



State of Connecticut

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STATE CAPITOL

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Testimony In Support of SB 229, SB 448, HB 5803, SB 452, and HB 5117

Appropriations Committee April 5, 2011

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Miner, and fellow members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of several bills that are on our public hearing agenda today.

HB 5148, An Act Redefining Terms of the Spending Cap

This bill stipulates that both chambers of the General Assembly must implement the state's constitutional spending cap, as they are required to do by a constitutional amendment that Connecticut's voters passed overwhelmingly 19 years ago. To do this, the General Assembly must vote to define the terms relating to the spending cap, and this bill suggests definitions for those terms.

My support for this bill extends to the sixteen other bills on today's agenda which require implementation of the constitutional spending cap. Several, like HB 5148, suggest definitions of the terms, while others do not. All require implementation.

Connecticut does have a statutory spending cap. Changing a statute can be done by the General Assembly alone, while amending the constitution demands the direct participation of voters. A statute does not carry the weight of a constitutional provision.

I introduced this bill because I believe that it is unacceptable not to act on the clearly expressed mandate of the state's voters. The state constitution is the linchpin of our representative government. If our legislative body is permitted to ignore a vote on a constitutional amendment, then its accountability to the citizens it represents is seriously in question. Connecticut's citizens voted 4 to 1 in favor of a constitutional spending cap. It is the General Assembly's duty to implement it.

SB 229, An Act Concerning Certain Agreements or Stipulations Required to be Approved by the General Assembly

This bill requires that both chambers of the General Assembly vote on all state employee collective bargaining agreements. Because this bill would require strict oversight of these agreements by the legislature, I believe that it will lead to greater accountability on the part of all legislators regarding the state's financial obligations to its employees.

SB 448, An Act Concerning the State Employees Retirement Commission

This bill requires that the State Employees Retirement Commission adopt a more rigorous process for its oversight of pension funds. I support it because I believe it will lead to improved management of the retirement system and allow the General Assembly to spot potential problems in a more timely manner so that it can, if appropriate, take action.

HB 5803, An Act Freezing State and Municipal Employees' Wages

This bill allows both the state and its municipalities to freeze wages of, respectively, state and municipal employees during periods of high unemployment. I support it because I know from experience in town government that towns, and their taxpayers, often face untenable budgetary situations in periods of sharp economic decline that occur shortly after they have signed employment contracts under very favorable economic conditions. When this happens, revenue shortfalls and the inability to raise taxes due to the economic environment make it difficult to fulfill contractual wage increases without cutting services or jobs or both.

SB 452, An Act Concerning State Mandates

This bill stipulates that no legislation that creates or enlarges a state mandate on municipalities be passed without a two-thirds vote in each chamber of the General Assembly. I support this bill, and in fact introduced a similar one, HB 5255, because I believe that our towns are in need of immediate relief from unfunded mandates. State mandates impose uniform regulations on 169 different towns that each have unique financial situations, forms of government, and priorities. Our town governments have worked hard during a long period of economic distress to manage their finances well and to provide essential services to taxpayers. The state should make every effort to remove obstacles from their path and to help them succeed.

HB 5117, An Act Concerning Portions of the State Budget Appropriating Aid to Municipalities

This bill requires the General Assembly to make appropriations for aid to municipalities not later than March first in any calendar year. Most towns establish their budgets and set their tax rates by April or May of each year. To do this, they need to be able to project revenues accurately. State aid is a major component of their revenues. If they do not have accurate information on this component, it is difficult for them to be effective in setting their tax rates. The state's budget is often not established before early June, if not later. The towns need their revenue information much earlier.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit testimony on these important bills.