

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Hearing Room 2A, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, Connecticut

Wednesday, September 5, 2012 - 10:00 A.M.

Members Present: Bruce Wittchen (Acting Chairman), Sen. Stephen Cassano, Barbara Henry, Scott Jackson, Robert Kaliszewski, Linda Krause, Frank Nicastro, James O'Leary, Mark Paquette, Leo Paul, Virginia Seccombe, Joyce Stille, Ron Thomas and Jim Watson

Members Absent: Mark Allaben, Ryan Bingham, John Finkle, Ronald Harris, Alice Meyer (Vice-Chairman), Scott Shanley and Michael Stupinski

Staff: Bruce Wittchen

Regional Planning Organization representatives: Carl Amento (SCRCOG), James Butler (SECCOG), Jonathan Chew (HVCEO), Peter Dorpalen (COGCNV), Rick Dunne (VCOG), John Filchak (NECCOG), Craig Lader (SWRPA), Rick Lynn (LHCEO), Dan McGuinness (NWCCOG) and Carl Stephani (CCRPA)

Opening Remarks:

Acting Chairman Wittchen called the meeting to order at 10:10 and, due to the presence of two new ACIR members and the regional planning organization (RPO) directors, asked everyone to introduce themselves.

1. Consideration of Minutes of June 28, 2012 Meeting:

A motion was made and seconded to approve the [June 28, 2012 minutes](#). There was no further discussion and the minutes were approved unanimously, with commission members Jackson and Watson abstaining because they had not attended the meeting.

2. Consideration of ACIR reports:

- a. Acting Chairman Wittchen explained that the surveys are out for the annual municipal budget experiences report and the report should be ready for adoption at the November 15 meeting.

3. Old Business:

There was no old business.

4. New Business:

Acting Chair Wittchen said that Commission member Cassano had suggested the ACIR schedule a special meeting and invite representatives of the state's [regional planning organizations](#) (RPOs) to participate. He asked Commission member Cassano to begin the discussion. Commission member Cassano thanked everyone for attending and said he would have to leave early because of family matters, but he came in for a few minutes because of the importance of this topic.

Commission member Cassano said he believes the executive and legislative branches are doing and thinking more regionally. We have regional incentives and grants and he believes the next state budget will go even further. It is important that this is all voluntary. He mentioned regional successes in southeastern and northwestern CT and said we have to determine the next steps.

Commission member Krause reported on the consolidation of the [CT River Estuary Regional Planning Agency](#) (CRERPA) and [Midstate Regional Planning Agency](#) (MRPA) to form the Lower CT River Valley Council of Governments, which will be based in a new location. They are wrapping up the physical details of the consolidation and are working on the programmatic details. Eleven of fourteen staff will remain and she noted that Geoff Colegrove, MRPA's Executive Director, is retiring after 46 years.

Commission member Krause noted that the two agencies had different programs and different cultures. So far, consolidation has been "challenging fun". They have received funding from the [Regional Planning Organization Consolidation Bonus Pool](#) for computer and consulting costs and have spent approximately \$100,000 of \$227,000 they received. It has gone well, despite this being the state's first-ever voluntary regional consolidation. Commission member Krause said the voluntary consolidation happened because towns worried they might be spun off to new regions centered around urban centers if the state were to choose new regional boundaries.

Commission member Paul noted that a goal of today's meeting is to get input from the regions because of the pressure for regional consolidation. Funding is an important consideration because there has been a major shift in funding for RPOs, who respond by farming out their staff for specific projects in order to cover their costs. He said the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials (LHCEO) and Northwest CT Council of Governments (NWCCOG) have formed a subcommittee to assess their options regarding consolidation.

Commission member Nicastrò noted that people are looking at the regions. He said the legislature needs input and the towns and regions should speak up before it's too late. How can the General Assembly help? It is important to inform legislators about these issues.

