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March 11, 2016

Honorable Sen. Catherine Osten and Rep. Philip Miller, Co-Chairs
Planning and Development Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2100
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: Testimony Senate Bill No. 421

Dear Co-Chairs Osten and Miller:

I am writing in strong opposition to SB 421 *An Act Concerning Community Empowerment and the Neighborhood Assistance Act*.

The proposed bill would mandate the creation of Community Investment Boards in each municipality receiving MRSA and Pilot grants from the state of Connecticut. These Boards would act as a parallel legislative body in these municipalities, and in some instances neighborhoods, for the purposes of prioritizing how 65% of MRSA and PILOT grants are spent in a municipality. If the Community Investment Board and the municipal legislative body are unable to come to agreement on spending priorities, 30% of the MRSA and PILOT grants would be returned to the state.

Here is a summary of deficiencies and concerns that River COG has identified with this bill:

1. The bill presupposes that local governments in Connecticut, specifically municipal elected legislative bodies, are not able to adequately represent their communities for the purposes of prioritizing spending of state grants. It also assumes that local legislative bodies are not responsive and accountable to the breadth of community members and concerns. The need for Community Investment Boards is especially perplexing in municipalities with a town meeting form of government where all residents can participate equally.
2. The bill does not identify the number of Community Investment Board members required, how they are to be appointed or elected, and for how long they may serve. It is also unclear if Board members are required to be residents of the municipality, or just have business or property in the municipality.

3. The bill does not identify how the Community Investment Boards will make decisions or involve the public in their decision making process. The bill gives no assurance that they will provide a more transparent and inclusive process than what already exists.
4. What happens if the priorities of the Community Investment Board are not approved by a majority vote of the electorate of the municipality? Does that money also go back to the state?
5. The bill does not define what a neighborhood is for the purposes of requiring a Community Investment Board, nor does it explain how multiple neighborhood Community Investment Boards in a municipality will aggregate their recommendations into a single list to be ratified by the electorate. What if neighborhoods disagree? Does their 35% go back to the state?
6. Section 4 of the bill would direct OPM to solicit solutions to “specific urban area problems” from members of the public. If OPM “determines that a proposal is viable,” a pilot program shall be implemented by OPM in a municipality or neighborhood in the state. The member of the public or the organization that proposes a successful pilot would then be given a cash award. This concept needs far more detail and refinement in order to be implementable. The lack of specificity of what problems, in what urban areas is problematic. Furthermore, it is doubtful that OPM has the wherewithal to implement successful pilots with its current level of staffing.

Overall, this proposal seems to address specific issues, in a specific municipality where there may be a perception that the municipal legislative body does not reflect the community that they serve and represent. Although I cannot speak for all 169 municipalities, I can assure the Committee that the residents of the municipalities of the Lower Connecticut River Valley Region do not require such an alternative legislative process.

Respectfully submitted,



Samuel S. Gold, AICP

Executive Director