

TOWN OF WESTON, CONNECTICUT



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Office of the First Selectman

**TESTIMONY
GAYLE WEINSTEIN
FIRST SELECTMAN, TOWN OF WESTON
TO THE
PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 1, 2013**

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present testimony in support of various proposals to provide towns with relief from unfunded mandates.

I support the proposals to require any new mandate to be adopted by a 2/3 vote of the legislature. This will shine a much needed spotlight on the costs associated with proposed mandates and ensure that lawmakers carefully consider and weigh the impact of any proposed mandates on our towns and cities.

I also support HB-5530, AN ACT PERMITTING THE POSTING OF LEGAL NOTICES ON MUNICIPAL WEB SITES, HB-5532, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PUBLICATION OF LEGAL NOTICES and SB-143, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PUBLICATION OF NOTICE IN NEWSPAPERS, which would allow towns to post legal notices on their website instead of in print publications, which reflects the way that many people prefer to obtain information as well as reduce costs on our municipalities and 2) HB-5295 AN ACT CONCERNING THE POSSESSIONS OF EVICTED TENANTS, which would eliminate the mandate that requires towns to store the possessions of evicted tenants.

In addition to these proposals, I urge the committee to support legislation to address the need to more equitably fund the Municipal Employee Retirement System. When MERS was established, the State Legislature authorized The State Employees Retirement Commission (SERC) to increase contribution rates as necessary on the employer, but reserved the right to increase employees' contributions. In other words, while the employer share can quite easily be changed, it takes a legislative act to raise the employee's share. Extensive benefit enhancements in MERS were adopted by the Legislature in 2001 (Public Act 01-80). The costs associated with the addition of these enhanced benefits were passed on exclusively to the employer. Therefore, costs have skewed tremendously onto the municipalities.

In the past 12 years, SERC has increased contribution rates for municipalities participating in MERS 11 times, and the State Legislature has never increased the employee's share. In 2002, the Town contribution for non-public safety personnel was 2.75% and this July that will rise to 11.98% a 436 % increase. In 2002, the Town contribution for public safety personnel was 3.75% and will rise to 16.96% a 452 % increase in July.

A more dramatic shift is realized when you look at the change of contribution ratios over the past 10 years. In 2002, the employer-employee contribution ratio was 55% municipality/45% employee. In July, 2013, it will become 82% municipality/18% employee for all non public safety employees. For Police and Fire, the contribution ratios were 62%/38% in 2002 and will now be 88/12%. I do not believe that this is consistent with the original intent when the plan was established.

In order to offset these tremendous increases, we have been forced to reduce town services and lay off employees. 2 years ago, we had to reduce our land use department to four days a week, and every department has had some level of reduction over the past five years.

As you know, municipalities are under tremendous pressure to keep property taxes stable. This is particularly important to me because unemployment, usage of the Town's food pantry, and Social Service needs are all on the rise in Weston. Quite simply, we must keep property taxes stable so that our Senior Citizens and those facing financial difficulties can stay in Weston.

Please consider a modest increase in the employee contribution to help municipalities cope with these increases.