James Butler said RPOs have been active for more than fifty years. The [Southeastern CT Council of Governments](#) (SECCOG) is unique in that it includes two tribes as non-voting members. Funding has declined, but SECCOG is still able to do a lot. The [Regional Performance Incentive](#) (RPI) program has been helpful, but receiving one of those grants is like hitting a homerun and RPOs cannot count on receiving one.

James Butler pointed out the loss of dedicated state funding for all the important little things RPOs should do. He said that, with the decline in the [state grant-in-aid](#) (SGIA) funding, RPOs have had to balance their books with staff cutbacks and a greater reliance on municipal dues and transportation or other specific grant funding. Funding general operations is increasingly difficult.

Dan McGuinness asked what is meant by "necessary regional services" in Sec. 189 of [June Special Session PA 12-1](#) (PA 12-1 JSS). He asked if towns will be required to use such services and if the intent is to have something like a county without using the word. John Filchak of the [Northeast CT Council of Governments](#) (NECCOG) said that subsection of PA 12-1 JSS is critical, particularly its statement about "regional delivery of state and local services". That contemplates larger organizations than we currently have. Is it to be based on the [regional education service center](#) model?

John Filchak referred to presentations he has given about the state's numerous and overlapping specialized regions and asked what services are to be provided by planning regions. The use of RPO-sponsored regional services is currently optional for municipalities. He agreed with James Butler that regions are increasingly service-based, having weaned themselves off general state funding. John said we need to clean up the maze of regions. He contrasted parts (a) and (b) of Section 189 PA 12-1 JSS, pointing out that Subsection (a) requires regional boundaries to be based on a rigorous analysis of specific criteria, while Subsection (b) says current regions are allowed to consolidate as they see fit.

Rick Lynn of the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials (LHCEO) said the towns in his region see the LHCEO as being an extension of local government and consider it to be the right size for what it does. However, they are open to change if it would improve cost effectiveness or provide other advantages. Commission member Henry said towns in the NWCCOG do things with towns in the LHCEO, so towns are already able to cooperate across regional boundaries if they choose.

Jonathan Chew of the [Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials](#) (HVCEO) said the Danbury area is a classic region where density decreases away from an urban center and was considered a region even before being formalized as the HVCEO. He said his board was disturbed by attempts to limit objectivity in earlier forms of regional boundaries bills.

Jonathan Chew noted that his region already has significant regional services in the form of regional septage disposal and regional solid waste disposal and is planning for more. He also mentioned that his RPO has decided to provide technical input to the regional boundary study early on, by commenting on each of the legislatively defined boundary criteria from the perspective of their region.

Carl Stephani of the [Central CT Regional Planning Agency](#) (CCRPA) said CCRPA's board considers that portion of the bill to have been a solution in search of a problem to solve. Peter Dorpalen, of the [Council of Governments of the Central Naugatuck Valley](#) (COGCNV), said his organization has not formally taken a position on regional consolidation, but has discussed it. Although consolidation may improve the economy of scale, towns are comfortable working with each other.

Peter Dorpalen said the towns of our current RPOs have developed social and economic ties that may not exist in a larger consolidated region. If an organization grows too large, it may lose the level of individual commitment that previously existed, as happened in the [Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection's](#) (DESPP's) [Region 5](#). With consolidation, would RPOs act more as sub-state service delivery districts, rather than in their traditional planning role? He also noted that state funding has been greatly reduced, limiting RPOs' flexibility to undertake projects not related to transportation planning.

Rick Dunne of the [Valley Council of Governments](#) (VCOG) said that, although RPOs are regional planning organizations, the state has not been willing to fund planning. There are five RPOs with a New York perspective, but they don't plan together. Funding is based on service delivery, not broad planning, with many focused on transportation. Are we going to focus on service delivery? The right size for a planning organization is different than the right size for a service delivery organization.

Craig Lader of the [South Western Regional Planning Agency](#) (SWRPA) said SWRPA is the RPO closest to and most integrated with New York and identified some of the ways they coordinate

with regional initiatives focused on Greater New York. He thanked the ACIR for inviting RPOs to attend this meeting and said the existing regional boundaries work well, as demonstrated by the fact that there has been only one voluntary merger and only one town not part of an RPO.

