

# Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Capitol Region Education Center  
111 Charter Oak Avenue, Hartford, Connecticut

Thursday, May 5, 2011, 10:00 A.M.

## MINUTES

**Members Present:** David LeVasseur (Chairman), Alice Meyer (Vice-Chairman), Sen. Stephen Cassano, James Finley, Ronald Harris, Robert Kaliszewski, Linda Krause, James O'Leary, Mark Paquette, Leo Paul, Virginia Seccombe, Joyce Stille, Adam Stolpen and Margaret Wirtenberg, PhD.

**Members Absent:** Mark Allaben, John Finkle, Barbara Henry, Joe Oros, Scott Shanley, Timothy Stewart

**Staff:** Bruce Wittchen.

**Opening Remarks:** Commission member LeVasseur called the meeting to order at 10:02 and recommended everyone introduce themselves because of a new member being present.

**1. Consideration of Minutes of April, 2011 Meeting:** Commission member LeVasseur noted that the date and location will be corrected on the draft minutes. Commission member Wirtenberg made a motion to accept the minutes as corrected and Commission member Paul seconded it. The motion passed unanimously, with Commission members Finley, Kaliszewski and Stolpen abstaining.

**2. Consideration of ACIR reports:** There were no new reports.

**3. Old Business:** Commission member LeVasseur asked Commission member Cassano to describe the Planning & Development's Committee's April 18 forum. Commission member Cassano said the forum had highlighted the value of cooperation among municipalities and the importance of regional planning organizations. A key question is what the regions will be in the future. If the regions were larger, each would have more funding and be able to do more.

Commission member Cassano said a pivotal part of the forum was when John Filchak of the Northeastern CT Council of Governments showed a series of slides to illustrate the various regions that the state is divided into for a wide variety of purposes, such as economic development and public health. The boundaries of those various regions are inconsistent and they should be the same. The forum was a good first step in what we're trying to do and the second step begins today.

Commission member Krause said she watched the forum and pointed out that Lyle Wray of the Capital Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) described things his large regional planning organization (RPO) has done; Richard Dunne of the Valley Council of Governments described

what his small RPO has done; and John Filchak described things his mid-size RPO has done. Each then mentioned initiatives that extended beyond their RPO's boundary, demonstrating the effectiveness of regionalism without specific boundaries.

Commission member Cassano said this raises an important point about the size of regions. If the CRCOG purchasing group were smaller, towns' savings could shrink because of the smaller purchasing power of the smaller group. The group could lack the critical mass necessary to succeed. Large RPOs might even be able to do some of the planning and permitting currently done by CTDOT and CTDEP. Change will take time, however, because there are a lot of details to work out, including the terms of leases of RPO offices.

Commission member Krause pointed out that John Filchak's engineering services group includes only five towns, so it is not always necessary to have a big group. Commission member Wirtenberg asked if we even need formal regions to accomplish such things. She said the speakers at the Planning & Development forum showed things can be accomplished by areas not conforming to RPO boundaries.

Commission member Cassano said CTDOT has to seek approval from multiple regions for each of its projects and Commission member Paul noted that his RPO has to vote on projects in other parts of the state. Commission member Cassano said it is a federal requirement for Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) projects.

Commission member Stille said a regional initiative such as CRCOG's permitting project does more than just help towns reduce costs; it also helps businesses. Commission member Meyer said it is easy to support regionalism, but we have to remember CT's home rule tradition. Towns can choose to do something together if it is voluntary and they can save money or improve the quality of life. Planning is easy; implementation is difficult.

Commission member Cassano noted that many small towns have little interest in regional initiatives. We also have to consider that municipal leadership is continually changing and a regional endeavor started by one chief elected official (CEO) might not be continued by a successor. He mentioned that Hartford's late Mayor Peters had invited all the CRCOG CEOs to a Bruins game in Hartford and it helped them recognize that they depend on a strong Hartford. New leaders need to learn that.

Commission member Meyer said that is what the ACIR does; it brings the state and local together. Commission member O'Leary said leadership is embodied in the CEOs, so councils of government (COGs) are the building blocks. CRCOG's CEOs have developed the relationships they need to work together; the Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS) emergency management regions have had to develop similar cohesiveness and inter-reliance among the CEOs of their towns. The process cannot be forced and DEMHS' Region 1 has not come together yet.

Commission member Finley said we are looking to improve efficiency in municipal spending, but 64% of overall municipal spending is on education and municipalities face restrictions

regarding what they can change. Back office, curriculum and special education assessment activities could be regionalized. Commission member Seccombe said some of that is under way already and her region is working on regional transportation. Commission member Cassano noted that even small town superintendents are paid \$150,000 per year and Commission member Paul agreed.

Commission member Harris said he gives presentations on regional school district creation and expansion. He can document the expected savings, but it comes down to local politics. Each town wants their own. He mentioned regional education centers and noted that towns can collaborate without becoming a regional school district. He noted the existence of quasi-public schools, such as Norwich Free School and Woodstock Academy, and said towns without their own school are in the catbird seat because they can choose between schools to get a good deal. However, a town with schools of its own does not want to lose them.

