definition shall specify that the term collectively includes Regional Planning Agencies, Regional Councils of Elected Officials, and Regional Councils of Governments established under the provisions of Chapters 50 and 127 of the statutes.**
- 3. C.G.S. Sec. 4-124h shall be amended to specify that a legally established Regional Council of Elected Officials can exercise all of the powers of a Regional Council of Governments as defined in Chapter 50 of the statutes.**

4. **Regional Planning Agencies shall be required to establish a mechanism for meeting with the chief elected officials of their member towns at least quarterly to communicate information about region-wide issues. The mechanism shall be established by January 1, 2009.**
5. **At least every 20 years, the Office of Policy and Management shall conduct an analysis of the boundaries of the state-defined logical planning areas in Connecticut and adopt new boundaries, if appropriate, based on that analysis. As part of its review, OPM shall develop criteria that will examine the influence of urban centers on neighboring towns in the context of current trends related to economic development and the environment, including characteristics such as housing patterns, employment levels, commuting patterns for the most widely held job classifications in the state, traffic patterns on major roadways, local perceptions of social and historic ties, and environmental considerations. OPM shall also include a measure that takes into consideration the size of the proposed regions (e.g., the number of towns, total population, and/or total square mileage), with the goal of establishing a minimum size for logical planning areas.**

The first analysis of the regions under this new system should be completed by October 1, 2009, with any revision of boundaries taking effect by July 1, 2010.

6. **In preparing the 2010 revision of the State Plan of Conservation and Development, the Office of Policy and Management shall:**
 - **for each policy contained in the plan:**
 - **assign a priority to it;**
 - **provide an estimate of the level of funding needed to implement it and identify the potential source(s) of funding;**
 - **set time-frame(s) for implementation; and**
 - **identify the entity or entities responsible for implementation;**
 - **for each of the six growth management principles, include a minimum of three benchmarks, one of which shall be financial, to measure progress towards implementation of the plan.**
7. **The Office of Policy and Management shall develop criteria for the uniform review of Regional Plans of Development submitted to it in order to determine whether they are consistent with the State Plan of Conservation and Development.**
8. **The name of the Regional Plan of Development shall be changed to the Regional Plan of Conservation and Development.**
9. **Regional Planning Organizations shall be given the statutory authority to comment on “projects of regional significance” that will be located in one town but will impact other towns in the region, or that are located in a town in another region but the town is contiguous to the region. The criteria for comment shall include analysis of the project’s compliance with the Regional Development Plan as well as other issues the Regional Planning Organizations believe are critical to the analysis. Notice shall be provided to a Regional Planning Organization not later than 30 days before the public**

hearing to be held by the town where the project will be located. The RPO shall study any such proposal and shall report its findings and recommendations to the zoning commission at or before the hearing. The report of the RPO shall be advisory, but it shall be made a part of the record of such hearing. If the RPO does not submit a report at or before the hearing, it shall be presumed that it does not disapprove of the project.

The Office of Policy and Management, in consultation with the Interagency Steering Council established by Executive Order No. 15, shall develop regulations that define the term “projects of regional significance” and the criteria that would initiate a review of such projects by a Regional Planning Organization. The criteria used to define “projects of regional significance” shall address, but not be limited to, such factors as project location, type, (such as energy, transportation, major infrastructure, water, or open space), and scope (size).

10. The Regional Performance Incentive Program shall:

- be established as an ongoing program;
- include criteria to be developed by OPM for evaluating proposals;
and
- give a preference to proposals that encompass region-wide efforts.

Based on the review of applications submitted in December 2007, the Office of Policy and Management should develop proposed substitute language for operation of the program in the future if necessary to overcome barriers identified as preventing projects of a regional nature from being established.