

History of Regional Planning Organizations

The following excerpts are taken from a Connecticut Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee document entitled "Staff Briefing: Connecticut's Regional Planning Organizations, September 18, 2007":

In Connecticut, state authorization for local planning and zoning began early in the 20th century. In 1917, towns were given authority to create town planning commissions to map and plan for public buildings, highways, streets, and building lines. In 1925, towns were authorized to establish zoning authorities to regulate the height and size of buildings, the proportion of a lot that could be occupied, and the size of yards and open-spaces.

By 1947, state law began requiring towns with planning commissions to adopt municipal plans of development. Each plan had to be based on studies of local physical, social, economic, and governmental conditions and be designed to promote coordinated development and the general welfare and prosperity of the people in the town. The plan could include planning commission recommendations regarding the most desirable use of land in the town, the most desirable population density, and the location of objects such as bridges, streets, airports, parks, public buildings, and utilities. In addition, the commission could make other recommendations it thought would be beneficial to the town.

In 1947, the General Assembly enacted legislation allowing two or more contiguous towns with planning commissions to form a Regional Planning Authority. Representation on the authority board would be proportional, with each member town getting two seats on the board and additional representatives if the town population exceeded 25,000 people. All town representatives were to be appointed by the local planning commission. The jurisdiction of each RPA would match the boundaries of the towns that actually joined the RPA.

Interest in a formal regional approach to planning and the establishment of RPAs continued growing in Connecticut, but two unrelated events in the mid-1950s are often cited as spurring action. First, in 1954, federal grants became available that would pay for up to half the cost of planning work in metropolitan and regional areas. However, the only eligible recipients were official regional planning agencies.

Second, in August 1955, deadly flooding in the state affected people and property in 39 towns, especially near the Farmington, Naugatuck, and Quinnebaug Rivers. Nearly 100 people were killed, and property damage topped \$203 million (the equivalent of \$1.5 billion today). More flooding in October of that year killed 17 people and caused \$20 million in damage in 60 towns. These incidents highlighted the need for comprehensive regional plans that would identify future infrastructure needs and provide guidance for development during reconstruction following a natural disaster as well as during periods of rapid economic expansion.

Consequently, in 1955, during the regular legislative session and a special November session, changes were made in the procedures for establishing a Regional Planning Authority. Instead of contiguous towns that could potentially stretch irregularly in several directions, member towns now had to be located within the same “logical economic and planning regions of the state.” One of the intents of this change was to insure the economic and orderly development of the state through the encouragement of sound community and regional planning and the proper utilization of the zoning police powers at the municipal level of government.

Among the fifteen RPOs that formed were the Midstate Regional Planning Agency, which commenced operations in 1962, and CRERPA, which commenced operations five years later in 1967. Midstate consisted of the eight towns anchored by Middletown while CRERPA consisted of the triangle of Estuary towns located at the mouth of the Connecticut River. Haddam and East Haddam, members of Midstate, were originally mapped to be a part of the Estuary region, but because the lower towns were taking longer to agree to join an RPO, the two towns petitioned to be included in the Midstate region. It seemed that some of the municipalities in the Estuary region were reluctant to participate in a regional government.

The first regional agreement was made in 1948 between a few towns of the South Central region. The final RPO to form was the Northwestern RPA in 1972 (the organization became a "COG" in 1982).