



# Reality may impose regional approaches

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It is time for Connecticut towns to abandon their steady habits and start finding ways to reduce the cost of local government.

Yes, we like our small towns. And face it, here in southeastern Connecticut even our “cities” are small towns. Public officials are more accessible in small towns, accountability greater. It’s harder to hide graft. Our towns provide us with a sense of community and an air of distinctiveness.

It is a system, however, that is inherently inefficient and redundant. Two neighboring towns need new schools, so they both build one and the state helps pay, when a single new school could have served both as well and more cheaply. Every town government and school system has its own administration, leading to higher per capita administrative cost than necessary.

This past week the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the nonprofit group that collectively represents the interests of Connecticut’s 169 towns and cities, said things have to change.

In about a week, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy will present his budget proposal. It is expected to involve reductions in state aid to municipalities. Meanwhile property values, which form the foundation for the other source of revenue for towns, the property tax, have remained relatively flat in many communities.

“The lack of diversity in revenue source and uncertainty at the state level are now eroding the capacity of local governments to meet their obligations to the public,” CCM wrote in its new policy paper, “this report is different (<http://www.ccm-ct.org/sites/default/files/files//ThisReportIsDifferent012317.pdf>).”

Change is possible.

In 2010, towns that are members of the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments decided to jointly hire a firm to carry out appraisals, which determine the property assessments on which taxes are based. John Filchak, executive director of the COG for 21 years, said he was able to negotiate a far better price per unit when he could bid a contract for 43,000 parcels in a dozen towns, rather than, say, for the 1,700 parcels in Eastford.

Filchak said the change has so far collectively saved the towns in the state’s northeast corner about \$1 million, a 47 percent reduction. Cathy Osten, the first selectwoman of Sprague and also the state senator in the 19th District, said her town joined the revaluation group even though Sprague is a member of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, the regional organization for towns in our corner of Connecticut.

“The southeastern council of governments was not interested in this,” Osten told me. “That’s why I went with the northeast council of governments.”

Osten said the move cut revaluation costs for her small town by about half.

James Butler, executive director of the Southeastern COG, said local leaders a few years ago gave him the task of exploring such a plan.

“At the time our (tax) assessors, and I have to be diplomatic here, pushed back and were the reason we did not get into it regionally,” Butler said.

While Butler’s job calls for diplomacy — he has 22 chief elected town leaders to keep happy — my job doesn’t. The fact is this kind of intransigence, based on turf protection and an unwillingness to explore new ways of doing things, is the major impediment standing in the way of finding more regional efficiencies.

Butler said he expects the Southeastern COG to revisit consolidated revaluation services and other steps toward regional cooperation. Aided by a state grant, his office is preparing a report on regional opportunities to cut costs.

CCM is convinced it is the way to go. In the report, it recommends the legislature require regional consolidation of property assessment services for towns servicing less than 15,000 parcels. That would include every municipality in southeastern Connecticut.

Butler also sees potential savings by sharing the cost of such “back-office” operations as information technology, human resources and grant writing. The local COG already has contracts with five small towns to provide planning services, saving them the cost of each hiring planners.

Osten said Sprague jointly purchased a large roadside mower and street sweeper with Bozrah and Franklin, obtaining a regional incentive grant from the state in the process. The three small towns share the equipment.

In the Northeast Corner, Filchak said 11 towns share animal control responsibilities and a single animal shelter, in the Dayville section of Killingly, saving the towns the cost of meeting that need individually.

Local elected leaders need to get squarely behind these efforts, even if it means breaking a few local eggs.

**Paul Choiniere is the editorial page editor.**