

NECCOG

northeastern connecticut council of governments



Testimony Regrading

Raised Bill 6629

An Act Concerning Regionalism in Connecticut

made before the

Planning and Development Committee

March 18, 2013

The Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (NECCOG) - representing the towns of **Ashford, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Eastford, Killingly, Plainfield, Pomfret, Putnam, Sterling, Thompson, Union and Woodstock** - supports **Raised Bill 6629, An Act Concerning Regionalism in Connecticut** and urges its favorable consideration by this Committee and the General Assembly.

The primary purpose of Raised Bill 6629 is to establish **defendable and sustainable regional boundaries** in Connecticut as a means to foster regionalism. Currently Connecticut has 14 Regional Planning Organizations - eight of these are councils of government, 2 councils of elected officials and 4 regional planning agencies. However, there are additionally many of other regions or divisions (public safety, human services, health, labor, etc.) within our state with the purpose of providing services - some of these are generated from state or federal agencies and others are products of our municipalities. The net result is a fragmentation of service delivery that leads to inefficiencies and increased costs. ***“Regional teamwork, rather than regional fragmentation, is essential.”*** It is NECCOG’s position that the most effective regional format is the council of governments approach - where the local chief elected official has the responsibility for regional actions and results.

The issue of boundaries for RPOs has been discussed for many years without resolution and appears to be an impediment to moving forward on the broader issue of the regional delivery of services. OPM has been charged to study regional boundaries and to make recommendations for any changes their study deems appropriate. Unfortunately, their work has been delayed several times and they have not been given the resources to do what such a study involves.

¹ Regionalist Paper No. 7 - The Importance of Regionalism in the Global Economy: Why Must We Adjust? Ray Taylor, Board member, Future of Hampton Roads, December 2005

We want to make very clear that **NECCOG as a region works**. NECCOG views itself not as a regional planning organization - but rather as a **regional service organization**. We are diversified in terms of the services offered, sized as an organization so that it allows for full participation and we are financially stable.

Our concerns during the course of the discussion about a reconfiguration of regional boundaries is that the regions will either be too large or be a merger of towns with dissimilar needs. The relative size (number of towns) is a critical issue. Our current region contains 12 member towns. This number of CEOs allows us to have thoughtful discussion (one of the strengths of the organization and where much is accomplished in terms of the issues raised and relationships formed) at our monthly and special meetings. It is our belief that any membership number much over twenty would diminish that effectiveness of the organization and make it more bureaucratic and less CEO driven. It is also important that regions have members with similar needs. NECCOG is the only example of a region where a town has transferred its membership -- a key reason for this was that the town (Ashford) believed it had more in common with NECCOG than its former region. In our own discussions as to what a logical division of the state should be we kept coming back to the eight counties - as proposed in HB 6629.

Connecticut's 14 RPOs offer a wide range of regional programs and approaches - many more than is probably understood. NECCOG as a region has embraced comprehensive regionalism for many years. Because of that history - we know it works. Currently, we offer a range of programs - including: Paramedic Intercept (the only such regional program offered by a COG), Town Administrative Audits, Regional Engineering, GIS, Transit District Administration, Animal Services (the largest regional program of this type in the State and the only COG based animal services program) and the states only Regional Property Revaluation Program. Each of these programs shares the common threads that they result in better services at reduced costs and were generated from the member towns.

Specifically regarding Raised Bill 6629:

- ▶ We believe that each region should be, as the Bill proposes (*multiple lines throughout the bill and which result in the overall length of the Bill*), a **council of governments**. For regionalism to work - the regions must be under the control of the respective chief-elected officials of that region. These are the persons most accountable locally and therefore it is logical that they be given this responsibility. Additionally, the regions in Connecticut need to embrace (as many do) the full spectrum of issues and potential services their towns may require. We believe that the local CEOs are in the best position to see that this happens.
- ▶ NECCOG supports the **delineation of councils of governments based on the eight county boundaries** of our state (*Lines 80-89*).
- We **do not favor** any attempt to reinstitute county government. Such a change is not needed or necessary for effective regional programs.

- **Counties are the basic regional delineation used in the United States** - but not in Connecticut or New England. We are the odd approach and it is not easily understood by policy makers in Washington or its various funding agencies. A wide range of grants, programs, disaster declarations, Census, and more use the county as their point of reference within states. Connecticut, we believe would be well served to follow the national model. Our current system is one where we have 169 municipal governments (plus several additional semiautonomous subsets of these municipalities) and a myriad of other state divisions (some regional - some not) with little or no relationship to logic. **What we have is fragmentation.** This fragmentation hurts in the efficient delivery of services from the state and municipal levels and ultimately is not a cost-effective means to deliver such services. A common service base - the county - would bring uniformity to our state for the delivery of services and save monies at the local and state level. While the county approach does not fully conform to the existing RPO boundaries, it is (we would argue) the most defensible and advantageous alternative.
- The Bill also deletes the OPM mandated RPO boundary study (currently due in January 2014). This study or one similar to it has been delayed previously. To our knowledge this study has not been started and OPM does not have the resources to conduct the study as directed. It is our view that another delay is not in the best interest of moving regionalism forward.
- ▶ The Bill provides that towns abutting county lines (*Lines 90 - 92*) will have the option to determine their ultimate affiliation within the proposed county boundary delineation. We support this provision: We believe it is important **that towns have the ability to have the choice to affiliate as they determine** is in their best interest. It may be the case that in some areas of the state where the consolidation of existing RPOs to a single county is not viewed as the best approach that an alternative be pursued. As we understand it, in some areas of the country multiple independent COGs make up a larger county based COG - which is focused on a common issue such as transportation (metropolitan planning organizations) and the individual COGs set their own agendas related to other issues.
- ▶ NECCOG supports the provision in the Bill (*Lines 93-94*) allowing **two or more county based COGs to merge as a single COG**. If this is the desire of those towns - such a determination should be respected by the State.
- ▶ The bill makes clear (*Lines 96-120*) that these newly formed COGs would have **broad scope and authority to address the many needs** that a given region may require. This is important so that there is no doubt as to the authority of these COGs to address issues of all types.
- ▶ Fundamental to the success of these new regions will be **adequate and predictable funding**. This is provided by tapping the Regional Performance Incentive Account. The Bill would provide for transitional funds (*Lines 132-134*) and

annual operational funds of two-hundred thousand dollars, plus one-dollar per capita within a given region. The RPI fund can cover these costs as well as funding projects to explore new regional ventures.

- ▶ **Section 5 (Lines 266-405)** of the Bill establishes three pilot programs - including one involving the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. **We ask that this section be removed from the Bill.** While we believe each of the proposed pilot projects have value - the fundamental focus of this legislation should be on the logical formation of regional boundaries.

No doubt this bill is controversial and will be opposed by several RPOs. NECCOG understands this and respects their positions and concerns. If the Bill were written another way - we might also be calling for its defeat or major modification. However, the issue needs resolution to allow Connecticut to move forward with comprehensive regionalism. By this we mean taking programs and services now offered through various state agencies and make their delivery areas conform to a common service region. In some cases this may mean transferring programs to regions. It will also mean looking closer at services now provided individually by municipalities (including education) and how those services may be better provided regionally. Connecticut's current budget situation requires that we take full advantage of the possibilities and opportunities of regionalism.

Clearly, HB 6629 ties in with the work of the newly reconstituted MORE (Municipal Opportunities and Regional Efficiencies) Commission. It would, we believe, be beneficial for the concept raised in this Bill to be brought forward to the MORE Commission for their insight before final action is taken on the Bill by the General Assembly. This will allow for further discussion and refinement and hopefully a resolution to this long-standing issue.

At NECCOG we know regionalism works. We practice it each day and see its results. If the regional boundary issue is an impediment to moving Connecticut forward to embrace to opportunities of regionalism - we ask that you move this legislative proposal forward so that we may move forward.

We are fully prepared to work with the Committee in any positive way regarding this issue. Thank you for your consideration of our position.

For more information, please contact:

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