Commission member Cassano said this process could begin with school transportation and special education. Commission member LeVasseur asked Commission member Seccombe to describe what towns in her area were able to save by going to a regional calendar. Commission member Seccombe said she had been trying for 20 years without success to convince the towns to align their calendars. Then a superintendent told the others that the one town could save the equivalent of a teacher's salary if its school calendar and its neighboring town's school calendars were the same. That got everyone thinking about it and they now use the same schedule.

Commission member LeVasseur pointed out that no structural changes had been required to make those changes. Commission member Seccombe said they even found a way to save on Vo-Tech school transportation – instead of each town transporting a few students to the regional school; one town transports its own students plus others from towns along the way to the school.

Commission member Finley said towns do not have a say regarding the minimum level of spending required for education. CEOs face the heat even though 70% of the budget is out of their hands. Commission member Cassano said Boards of Education should face more accountability. Commission member Finley said it would help if there were a stronger relationship between the CEOs and Boards of Education.

Commission member Krause noted that Pennsylvania has separate school taxes and, when the cost is separate, people can see it and respond. There was a discussion of other states that also have separate municipal and school taxes and a question about how they might have begun doing separate school taxes.

Commission member Paquette said it will take time to change to our regional framework, so we need a clear picture soon of what is needed. Commission member Cassano noted that Coventry is already working with CRCOG on some matters, even though it is officially in a neighboring RPO. Commission member Stolpen said we do not have much time; we are facing a financial tsunami that will spill over across the entire economy. He added that the tax on his house this year equals what his parents paid to buy it in the late 50s. We need to cut municipal costs and, if regionalism is the way to do it, it must be articulated.

Commission member Cassano said it is helpful that the budget was passed with a month left in the session because that leaves time for other efforts. However, it is too late for the ACIR to submit something now. Can the ACIR have something ready for the next session? It can't be a top-down proposal. We should get the RPOs involved and perhaps Board of Education chairs along with the CEOs. Commission member Cassano noted that job security is always a central concern when discussing any kind of consolidation.

Commission member LeVasseur said there are ACIR members who would participate in such an effort. Commission member Paul said he would help and Commission member Seccombe suggested keeping the members aware of which legislators are critical to such an effort. Commission Member O'Leary said ACIR has had similar discussions for many years and say that things will not change because of a lack of will and a need for a crisis. There was a discussion that the state and towns now face the crisis and leaders have to seize the moment. Commission member O'Leary added that it will require a collaborative effort and that a crisis helps break down barriers.

Commission member Krause said she is pro-regionalism and we are already regionalized for things which benefit from it. She noted there is some resentment of CRCOG for getting credit for doing things others have already done. We should not break what we already have by trying to fix it and every region should not be a Wal-Mart; there is still a place for small hardware stores. Commission member Krause said that Nantucket, where Commission member Cassano is from, and Winnipeg, where CRCOG's Lyle Wray went to school, have not developed the same kind of relationships with surrounding communities that CT municipalities have done.

There was a discussion of the comparison of Wal-Mart to towns or regions and of municipal and regional relationships. The conclusion was that regions should not be standardized. Commission member Stille mentioned the study of police, fire and emergency dispatch and Commission member Cassano said CT has reduced its number of dispatch centers from 107 to 106, while southern California has only two.

Commission member Seccombe said towns must be allowed to work together across regional boundaries and Commission member Wirtenberg pointed out that improved technology increases the ability of towns to work together. Commission member Stolpen said the state should not stipulate towns' membership in regional efforts, but towns should not get the benefits if they opt out. Commission member O'Leary described his experience with hardware store affiliations and bank consolidations and said those changes have improved the efficiency of back office operations. Hospitals are doing the same. Towns should do it voluntarily, but someone must provide the vision.

Commission member Cassano said all the players, including business, need to be at the table to solve the problem. Commission member Finley said the state budget includes revolutionary changes for sharing state revenue, helping municipalities diversify their resources. Commission member Paquette said long-term funding is needed to sustain regional performance incentive

(RPI) grant projects and Commission member Cassano said regions need revenue sources. Dues are not enough and if there were fewer regions, each would have more funds.

Commission member Paul questioned the reliability of funding in the future and Commission member Cassano said we cannot bind future legislatures. We need to keep legislators informed and involved. Commission member O'Leary said the majority party has to be open to the other party. Commission member Cassano said legislators collaborate more across party lines in committee than on the budget.

#### **4. New Business:**

Bruce Wittchen said the annual municipal budget survey will begin before the ACIR meets again and noted that he had distributed a copy of the survey form to the members. He pointed out that some towns have an automatic budget referendum and that some towns have a cap on the number of budget referendums. These rules could bias the results of the ACIR's survey, which only asks if there was a referendum and how many there were. He suggested adding questions about such rules to the survey. The members agreed that the questions should be added. Commission member Meyer recommended also asking towns about voter turnouts. The members agreed with adding that too.

The next meeting will be July 21, 2011, at CREC

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35.