

March 11, 2016

Esteemed Chairs Osten and Miller,
Esteemed members of the Planning and Development Committee:

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) would like to share its comments on the following bills.

House Bill 5601, An Act Concerning the Connecticut Transportation Institute and a Study of School Transportation Efficiencies

WestCOG is interested in the study 5601 proposes; however, WestCOG does **not support** the use of regional performance incentive (RPI) account funds for this study. RPI funds are intended to be awarded to projects on a competitive basis, not dedicated as an earmark.

Regardless of its funding source, should the study this bill describes go forward, WestCOG would appreciate being involved as a project partner.

House Bill 5602, An Act Concerning Regionalism

In general, WestCOG **supports** measures that reduce procurement and purchasing costs. With regards to 5602, however: is the language under Section 1(b) intended to be broad? The section reads: “Any municipality may purchase equipment, supplies, materials, or services from a person who has a contract to sell such goods or services to other state governments, political subdivisions of the state, nonprofit organizations or public purchasing consortia... in accordance with the provisions of such a contract.”

It is not clear that a seller who gives a discounted rate to a charitable organization would give that same rate to a municipality; or that one across the country would voluntarily sell at the same rate to Connecticut municipalities as to his or her state. It is also not clear to us that such language, which would affect interstate commerce, would be constitutional.

House Bill 5603, An Act Concerning Regional Technology

WestCOG **opposes** adding a mandate to consider “the application and use of technology to enhance efficiencies, foster collaboration, increase transparency and access to information and to reduce costs” in plans of conservation and development (PoCD).

While WestCOG fully supports using technology to achieve these ends and is developing a regional IT services program, technologies such as electronic document management and VoIP do not belong in a land use plan, which is what a PoCD at its core is. Shoehorning a discussion of workflow and communications technology into such a document may yield more perplexity than progress. Addressing technology in a municipal plan is also likely to result in significant duplication of labor, given that cities and towns largely face identical challenges and opportunities in technology.

In our view, a more efficient—and more productive approach—would be to encourage the state’s COGs to undertake comprehensive technology plans on behalf of their regions.

House Bill 5604, An Act Concerning Regional Efficiencies

WestCOG **does not support** the use of a “regionalization evaluation tool” to “measure and assess the performance of and efficiencies achieved by each municipality and... board of education.” While performance and efficiency metrics would be a positive development, the bill as worded seems to imply that regionalization is necessary for performance and efficiency. If so, this is an unwarranted presupposition. Size and performance do not always go hand-in-hand, nor do size and efficiency. Small organizations can and sometimes do outperform larger ones. WestCOG would support the creation of evaluation tools that work under all scenarios (economies of scale, no scale effects, and diseconomies of scale).

Section 4 of 5604 is **unacceptable**. Unlike Section 3, which goes into effect only on enactment of future legislation, Section 4 goes into effect regardless of whether the MORE Commission’s recommendations are ever adopted. To allow an advisory commission to decide how the state allocates its funds without any review by the legislature is a bad precedent, and it is one that WestCOG **cannot support**. Spending should remain the prerogative of the General Assembly.

Senate Bill 331, An Act Establish a High-Speed Internet Service Pilot

WestCOG **strongly supports** the rollout of gigabit-speed Internet access in Connecticut. Efforts such as these are vital to economy of the state and a necessary complement to Connecticut’s vision for a best-in-class transportation system. (A state with uncongested highways and fast trains will not grow in the 21st century if its businesses and residents are still hooked up to 20th century Internet connections.)

In addition to supporting 331, we also urge you to consider reforms to state regulations, with the goal of creating a competitive market. States and countries that have undertaken telecommunications reforms to create open markets for Internet access have realized lower prices and faster service as a result of new competition.

Senate Bill 421, An Act Concerning Community Empowerment and the Neighborhood Assistance Act

WestCOG **strongly opposes** any mandate to create a “community investment board... comprised of... residents, business owners, religious leaders, community development corporation representatives, and community group representatives” in every municipality.

Such a board is unnecessary. In municipalities with town meetings, any interested person can take a direct role in town government, including determination of spending priorities, when they want. In those without meetings, interested persons have the opportunity to run for city or town council, serve on commissions, testify, and organize their fellow citizens (and many do!)

The additional requirement that large municipalities create one such board for “each neighborhood” raises the question: what is a neighborhood? Cities in Connecticut could end up with ten or more boards. Such fragmentation would dilute the impact of state

resources. (MRSA and PILOT funds would be divided between the municipality and the community boards, limiting the amount that could be targeted to any one project.)

While community boards may serve a function big cities, local control is alive and well here. Neither Connecticut nor its municipalities need a new level of neighborhood government.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis R. Pickering". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent horizontal line under the name.

Francis R. Pickering,
Executive Director