Craig Lader said the criteria originally used to delineate RPO boundaries are obsolete, but we do not know if regions whose boundaries are based on new criteria would be better. As for the size of RPOs, here is no basis for establishing a minimum size for RPOs. Larger RPOs might be more cost-effective, but the best approach is to allow voluntary change at the periphery. The existing boundaries work, as does the state's grassroots approach to regionalism. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

John Filchak said the General Assembly sees regionalism as a means for service delivery and described recent RPI funding of regional [geographic information system](#) (GIS) initiatives. He said that is not a good approach for developing a statewide GIS. Some RPI funding could go to a planning office at OPM. It takes a high level of expertise to do some things.

Commission member Nicastro said he agrees with what others have said about RPO's focus on transportation planning. There will be a study of the rail line between Waterbury and Hartford because the right of way is there and it is an opportunity for commuter rail. Rick Dunne said he believes we should have a state planning office and not rely on legislative-mandated planning studies. It would cost \$1 billion to update Rt 8 and another \$1 billion for the Housatonic bridge, but we already have rail paralleling Rt 8. It would be better to improve the rail service. Unfortunately, the state, particularly DOT, does not share information it bases its plans on.

Commission member Krause said planning only becomes noticeable when we do not do it. There has been a recent focus on service delivery, but doing service delivery does not prevent an RPO from doing planning. Function follows funding. Some directors have a planning background and others have a management background, but we are all RPOs. However, we need to have planners in place to prepare planning grant applications and we need reliable funding to have the planners. Without a change in funding mechanisms, Middletown will face \$2 per capita RPO dues for its 47,000 residents. We need other funding sources for planning.

Dan McGuinness pointed out the towns' and RPO's experience with emergency planning funds. First, funding was directed to RPOs and then it was directed to the emergency planning regions. Region 5 meetings are far away and are scheduled during the day, which is inconvenient for towns that rely on volunteer services. Commission member Henry asked what was the purpose of Section 189 of PA 12-1 JJS; is it to save money or to improve services? John Filchak said the goal is to provide effective delivery of services at a lower cost.

There was a discussion of emergency call centers. Commission member Henry noted that they are waiting a long time for rural minor and major collector road funding and she has not noticed any improvement in the delivery of services or any cost savings. She also mentioned [probate court](#) consolidation and Commission member Nicastro noted that the General Assembly will be asking about the probate court savings.

James Butler mentioned the consolidation of [workforce boards](#) and said towns had a voice in how it was done, which was important. He said his council has a board rather than have all 43 CEOs oversee operations. He also noted that the boundaries of his workforce board's area are not aligned with RPO boundaries.

Commission member Paul said our RPOs function exceptionally well and, before the state looks to change their boundaries, it should tackle the inconsistent state agency region boundaries shown in John Filchak's legislative presentation. Commission member Paul noted that the LHCEO and NWCCOG have been working together on many things for many years and RPI funding would be better spent on RPO operations. He believes this meeting has accomplished what we intended.

Commission member Jackson said he is happy with his town's RPO. Hamden can rely on the RPO's planners and other staff, which is important as the town's own planning and engineering staff shrinks. He noted that the emergency planning region and workforce board are each made up of different combinations of people. That results in a loss of time and effectiveness. We need as much efficiency as possible and he does not understand people's fear of counties.

Carl Amento of the [South Central Regional Council of Governments](#) (SCRCOG) said our current system of RPOs works very efficiently and, before we throw out the baby with the bathwater, we should be sure that any replacement system will work. Probate court consolidation took away an important local service that had a value that cannot be measured in dollars. Consolidating back-office and IT functions is a better approach.

5. The next meeting is scheduled for 10:00 AM, November 15, 2012, in the Student Center's 1849 Room at CCSU, New Britain.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:25

Minutes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM