



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

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RiverCOG Legislative Agenda 2024

Adopted December 13, 2023

Priority Items

- **State Leadership on Solid Waste** – The state of Connecticut is facing a waste crisis. The lack of statewide leadership, vision, and actions means that municipalities and COGs are being forced to individually tackle an issue that is much larger than themselves. Dissolving MIRA and replacing it with a number of new, small regional waste authorities will not necessarily result in the most effective or efficient solutions to our waste problems.
 - Articulate a clear vision as to what the state’s policy is towards in-state and out of state garbage disposal.
 - If a decision is made to move to pay as you throw, it should be clear and consistent and statewide.
 - Actively work to build capacity at the state to help guide municipalities, regions, regional waste authorities, and the private sector.
 - Expand product stewardship to provide financial incentives to associate the cost of product disposal with the purchase or manufacture of the product.
 - Work with other states on product stewardship initiatives that will incentivize the reduction of the creation of waste, such as packaging.
- **State Competitive Match Fund for Federal Discretionary Grants** – The amount of federal discretionary grant funds is at a historic high and for Connecticut to compete, there needs to be a concerted effort to support as many good and competitive applications coming from Connecticut. Cities and towns do not have match funds waiting to be committed to applications to new federal discretionary grant programs. Furthermore, the state regularly funds needed transportation and infrastructure projects with 100% state bonded funds. A competitive match fund should be funded and prioritized for matching municipal, regional, and state applications to federal discretionary grants. Priority could be given to projects that meet goals of state and regional plans, especially projects that may be otherwise funded with solely state bond funds. Furthermore, the commitment of the state will allow many more grant applications from municipalities and regions and will result in more federal money coming into the state. This can help reverse Connecticut’s position as the worst state in the country for return on federal taxes.
- **Reversal of Cuts to Shore Line East Commuter Rail Service** – Massive cuts to Shore Line East Commuter Rail services threaten the viability of the railroad as a useful alternative to driving. The massive cuts to Shore Line East, first started during COVID-19 and further cut by the Governor in 2023, undercuts state and municipal efforts to provide alternatives to driving but also hampers revitalization of our town and city centers with transit-oriented development and housing. The Naugatuck Branch of Metro North saw a nearly 50% increase in train frequency and consequentially regained ridership lost during COVID-19. Similarly, the compounding cuts to Shore Line East make

RiverCOG

the service useful to even fewer people and has sabotaged ridership recovery. Ironically, the recently completed CTDOT Eastern CT Corridor Rail and Transit Feasibility Study found demand for additional Shore Line East service and destinations. We demand a plan to reinstate service and in the interim fund supplemental express bus service to be operated by Estuary Transit District.

- **Housing Planning** – Proposals that seek to address the state’s housing issues should take a comprehensive approach including transportation, jobs, and sustainability. Housing markets are regional and the COGs should have a role in housing planning. State level zoning is not appropriate for addressing very different needs and situations across the state.
- **Municipal Law: Public Safety** - Municipalities are feeling the same pinch that our Emergency Medical Responders are feeling as they struggle with personnel issues and payments to keep their businesses afloat. The current protocol in place is that these EMT organizations are given the license to operate in a particular town location, not simply to operate. When the needs of the town are not being met, the PSA ownership holds the town hostage to the EMS service provider. Some CEOs would like to have ownership of the PSA to ensure quality service to citizenry.
- **Lack of Skilled Workforce for Municipal Jobs** – Municipalities struggle to fill important positions in town and city halls. Common vacant positions include planner, zoning enforcement, and building official. The state needs to partner with our higher education sector to ensure that there is a training pipeline for these essential positions. There are additional opportunities to invest in technology to facilitate electronic documents and workflows to enable easier staff sharing. Also, there should be some ability to address labor concerns and protect worker rights to facilitate shared positions between municipalities.

Other Priorities

Land Use, Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure, and Economic Development

- RiverCOG is grateful to the State of Connecticut for increased funding that met a decade long promise to the COGs for the Regional Services Grant. We encourage the General Assembly and Administration to maintain funding at \$7 million per year for the nine COGs in the state.
- Rollback recent changes to the Regional Performance Incentive Program (RPIP) that overly complicate, limit funding opportunities, and unnecessarily restrict the useability of the grant. These changes greatly reduced the usability of RPIP and stymied the use of RPIP to facilitate regional shared services.
- Attract young adults and keep recent college graduates to the region by supporting policies that grow jobs, expand housing options, and provide opportunities for revitalization of the region’s central business districts through mixed use development. The region also seeks to support legislation that will help implement recommendations from the Regional Plan of Conservation and Development (RPOCD) and Regional Housing Plan (RHP) that seek to further diversify the region.
- Provide opportunities & resources to improve technical training and pipelines to fill job openings. Encourage and develop systems that use/integrate all educational (private and public) institutions and ensure all programming is complementary and not redundant. Empower the Dept of Workforce Development Unit. Encourage creation of training center(s) in southern Middlesex County.
- Support the newly formed Office of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in its efforts to create uniform mapping data for the entire state. Funding is needed to make this possible, including funding for a survey of municipal boundaries. Although many towns are internally consistent, the

is claimed by multiple municipalities or by no municipalities. The state cannot rely on 169 municipalities to maintain basic mapping data.

- The region will be better served if the state provides a more consistent message concerning their goals around long-term development and conservation initiatives outlined in the State POCD and Consolidated Housing Plan. Consistency and further clarification of developmental goals will allow for more effective planning efforts both regionally and locally.
- Continue to fund and support efforts that encourage mixed-use development (including affordable housing) around transportation hubs. Support mixed-use infill development to revitalize town centers.
- Consider programs to re-use/redevelop mall space to include affordable housing, entertainment, retail, micro-manufacturing, local artisans, co-working space and makerspace.
- Support efforts to better establish stability and housing security for our region’s residents including the creation of rent control measures that would create reasonable caps on increases that occur during a lease renewal process. Currently, the state lacks any statutory language or protections to renters that limit a landlord’s ability to raise rental fees each year. Recommend including accessory dwellings and naturally occurring affordable housing in affordable housing counts. Enable municipalities to provide a property value assessment based on the affordable rents being provided, similar to how farm and forest land can be valued.
- The RiverCOG communities encourage the state to provide additional funding for staff to support the upkeep, maintenance, and modernization of our region’s state-owned parks and forests and support of the state’s private forest landowners. Reduce the region’s carbon emissions from the transportation sector by providing additional grant opportunities that will expand publicly available EV charging stations and networks.
- Encourage alternative transportation options by expanding bicycle infrastructure (especially parking). There are few areas in the region that provide bike racks/parking for those who choose to ride.
- Funding for pilot projects to increase the number of areas served by last mile on-demand transit services is used and appreciated in the region. Continue expanding support for these services and including more service areas.

Finance Revenue and Bonding & Appropriations

- Oppose any taxing policies and proposals that further limit a municipality’s ability to generate revenue including but not limited to caps on automobile and real estate tax collection. Modify the statutes to guarantee that the anticipated reimbursements from the automobile mill rate cap do not sunset.
- Support initiatives that ensure that our region’s municipalities receive all their state funded allocations, including PILOT payments and MRSA, in a timely fashion and at their fully established statutorily dictated levels.

Public Safety, Health, and Human Services

- Revisit 2020’s Police Accountability Law and simplify the police department accreditation processes to improve compliance. The existing law also requires the costly storage and upkeep of all body and dash cameras footage and the region would be better served by the creation of a state sponsored storage program.
- Request the creation of a new grant program designed to support the repair, maintenance, restoration, and removal of privately-owned dams. The program would be tailored to apply specifically to applicants or municipalities who can demonstrate that the lack of maintenance poses a public safety risk. Presently, many owners are limited by financial constraints and are unable to have the dams adequately repaired. If these privately-owned dams fail, massive property damage could occur.

- For greater safety of pedestrians and cyclists, coordination between municipalities, and CTDOT should occur for making ped/bike improvements on state owned roads.

Environment and Energy

- Continue to combat the region's and the state's ongoing aquatic invasive species problem through continued funding of DEEP's Clean, Drain, Dry Boat program and support an increase to the overall budget allocation for newly formed Office of Aquatic Invasive Species. Increasing funding will better support cleanup and mitigation efforts already in place.
- Support the investigation of the creation of a statewide 100-foot riparian and inland and coastal wetland buffer regulation.
- Support efforts to improve the region's access to high-speed internet. The goal should be 1 gigabit per second download speed at every address in the state. The state's fiber optic network is within 5 miles of every address in the state and it was built to facilitate access statewide. Investing in last mile connections will facilitate connections, further educational opportunities and make the region more attractive for existing and prospective employers. Ensure additional redundancy of the internet network to ensure reliable service is always available.
- Expand funding for DEEP's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program.
- Expand funding and support for farmland protection and farming operations in the state.
- Support the creation of new extended producer responsibilities for smoke detectors and other hard to dispose of products sold in Connecticut. Improper disposal of these products is expensive to cleanup and pose safety risks to residents. Support the creation of new extended producer responsibilities for manufacturers of packaging and household hazardous waste.
- Create a pilot program that would direct electric utilities to work with condominiums and apartment buildings on the implementation of rooftop solar, with a credit for generation being applied to each meter or going to the condo association as common charge subsidy.
- Adopt a state-wide policy on recycling – go back to dual-stream recycling to make recycled waste more marketable & recyclable.