



ESTUARY TRANSIT DISTRICT

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www.9TownTransit.com

17 Industrial Park Road, Suite 6
Centerbrook, CT 06409

P 860.510.0429
F 860.395.0248

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Dear Members of the Transportation Committee:

The purpose of this testimony is to express the Estuary Transit District's strong objection to raised bill S.B. 112. We believe that at best, this bill would set a precedent of diluting municipal control of transit districts and at worst, would create an empire that would potentially usurp local control over three Connecticut transit districts.

Chapter 103 (a) allows for the creation of transit districts in Connecticut. The legislation allows municipalities to join together to form a district with the approval of their legislative body, and gives each member municipality a population weighted vote on the board of directors. Any municipality with a population of 25,000 to 100,000 receives two board members, and a municipality with a population of over 100,000 receives three members. The board of directors governs the affairs of the district and sets the budget and member town dues. As no dedicated funding source is provided for by the district, member town dues are one of the primary sources of operating funds.

S.B. 112 alters Chapter 103 (a) giving Southeast Connecticut Council of Governments unprecedented power over certain transit districts. The COG would appoint three board members to the district's board and have its Executive Director sit as an ex-officio member. In addition, the council would receive certain executive branch type powers, such as approval of the district manager, auditor and budget. These powers would not only give the council 25% of the board's votes, but also absolute veto power over critical items, such as the budget.

Giving such power to any council of governments is concerning for several reasons. First, COGs have no financial stake in the districts, yet would have absolute control over the budget. This would enable it to create unrealistic budgets and leave the member towns with the responsibility of procuring necessary funding. Additionally, giving power to the COG takes control away from the municipalities which are held accountable by their citizens regarding funding and services.

Finally, COGs are often much larger than the transit districts. In the case of Southeast Connecticut COG, there are 22 member municipalities, or tribes, but only six members of the Southeast Area Transit

District. This would mean that the 16 municipalities that are not members of the transit district would now have an inordinate amount of power over that district.

For all the reasons that this bill is bad policy, the most disturbing facet is the language giving Southeast Connecticut COG these overreaching powers over "any transit district serving the municipalities within the boundaries of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments' planning region". Since the Norwich/New London area is the urban center of Eastern Connecticut, a total of three transit districts serve one or more of the towns in Southeastern Connecticut COG's planning region. This would include Southeast Area Transit District (SEAT), Estuary Transit District (ETD) and Windham Region Transit District (WRTD). The latter two only serve one and two such municipalities, respectively, and have no member towns represented in the Southeastern Connecticut COG. In fact, both ETD and WRTD each have their own RPA and COG representing their member towns.

S.B. 112 therefore represents a hostile attempt for the Southeastern Connecticut COG to take control of two rural transit districts primarily serving municipalities which are not members of the Southeastern Connecticut COG. These extreme powers would be in the hands of an agency which is entirely controlled by towns which are not members of the transit district; robbing the member towns of their local control in favor of a distant urban regional agency. It would threaten the character of the two rural districts, whose needs are much different than the urban area served by SEAT, and silence the voice of the rural users who desperately depend on these services every day.

A recent article in the Day of New London cited Southeastern Connecticut COG's motive as being that of oversight in the light of recent issues at SEAT. We believe that the current Chapter 103 (a) gives the necessary control of transit districts to the member municipalities as it is currently written. The member municipalities have complete authority over their appointment to the board of directors of the district, and are free to change their choice of director at any time. This was done successfully in our district four years ago when ETD faced financial and leadership troubles. The member municipalities removed several board members, and many First Selectmen joined the board and led it to a path of fiscal stability and ridership growth of 60%. Three years later, ETD was selected from over 4,000 member transit agencies as the Community Transportation Association of America Rural System of the Year for 2011.

The board of the Estuary Transit District the Transportation Committee members to oppose S.B. 112 and keep Chapter 103 (a) in its current form. ETD believes that our transit district is an example of the success of regionalism, and that such success is achieved when control is kept at the local level. In addition, the seventeen towns of the Connecticut River Valley Council of Elected Officials voted to oppose this bill at their meeting on February 29, 2012.

Respectfully Submitted,



Joseph Comerford
Executive Director
Estuary Transit District