



**TESTIMONY
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CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF SMALL TOWNS (COST)
BEFORE THE PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 23, 2009**

The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) supports **HB-6389, An Act Concerning Regionalism.**

Connecticut's small towns and cities support initiatives to encourage voluntary regional cooperation to provide programs to meet the needs of local residents and businesses in a more efficient, cost-effective manner. As Connecticut's small towns and cities struggle to do more with less, many communities are exploring new opportunities to share resources to meet these growing needs. Programs such as the Regional Incentive Performance Grant program have been very successful in encouraging regional projects. The state should continue to fund these programs and make them more flexible to encourage even greater regional cooperation.

Interlocal Agreements

COST supports efforts to eliminate duplicative review processes by allowing cooperating towns to select one counsel to review and approve contracts and authorize a lead town to administer purchase or service agreements. This will remove some of the barriers associated with developing regional programs.

We do believe there should be some discretion afforded to OPM to fund projects that may not meet the threshold outlined in Section 2 of the bill. Due to the geographic location and lack of planning resources and staff in Connecticut's small towns, it is not always feasible or logistically possible to have at least three towns with a combined population of 50,000 or four or more town participate in a project. We therefore recommend that this population requirement be eliminated and that OPM be given the discretion to be more flexible in approving projects to ensure that worthy projects with fewer towns/lower combined populations participating are not shut out of the process.

State Support for Shared Capital Expenditures

COST strongly supports Section 3 of the bill which provides state support for the shared purchase of capital equipment, which will be very helpful in fostering regional

efficiencies. Many small towns are finding it difficult to absorb the cost of new/replacement equipment needed to perform critical town services, such as plowing, mowing and fire trucks, etc. This provision will certainly encourage towns to work together on a regional basis to provide these services.

State-Municipal Cooperation

In addition to fostering regional cooperation between towns, Connecticut should look at ways of improving cooperation between the state and towns to share services. For example, towns should be eligible for reimbursement for plowing some of the state roads. Or, if the state is building a sand/salt shed in a town, the town should be eligible to share the use and cost of building and maintaining the sand/salt shed so that the town doesn't have to build a separate one.

Role of the Regional Planning Organizations

Although not addressed in this bill, COST believes regional planning organizations should be given the opportunity to strengthen their ability to help towns explore opportunities for regional programs and assist them in applying for grant programs. In addition, the RPO's could act as a mediator to resolve any implementation issues and to ensure that the towns stay on task in implementing the grant. RPO's should also be given the resources needed to develop best management practices and assist towns with negotiating and drafting shared services agreements to facilitate regional cooperation.

Planning Assistance

For small towns, pursuing Smart Growth goals pose certain challenges because they lack the staff and resources needed to undertake the kind of planning envisioned under Smart Growth. We therefore recommend programs to assist towns in pursuing regional programs by providing technical assistance in such areas as research and planning, comprehensive plan development, zoning ordinances, and public participation programs; organizing and conducting training workshops and retreats for councils, commissions, boards, and citizens groups.

Adequate Resources for Regional Planning Organizations

While COST recognizes the extreme fiscal distress that the State of Connecticut is under, we nevertheless oppose the Governor's cuts to RPO's that are contained in her biennial budget proposal. It is totally incongruous from a policy standpoint to promote the expansion of regionalism on the one hand, while at the same time proposing cuts to the very organizations that are key to undertaking most of these regional initiatives.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please contact me at 860-676-0770 or brussell@ctcost.org with any questions.