



2024

ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM

Prepared by: Anna Shugrue, Regional Planner II

January 2024

Introduction

The Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments recognizes the need to identify regional legislative priorities ahead of the 2024 short legislative session. The following list of policy areas- which is random and not in order of priority- has been assembled through several individual meetings with the First Selectmen/Town Managers of the NECCOG Region's towns. This platform contains key issues and specific proposals to address the following policy areas. The purpose of this platform is to detail NECCOG's support and advocacy for certain legislative issues, as well as serve as a point of reference for bill tracking during this year's session.

Note: This document is a work in progress and will be updated periodically.

General Principles

1. Support legislation that advances NECCOG's organizational mission of results through regionalism and oppose legislation that will hinder NECCOG in continuing to administer and provide regional services to municipalities.
2. Support legislation that allows greater flexibility for municipal positions defined in state statute in order to foster greater operational capacity within the region.
3. Collaborate with local agencies and surrounding governments in an effort to strengthen support for regional services and solutions to policy issues.
4. Continue NECCOG's efforts of informing and seeking counsel of the region's leadership throughout the legislative session.
5. Support legislation that provides equitable levels of state and federal funding for state-mandated programs.

For more information, please contact:

John Filchak, Executive Director

john.filchak@neccog.org

860-774-1253 x 14

or

Anna Shugrue, Regional Planner II

anna.shugrue@neccog.org

860-774-1253 x 18

Policy Areas

1. Regional Health District Structure

- a. The current **Regional Health District Structure lacks accountability** to its member towns and should be reexamined through Connecticut General Statutes Sections [19a-240 through 19a-246](#). Additionally, NECCOG supports efforts towards legislation reform the updates the qualifications, term and duties of the director of health position. Currently, the statute (19a-244) reads that a director of health holds a graduate degree in public health but does not outline other criteria (such as managerial experience) that may be imperative for directing a district of health.

2. Housing

NECCOG supports the development of affordable housing and recognizes its importance in advancing economic development and quality of life within the region. NECCOG has completed several Affordable Housing Plans for its member towns to address housing challenges within the region and emphasizes its support for Affordable Housing legislation that considers the needs of individual small towns.

- a. NECCOG member towns are concerned that the Legislature will implement a **'one-size fits all'** approach to the development of affordable housing in the state and fail to provide flexibility to towns.
- b. **Properties being converted into Airbnbs** are negatively impacting the rental market. The Office of Legislative Research (OLR) published a [report](#) with a variety of techniques to regulate and control Airbnb rentals, including implementing duration caps on rentals, density controls, etc.

3. Agriculture/Animal Control

- a. **Mandatory Mediation for Animal Control Violations** - Animal control issues are not priority issues for the courts. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods such as mediation, enables people to resolve disputes before trial and accelerates the court process.¹ Legislation pertaining to animal control violations should allow for mediation to bypass the onerous court process dealing with animal control violation cases.
- b. **Roaming Livestock Control** - [PA 23-184](#) § 12 prohibits an owner for allowing their livestock to roam and grants an infraction when violated; but, the current law does not provide the authority for the state or municipalities to control this issue. Roaming livestock is a hazard and is impacting roadway safety within the region. Owners of roaming livestock can be cited; however, this only prolongs the issue as the court process is lengthy. NECCOG seeks to support legislation granting the state or municipalities to take more serious and immediate action against roaming livestock violations to be more effective in containing the issue and increasing roadway safety.
- c. **Avian Influenza Emergency Response Plan Impacts** on Municipalities- In the event of an avian influenza outbreak, the CT Department of Agriculture would have the right to utilize PA490 land within Voluntown. This is another unfunded mandate and potential public health/environmental challenge for towns with poultry farms.

¹ "State of Connecticut Judicial Branch Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)," (2022): Connecticut Judicial Branch, <<https://www.jud.ct.gov/external/super/altdisp.htm>>

4. Property Tax Reform

High property taxes in CT despite cuts in the income tax remains a top legislative priority. A report done by the Property Tax Working Group of 1,000 Friends of Connecticut titled, “Property Tax Reform- If Not NOW, WHEN?” provides a [framework](#) for property tax reform that addresses the two fundamental issues with Connecticut’s property tax system- horizontal and vertical inequity. NECCOG primarily supports property tax reform that works to address a town’s fiscal inequalities and increase capacity to provide high-quality public services.

- a. **Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT)** for State Lands- The use-value assessment value (490 value) is utilized to the detriment of towns and should be increased.
- b. **Non-profit and private educational costs of service to municipalities without local taxation or compensation** - The large amount of real estate that municipality’s nonprofit organizations and schools buy up lies on un-taxable land that could be profitable.
- c. **Valuation methodology change for motor vehicles** and the adverse impact to municipal grand lists- NECCOG would like this bill to be amended to include an equitable formula for assessing vehicles that does not leave the towns facing large cuts in taxes collected. COST sent out a proposed change to this legislation that should be consulted. Furthermore, there is currently a Motor Vehicle Property Tax Taskforce Subcommittee on Collecting Revenue at the Local Level that will be putting out a report ahead of the legislative session.

5. Municipal Solid Waste And Recycling

The state can benefit from a regional approach to municipal waste management, rather than individual town strategies. Municipalities would benefit from a statewide plan or cohesive messaging from DEEP that provides direction on how to manage waste.

- a. The publication, “Governor Lamont Announces 2023 Legislative Proposal: Addressing the Future of Materials and Waste Management,” proposes Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for packaging as an updated recommendation to the state’s Comprehensive Material Management Strategy. This bill would impose a fee on businesses for the disposal of waste material generated from their products, thus encouraging producers to cut down on creating excessive packaging and move towards packaging made of recycled materials. While a positive impact of this bill may include holding producers more accountable for their material use, **a resulting negative impact is the shifting burden of waste disposal to the town’s businesses and associated costs.** Businesses in the northeast may struggle to pay a new imposed fee.
- b. [Environmental Depot](#) Funding- NECCOG has been pioneering the creation of an Environmental Depot, which aims to be a self-sufficient location for municipal solid waste management. Currently, towns in the northeast region participate in intermittent Household Hazardous Waste Collection days, which are expensive, inconvenient, and often result in improper disposal. The Environmental Depot would provide a year-round regional waste disposal option and would assist the state in its 2024 goal of 60% diversion of materials from disposal.

6. Education

NECCOG emphasizes the need for regional cooperative efforts amongst COGs and Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) to foster increased efficiencies, reduced costs, and improved educational outcomes, especially for special education. The “Report of the Task Force to Promote Municipal Shared Services” prepared by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Work Groups explains that basic framework for shared services exists in the state, but the challenge is avenues of funding and service delivery. NECCOG supports legislation that advances restructuring service delivery and funding through COGs and RESCs.

- a. **Special Education Reform** - There are various unfunded mandates that town school districts face regarding special education students, with very little proper reimbursement from the state. Special education mandates pose a challenge for municipalities' Board of Ed budgets, as it is difficult to predict the number of students that will have Special Education needs from year-to-year.
- b. **Education Cost Sharing (ECS) Reform** - The state has been projecting a reduction in Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding by \$10 million over the course of ten years which could be problematic since education costs have risen. Town's Board of Education budgets would benefit from a predictable, equitable funding formula.

7. State lands

State-owned land is prevalent within the northeastern region, especially in Voluntown, where 66% of the town's land area (forest and recreational) is owned by the state. Less than ten thousand acres are left for private and municipal development (Voluntown POCD, 2020, p.7). State-owned land is regulated in various ways than municipally-owned land and impacts enforcement in several areas of the region.

- a. **DEEP Enforcement on State Lands and Water** - towns are dealing with an unfunded public safety issue, as DEEP has little jurisdiction to patrol certain state areas. It may be worthwhile to consult [EPA's Enforcement and Compliance History Online \(ECHO\)](#) to increase availability of compliance monitoring.
- b. **State's failure to maintain trails and other properties** - Trail maintenance is another unfunded mandate and possible liability.

8. Issuance of Temporary Pistol Permits

- a. **Pistol permit applications should be transferred to the State** when a town does not have a police department. The legislation should be rewritten so that towns can take applications and forward them to the appropriate state office for action. Since a temporary pistol permit is a state-issued permit, it should be granted and regulated at the state-level, through the state police who possess knowledge on background checks and CSPs.

