

## **Raised Bill No. 6629, An Act Concerning Regionalism in Connecticut**

My name is J. H. Torrance Downes, Senior Planner at the Lower CT River Valley Council of Governments and principal staff for the CT River Gateway Commission. I am reading this testimony on behalf of Ms. Jean Davies, AICP, Assistant Director of the Council of Governments. She is unable to be here today because of a family medical emergency.

I am speaking to you today as a witness and active participant in a regional boundary change and merger of two Regional Planning Agencies into a Council of Governments, a planner with 26 years experience in city, town and regional government, and a geographer with an interest in Connecticut's political geography, boundaries and the political affinities associated with those boundaries. I have been asked to represent the professional staff of the newly-merged Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments, staff with over 100 years of experience in local, regional and state government in Connecticut.

Our testimony today relates to the origins, construction, and implications of House Bill 6629 which promotes the dissolution of an historical boundary system of Regional Planning Organizations that have been in place for approximately 50 years. The bill also appears to place a new emphasis on the administration of regional services. There are two aspects of this bill that are of concern.

The first is the basic construct of the Bill's intended purpose which is to create more efficient government, cost benefits, and improved coordination for service delivery to the general public. The proposal is to achieve this through a simplified redrawing of boundaries to eliminate several regional planning organizations and merge towns together into eight prescribed new Councils of Government.

From close observation and participation in Connecticut's test case in the Lower Connecticut River Valley, expect the political and actual costs to far exceed your expectations. The 17 towns of the Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments have made it look easy. The merger of the

17 towns was ten years in the making. It was “shovel ready” when the idea for reconstructing regional boundaries emerged several years ago.

The ingredients to the success included an existing affinity between the 17 towns of the two regions, the dedicated work and time contributed by the Chief Elected Officials in those towns, committed and loyal staff from both agencies who put their heart and soul into the mental and physical constructs of the merger. That said, the merger process consumed *and continues to consume* immeasurable amounts of time in the form of new agreements, new operational procedures, financial procedures, close out audits, consolidation of office systems. Now add in the boundary merger of the existing Metropolitan Planning Organization. Apparently, we are the first national merger of two MPOs. Mergers have been attempted several times, but they ended up becoming too politically charged and failed. The Lower CT River Valley, almost 9 months after the Council of Governments was formed, will take action in two weeks to merge the MPOs. It was not a simple political process, and it will continue for some years to be a logistically challenging bureaucratic process requiring all new Regional Transportation Plans, Financial contracts, Unified Planning Work Programs, Agreements and the list goes on.

If this bill is not carefully scrutinized, expect what may be political and financial costs to the towns and the state. The historic fifty year relationship between the towns within existing regional planning organizations created a long standing element of trust and cooperation that has transcended politics to create many positive and cost saving initiatives. Dissolution of those boundaries will at a minimum create 5-10 years of work on the part of the towns and the state with associated financial and political costs. It is our experience that a small well planned project or initiative takes five years of research and planning, public acceptance and construction and another five years to be able to measure the performance benefits to the public.

The second aspect of the bill that is of major concern is the implications to land use, economic, transportation, and conservation planning in the State of Connecticut. By simply re-designating the new eight organizations as Councils of Government, the Bill diminishes the relative importance of

coordinated state, regional, and local planning. The regional planning organizations are the state's long range planning vehicles, in the virtual absence of an adequately-staffed State planning office. The staff at OPM does the best they can with the limited resources they are given, but the bulk of the state's long range planning and coordination is done by the current regional planning organizations. If new administrative responsibilities significantly reduce the time and resources required to address the planning component, current coordination efforts and efficiency will be lost. There seems to be little understanding of the benefits derived from the present regional system. The effectiveness and efficiency of the current organizations has never been evaluated. In recent years, state financial support for this planning function has been drastically reduced by virtual elimination of the state-grants-in-aid. Funds for specific regional projects, such as the RPIP program, do not support the basic work of the regional agencies.

House Bill 6629 calls for a significant change in the way we organize government in Connecticut. While its purpose is well-intended, there are also negative consequences from the proposed changes. Please take the time to evaluate both the benefits and the costs, and to preserve the good aspects of our current regional planning system.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jean Davies, Assistant Director, on behalf of the Professional Staff of the Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments