



Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

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RiverCOG Legislative Agenda 2025

Top Priorities

- Fix Veteran's Property Tax Exemption
- Lack of Statewide Vision and Leadership on Solid Waste – Leading to Privatization of Waste
- Restore Funding to Shore Line East Commuter Railroad
- Allow for Rapid Response Permitting for Addressing Hydrilla and Other Aquatic Invasives
- Fix Early Voting to Reduce Costs
- Revise Statutes That Cap Municipal Fines and Fees
- Housing Planning and Needs Assessments Should Be at the COG Level, Not State

Municipal Operations

Fix Veteran's Tax Exemption

- Fix Public Act 24-46 to clarify that the tax exemption benefits are granted only to 100% disabled veterans as was intended by the original bill language.
- The exemption was intended to be limited to only 100% disabled veterans who are unable to work as a result of their service-related disability.
- The removal of this criteria has created a much greater cost to municipalities, far larger than was intended.
 - If this exemption is not fixed, the state should provide PILOT funds to keep municipalities whole for costs over the original projected statewide cost of \$4.9 million.

Early Voting

- Current early voting requirements put financial strains on limited municipal resources with limited use of the service by constituents.
 - Remove the requirements of early voting for primaries.
 - Shorten the timeline required for early voting.
 - Provide alternative options for early voting for small municipalities now that no-excuse absentee ballots have been approved.
 - Early voting did not necessarily eliminate long lines in cities because the cities only had a single polling place.
 - Fully fund the significant additional costs borne by municipalities to hold early voting.

Fines and Fees

- Municipalities should have the power to set their own reasonable fines and fees.

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- Cementing fines and fees in the general statutes prevents municipalities from covering rising costs or ensuring fines are a deterrent or punish bad behaviors. For example, fire ban fines (\$50-75) set in statute are not high enough to deter behavior or to cover the costs associated with enforcement or responding to fires (such as paying fire marshal).
- Instead of dictating amounts, state statute should provide a methodology for setting a reasonable fine or fee, and prohibiting imposing exorbitant fines or fees.
- If municipalities are not able to charge reasonable fines and fees to cover costs, and have to remit the majority of funds collected to the state, then the state should take responsibility and take over licensing and enforcement actions. The cost of collecting and remitting these fees to the state, exceeds the revenue collected by the municipality and shifts costs to the property tax.

Municipal Law

- Support legislation that protects public and private sectors from cybersecurity threats and that develops greater resiliency in case of cybersecurity attacks.

Workforce

- 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: 1) Partner with towns and institutions 2) Invest in technology to facilitate common electronic documents and workflows to enable easier staff sharing; 3) Address labor concerns and protect worker rights to facilitate shared positions between municipalities

Regional Planning & Services

Waste Management

- The lack of statewide leadership, vision, and action means that municipalities and COGs are being forced to individually tackle an issue that is much larger than themselves. State leadership is needed to find the most effective and efficient solutions to our waste problems.

The upcoming expiration of the MIRA Dissolution Authority on June 30, 2025 will mean that the remaining MIRA municipalities will sign contracts with private haulers, before any new regional waste authorities can be stood up to take MIRA's place. The result will be the privatization of solid waste disposal and potentially increased barriers to future regional or statewide collaboration, and long-term cost control.

- We encourage the General Assembly and Administration to consider the following:
 - Articulate a clear vision as to what the state's policy is towards in-state and out-of-state garbage disposal.
 - Economies of scale in waste disposal can only be assured if there is enforcement of flow control. Regional waste authorities should be given enforcement powers, especially if DEEP is unwilling or unable to do enforcement.

- Startup funding for regional recycling coordinators would easily become self-sustaining and benefit the implementation of waste and recycling projects.
- Programs such as pay-as-you-throw, should be clear, consistent, and uniformly applied.
- Actively work to build capacity at the state to help guide municipalities, regions, regional waste authorities, and the private sector.
- Expand extended producer responsibilities to provide financial incentives to associate the cost of product disposal with the purchase or manufacture of products and packaging including other hard to dispose of products sold in Connecticut such as smoke detectors, carpets, and tires. Coordinate with neighboring state efforts.
- Amend the bottle bill to treat all recyclable containers equally, regardless of what substance they were filled with. Increase the handling fee to \$0.05 to promote and support more redemption locations. Ensure all remaining container deposits are put into a separate regional waste fund to help pay for waste/ recycling projects instead of the funds going into the state's General Fund.
- Support additional education for all waste and recycling efforts.
- Support eliminating plastic bags for grocery stores with fruits and vegetables.
- Adopt a state-wide policy on recycling – go back to dual-stream recycling to make recycled waste more marketable & recyclable.

Housing

- Proposals that seek to address the state's housing issues should take a comprehensive approach including transportation, jobs, infrastructure, and sustainability.
- The COGs should have a role in housing planning as they are well positioned to understand the local and regional housing context and will be most effective in working with municipalities to plan and zone for a variety of housing types to meet regional needs.
- The COGs should be empowered through state legislation and allocation of additional funding to work with their member municipalities on housing planning and other efforts that would lead to the wider availability of housing options to serve local and regional needs.
- Housing Needs Assessment and Allocation – State, Regional, and Local Coordination
 - If a determination of housing needs is undertaken by the state, it should be predicated on reliable population and job growth projections at the state and regional level, which do not necessarily exist. These projections, and any determination of housing needs, should be created based on a transparent process in which all COGs are represented, and should take into consideration all segments of the population across income levels to ensure a healthy housing market.
 - The state should not allocate housing units to municipalities based on a housing needs assessment. Instead, the state should allocate units to the COG regions based on a methodology created with the participation of the COGs and a robust public process. The COGs should be responsible for allocating housing units to municipalities in a manner consistent with the goals and visions set forth in their respective Regional Plans of Conservation and Development.

- Municipalities are in the best position to determine how their share of housing units will be accommodated (new build, conversion, adaptive reuse, etc.). The state and regions may assist or provide recommendations but should not prescribe specific methods.
- The state should adopt enabling legislation allowing the COGs to create regional housing commissions with representation from each municipality. The commissions could be responsible for steering the creation of regional housing plans and adopting a methodology to allocate needed units across municipalities.
- RiverCOG is troubled that the state’s Fair Share Housing Study has not been transparent to the public and has not yet included any opportunities for the public to be informed and be involved. Professional planning ethics requires consultation and opportunities for meaningful involvement of the communities for which are being planned.
- Creating housing plans for the resettlement of lower income households from the state’s cities to suburban and rural towns, without any consultation with those communities is troublesome and in violation of professional planning ethics.
- 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.
- State subsidies should be available to help construct needed housing, particularly for those making less than 60% AMI. Unrelated state municipal funding should not be linked to housing policies.

Transit and Transportation

Shore Line East Commuter Rail Service:

- Fully restore service on Shore Line East Commuter Rail Service to pre-Covid Levels, and in the interim fund supplemental express bus service to be operated by River Valley Transit (RVT).
 - More state funding is required to ensure Shore Line East Commuter Rail service reaches its full potential as an alternative mode of transportation to personal vehicles. Shore Line East is the only alternative for travelers seeking to avoid the worsening congestion of I-95.
 - Goals to reduce GHGs and road congestion are not reachable without a reliable and convenient alternative to driving personal vehicles.
 - Successful transit-oriented development (TOD) requires a sustained commitment to reliable and convenient rail service, to create revitalized downtowns, and affordable housing options to our residents.
 - The Naugatuck Branch of Metro North saw a nearly 50% increase in train frequency and consequentially regained ridership lost during COVID-19. In contrast, the funding cut for Shore Line East reduced service and sabotaged ridership recovery.
 - Ironically, the CTDOT Eastern CT Corridor Rail and Transit Feasibility Study found demand for additional Shore Line East service and destinations.

River Valley Transit (RVT):

- Repeal Public Act 22-40 that flat funds the state’s transit districts at FY24 levels. CT Transit (Hartford, New Haven, Stamford, Waterbury, and Meriden) divisions are not under the same

funding cap. Discriminating against the state’s transit districts, which are on average more cost efficient than CT Transit, is unexplained and unmerited.

- Prioritize funding to support upgrading RVT facilities for the adoption of electric buses.
 - To transition to an electric bus fleet, investments must be made in bus charging facilities. Charging facilities require significant electrical upgrades, well beyond the capacity of the transit district.
 - RVT will require 2 megawatts of electricity to charge a fully electrified fleet. Their existing facilities do not meet these requirements.
 - Upgraded fire suppression systems are also required to accommodate indoor storage of electric vehicles. Indoor storage of vehicles is necessary, particularly in winter, because cold temperatures significantly reduces battery charge capacity.
 - Fund 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.

Additional Transportation Options:

- Continue to support funding opportunities that help residents access micro-transit options such as the Electric Bicycle (eBike) Incentive Program (DEEP), and the Micro-transit Pilot Program (CTDOT), and expand funding for bicycle and pedestrian networks.
- Promote coordination between towns and CTDOT for greater safety of pedestrians and cyclists on state owned roads.
- Require and fund life-saving implementation of pedestrian and driver safety features such as blinking lights at crosswalks and wrong-way driver detection systems on highways.
- Continue to provide funding and grant opportunities that will expand public EV charging stations, particularly for those living in rental and multi-family housing.

Economic Development

Worker Development and Retention:

- Retain and attract young adults by offering a state tax incentive meant to reduce the cost of living and encourage long term settlement.
- Attract young adults and retain recent college graduates by supporting policies that grow jobs, expand housing options, and reduce the cost of childcare.
- Provide opportunities & resources to improve technical pipeline training and to fill job openings. Develop systems that integrate all educational (K-12, advanced training, private and public) institutions and ensure that programming is complementary and not redundant.
- Empower the Dept of Workforce Development Unit to expand services to more locations to serve a greater number of residents with limited transportation options. Encourage creation of training center(s) in southern Middlesex County and utilize the regional Adult Education centers when possible.

Planning:

- 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.
- Support the Office of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in its efforts to create uniform mapping and CAMA data for the entire state. Funding is necessary for a survey of municipal boundaries. Although many towns are internally consistent, there is land that 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.
- Extend the update cycle of the State Plan of Conservation and Development to be ten-years, and then set up a calendar of updates, potential at the beginning of a decade for regional and then municipal PoCD updates. This will allow each plan to refer to the one above it and help with coordination of planning.

Funding:

- RiverCOG is grateful to the State of Connecticut for funding that helps support its mandates and operations. We encourage the General Assembly and Administration to maintain Regional Services Grant funding at least \$7 million per year for the nine COGs in the state.
- 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.
- Invest more in tourism promotion of Connecticut, in particular for the America 250 commemoration in 2026. Surrounding states are investing heavily in promoting heritage tourism and Connecticut risks falling behind. Connecticut businesses should not miss out on this opportunity to bring tourists to our state.

Public Safety, Health, and Human Services

- Create and fund a new grant program designed to support the repair, maintenance, restoration, and removal of privately-owned dams that pose a threat to public safety. Funding would be prioritized for dams considered most dangerous by the DEEP ranking system and to applicants or municipalities who can demonstrate that the lack of maintenance cannot reasonably be funded by private or other sources. The most dangerous privately-owned dams threaten loss of life and damage to property. In some instances, catastrophic failure of a series of dams could occur. (This can follow on the 2024 Act Concerning Dam Safety enabling DEEP to act when dams pose imminent risk.)
- 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.

- Support increases in Medicaid reimbursements for medical services to ensure existing hospitals and medical services can be sustained.
- Support basic needs programs that are also available to the 30% of the population who are ALICE—Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. The ALICE population refers to households that earn more than the federal poverty level (FPL) but are still unable to afford the basic necessities in their community.
- Support funding for universal free school lunch programs. School lunch debt has become a serious issue at many schools. Universal free lunch would mean that no child would go hungry while at school, and could support healthier diets.

Land Use

- 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. Fund small municipal infrastructure/wastewater projects to support increased housing options and mixed-use development in Transit-Oriented Development projects.
- Support programs that incentivize the re-use and redevelop of underutilized commercial spaces, such as former malls, and strip-malls for new functions such as housing, entertainment venues, flexible retail, micro-manufacturing, local artisan spaces, co-working spaces and makerspace.

Environment

- 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 the Office of Aquatic Invasive Species. Increasing funding will better support cleanup and mitigation efforts already in place.
- Expedited permitting should allow for action to be taken quickly to combat invasive species. Waiting for permitting can worsen the environmental impact of both the invasive species and the intervention that is needed.
- Encourage 100-foot riparian and inland and coastal wetland buffer regulation to protect public health, ecosystem services, and water quality and quantity.
 - Such a setback exists in the Connecticut River Gateway zone
 - Variances are regularly granted to balance the needs of conservation and development.
- 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.
- Create a program to help farmers impacted by natural disasters and better insurance options to cover loss of crops, damage to real property (eg. greenhouses, equipment and delivery trucks).

Energy

- Create a pilot program that would direct electric utilities to work with condominiums and apartment buildings on the implementation of solar generation, with a credit for generation being applied to each meter or going to the condo association as common charge subsidy.
- Create a pilot program in cooperation with utilities that incentivizes public and private entities to develop microgrids behind their meters that use at least 50% of energy from green energy sources such as solar power for resiliency and to put additional energy into the electric grid.

Infrastructure

- 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. The program should also require additional redundancy of the internet network to ensure reliable service is always available.

State Funding

State Competitive Match Fund for Federal Discretionary Grants

- 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 the 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.

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.