9. Transportation and Infrastructure

- a. **Create an Infrastructure Bank** to facilitate municipal use of IJA and other federal programs. The Office of Legislative Research (OLR) released a report titled, "2020 Major Issues," in which other state agencies were consulted, including the Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA) and Legislative Commissioner's Office (LCO). In 2019, the Banking Committee introduced a bill proposing the creation of a state infrastructure bank which, "...use initial capital to lend funds for infrastructure projects and then, through a revolving loan fund, use the repayments to finance future projects" (OLR, 2020, p.5). [SB 70](#), proposed in 2019 would, "...establish an infrastructure bank in Connecticut to finance improvements for things such as roads, bridges, ports, energy transmission and distribution, and telecommunication networks" (OLR, 2020, p.5).
- b. **Lack of Predictability for the Local Bridge Program** and other similar Infrastructure Programs. Towns would like to see funds awarded in a timelier fashion, since investment in this infrastructure

is crucial. Other concerns for the bridge program are that the grant opportunities remain consistent from year-to-year and that more money from the state be allocated towards funding.

- c. Road Safety Assistance for towns without municipal police
- d. Airline Trail expansion delays for Killingly and Plainfield

10. Hazard Trees and Related Vegetation Management

Aging trees across the state have been plagued with invasive insect species such as the emerald ash borer and gypsy moth, as well as storm damage. These **hazard trees pose a threat to roadway safety and drivers**. NECCOG would like to see the creation of a formal, optional COG-based program for the management of hazard trees on heavily utilized roadways, and to aid towns that may not have the municipal capacity to handle this issue on their own.

11. Volunteer Fire and EMS Service

The current system of these services is not sustainable for small towns and requires reform. NECCOG would like the opportunity to pilot the consolidation of multiple small fire/EMS services into a sub-regional service with back-office support through the COG. This effort may be reached through RPIP or may require legislation. A law passed in session year 2021 required the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management to conduct a study regarding the obstacles to merging or consolidating the fire districts or fire departments of two or more municipalities. The Work Group [report](#) identified pros and cons to consolidation, obstacles to consolidation, paths to improving service, and statutes, regulations and policies to be considered in a consolidation process. NECCOG supports the Eastern CT EMS Council's following policy areas of interest:

- a. Increase Ambulance Medicaid Rates: there is \$5 million for EMS in the 2024 budget. We hope the funds remain in place throughout the session.
- b. Medicaid In-town Mileage: the current Medicaid program is unclear as to whether they should be paying for "in-town" transports. We are seeking language to clarify the issue, so all organizations get reimbursed for mileage for "in-town" transports.
- c. Maximum Allowable Ambulance Rates: OEMS sets our rates as "maximum allowable" rates. Our preference would be that language change to become "standard" rates.
- d. Emergency Responses to be fully covered by insurance plans: eliminate cost sharing (deductibles) for emergency ambulance responses, prohibit prior authorizations on emergency responses, and ensure emergency responses are covered by insurance plans.
- e. Eliminate Ambulance Sales Tax: Currently wheelchair vans do not pay sales tax. Ambulances used to have the same benefit. We'd like to have ambulances added to the exclusionary list.
- f. OEMS Regional Coordinators: We need your support in transitioning these valuable positions to permanent positions from durational.
- g. CT EMS Advisory Board: The Board is seeking support in classifying the "Trauma Committee" as a standing committee much like the "Medical Advisory Committee". The active trauma committee does not have a vote on any board initiatives currently, this would allow them that ability much like their ED Physician counterpart's Medical Advisory Committee.

12. RPIP Reform

Amend 4-124s(c)(2)(D) so that not less than twenty-five per cent of the cost of a proposal be funded by the council for the first three years of operation, and that by the fourth year, unless OPM in consultation with the COG agrees determines that an extension of the time frame is warranted to ensure the success of such program prior to the COG assuming one hundred per cent of the costs.

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13. MS4 Requirements

Some towns are facing difficulties reaching project and management plan goals to reduce polluted stormwater discharge due to lack of available municipal funding. NECCOG supports efforts to ensure that MS4 funding remains consistent from year-to-year and that funding is increased to support municipalities with lesser funding capacity. NECCOG proposes that towns that are required to comply with the MS4 General Permit guidelines must adhere to the following basic requirements of the program:

- a. Submit a Stormwater Management Plan identifying 6 minimum control measures that a municipality will undertake to prevent and/or treat polluted runoff;
- b. Submit Annual Reports to DEEP indicating the progress with implementing that plan; and
- c. Monitor the quality of water bodies.