



Valley Council of Governments

Serving the Communities of Ansonia, Derby, Seymour & Shelton

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Testimony of the Valley Council of Governments to the Planning & Development Committee

March 18, 2013

Messer's Chairmen & Members of the Committee,

My name is Rick Dunne and I am the Executive Director of the Valley Council of Governments (VCOG).

Today I am before you to testify to my general support for:
Raised H.B. No. 6629 "An Act Concerning Regionalism In Connecticut"

Located in the Lower Naugatuck Valley VCOG is one of Connecticut's 14 Regional Planning Organizations and with 4 municipalities and 86,000 people, our smallest urban region. Together with the Greater Bridgeport Regional Council VCOG comprises one of Connecticut's 11 Metropolitan Planning Organizations, the GBVMPO. Our MPO, together with the MPOs for the Southwest Regional Planning Agency and parts of the MPOs covering the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials, the Council of Governments of the Central Naugatuck Valley and the South Central Regional Council of Governments comprise The Bridgeport/Stamford Urbanized Area, which is a federally-recognized TMA or Transportation Management Area. Personally I think the entire TMA should function as a single Council of Governments for the Southwest quadrant of Connecticut. With the rededication of the RPI funding as proposed under the bill they will certainly be more efficient entities that can be more responsive more productive and more capable of producing results for greater numbers of people.

You will notice that I referred to the regional boundaries by their transportation designations and not the historic county boundaries as contained in the current draft of HB 6629. This is because the federal Urbanized Areas have real data behind them- they are based on where people live and work and how and where they travel between those two points. This is critically important information that determines a market- the area that real people use when living their lives.

So while I support much of what this bill sets out to accomplish, including making regions fewer and larger, I would strongly suggest that the Committee reconsider using the county boundaries and instead use a method of consolidating existing regions with federal urbanized areas and Transportation Management Areas as your centering guide to accomplish the goal and in that way remove any argument that your method is arbitrary. Boundaries also need to take into consideration natural and existing relationships and should not sever cohesive areas. As the CRCOG 2020 Policy regarding boundaries states: "...it's important that each region be sized and organized so that it is sensitive to the range of communities it includes, from small rural towns to central cities, but is large enough to be viable as an entity that can produce meaningful services."

In total, this bill needs to be part of a larger effort in which we need to re-think the scale at which Connecticut conducts business. For Connecticut to be more attractive and successful we must right-size our costs- and that means we must *right-scale* the way we deliver services to give us a fighting chance at becoming a competitive state. Getting regions to the right scale is a good start. We like to deliver services 169 ways- if we can get to a few really efficient regions that will be a network that every state agency can tap into for efficient program delivery- and that in turn will help to make the agencies more efficient. By consolidating regions we can open the doors to better cooperative relationships with state agencies and give them a reason to devolve funding and responsibility for a number of major programs to capable and efficient partners. This would benefit the state by allowing them to reorganize their own operations to focus away from the local and regional level and toward the state-level efforts where they can focus on efficiency.

Our current system is incredibly expensive and disorganized, producing far less than should be expected at too high a cost. This is true not just of the state but of the current regions. As compared to RPOs outside of CT we produce very little in the way of meaningful results whether it is planning products, delivered services, projects designed or just the power to deliver projects that comes with operating on an appropriate scale. But with fewer regions and real and dependable funding like the formula proposed from the RPI grant larger, more professional staffs would be able to perform more skilled tasks whether in the area of planning, human resources or other service delivery for both our member municipalities and the state. Only a few of our regions today are capable of performing real modeling or analysis, or conducting high-level planning activities that lead to meaningful project implementation. Larger and more robust regions capable of better division of responsibilities, qualified to manage more substantial programs and budgets would benefit our municipalities by giving them greater control over the outcomes of these planning activities and would benefit the state by relieving it of the burden of overseeing too many small agencies that are incapable of performing anything more than rudimentary planning tasks. I know. My agency is one of these.

In return, any RPO that insists on substantial funding and greater autonomy should be able to meet two basic tests: 1) Have a staff capable of performing the complex and technically challenging responsibilities that state & federal programs demand; large enough and diverse enough to support basic planning and administration functions as well as more specialized functions, and 2) Serve a Metropolitan Planning Area of at least 200,000 people as part of its service area. Such a scale is needed to find a balance between creating regions large enough to achieve the efficiencies of larger organizations with the convenience and local presence offered by smaller regions. How many regions today are capable of performing sophisticated travel demand modeling, traffic engineering, performance measurement or project design and delivery? Do we all retain sufficient knowledge of Sustainable Development Policy and Practice, Economic Development Planning, Public Safety and Emergency Response Planning and ability in GIS mapping, Transit and Solid Waste Management among other diverse subject areas that would benefit our towns and the state on a region-wide basis as they all struggle with limited financial resources and increasing demands for services?

Sadly, the answer today is no. but with fewer and larger regions dependably funded from existing resources we can all have that system very soon. I urge you to amend the boundary provision and pass HB 6629.

Thank you.