



**Testimony of John Elsesser
on Behalf of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Appropriations Committee Forum
March 7, 2012**

My name is John Elsesser and I'm the Town Manager of the Town of Coventry, a community of about 12,500 people located in Tolland County. I also serve as an Officer on the Executive Committee of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns' Board of Directors. I'd like to thank Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Committee for giving us the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today on the Governor's proposed budget and its impact on smaller towns and cities.

COST applauds Governor Malloy for continuing his commitment to maintaining current levels of funding for the Town Aid Road Program (TAR), Local Capital Improvement Program (LoCIP), Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP), Main Street Investment Fund and Clean Water Fund. These programs have been successful in assisting towns in maintaining roads and bridges, supporting economic development initiatives and protecting water resources - all of which are vital to our small towns and cities and the state's overall economy.

We are particularly pleased that the Governor's proposed budget includes funding to reactivate the Local Bridge program, which COST members have identified as a top priority in its 2012 Legislative Platform.

Towns and cities in Connecticut are responsible for maintaining more than 3,400 bridges and culverts. Recognizing the huge costs associated with constructing and maintaining bridges, the legislature created the Local Bridge program in 1984. However, funding for the program was eliminated in 2009 to help address the state's budget deficit. Although federal funding and other state funds are available for a limited number of projects, towns are struggling to find ways to maintain bridges. The Federal program also excludes bridges under 20 foot spans whereas the State program covered spans of 6 feet or greater.

According to an analysis prepared by the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), over a third of Connecticut municipal bridges are considered either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. We therefore urge your support for reactivating and modernizing this once-robust program. A modification to the program under consideration in the Transportation Committee will allow the program to work to leverage Federal Bridge funds where applicable and allow towns to make necessary

repairs in a more cost-efficient manner. We also ask lawmakers to help nudge the various state agencies to streamline the permitting process since it can take up to five years to gain approval to proceed, adding unnecessary costs and jeopardizing public safety. We also appreciate the loan provisions which will reduce local borrowing costs.

In addition to STEAP, the Town Aid Road program, and LoCIP programs – which have been critical to maintaining local infrastructure and supporting economic development - COST is urging support for the Governor's proposal to include municipal facilities in the state's plan to expand broadband access to create a reliable data network. Municipal governments need to be able to connect to vital public health and safety networks, communicate with government agencies and constituents and access and submit electronic forms and reports required under state and federal law. This network will encourage new forms of inter-town cooperation. (See attached concept plan.)

Just a side note on Town Aid for Roads. Coventry is celebrating our 300th birthday this year, so we have looked back on some of our past leaders. Dr. William Higgins is known as the "Father of the Dirt Road Bill" which is the predecessor of Town Aid for Roads. Serving as our State Representative, Dr. Higgins was successful in getting the Dirt Road Bill passed in 1931 and for six years \$18 million was funded for this program until the State modified it and took a portion for "Other Than Highway Purposes." The Connecticut Rural Roads Improvement Association challenged this in court and won, keeping the money for roads. If this \$18 million were adjusted for inflation it would now be worth \$268.4 million. So we request that the \$30 million for TAR remain, recognizing that in the "good ole days" roads were a higher priority.

While the Governor's proposed budget maintains funding for key municipal aid programs and even increases ECS funding, years of flat funding of these programs and cuts to other programs are beginning to take their toll. Towns are struggling to provide critical services to residents but escalating wage and benefit costs for municipal workers, increased taxes and fees and increased costs for products and services are making this very difficult. We therefore urge lawmakers to take a hard look at adopting meaningful mandate relief and refrain from adopting any new unfunded mandates.

COST also appreciates the Governor's continued support for incentive-based initiatives that encourage voluntary efforts to regionalize municipal services. Declining municipal revenues have put increased pressure on the property tax. But, as is often the case, there is a silver lining. Increased interest in regional efforts has created several innovative products and systems from which the Town of Coventry has been able to benefit.

For example, the Town of Coventry and the Town of South Windsor have entered into an agreement for Coventry to contract for IT computer services including GIS expertise. Coventry will have access to South Windsor employees, who will provide computer and network repair and maintenance services and long-term planning guidance, which will save several thousand dollars. We also will continue work with the Windham Council of Governments on a regional GIS hosting service including upgraded on-line assessment information. This allows us to drop a more pricey contract with our revaluation firm.

Working with three other towns, our Town Clerk was able to bid for software services for the land and records management system, which will allow on-line searches and many enhanced services. The multi-town bid saved substantial time and money. This year we have an application pending for a three-town economic development consultant to leverage the potential of the UConn Technology Park. Clearly, targeted, voluntary regional cooperation can save money and improve public services. We ask the State to help give us the tools to develop creative and efficient solutions.

Some towns, however, are finding that efforts to regionalize bump up against existing state law or collective bargaining agreements. Several towns, for example, are exploring sharing the services of fire marshals and building officials. However, because state law provides that fire marshals are appointed for life as opposed to the four year term that building officials serve, the towns are unable to regionalize these services. We need to begin to make hard decisions about how to remove these barriers to regionalization.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share the thoughts and concerns of Connecticut's smaller towns.