

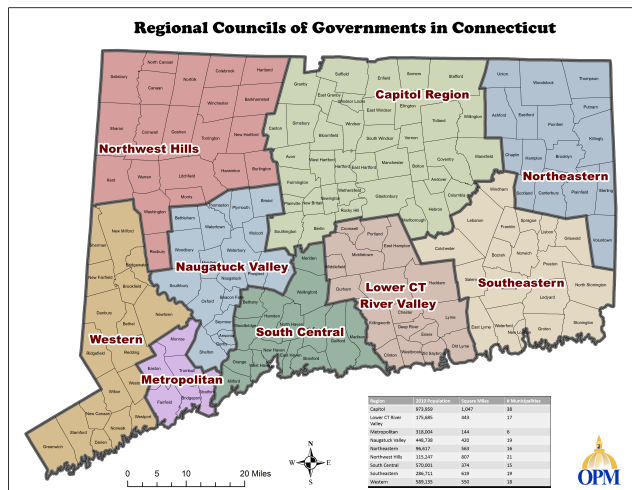
CT VIEWPOINTS

The need to act regionally has never been more important



by John Filchak

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If the opportunity for shared or regional services is to be realized, there needs to be a comprehensive realignment of which level of government — state, local or regional — should be responsible for what. Possibilities are open for strengthening and maximizing the opportunities provided by Connecticut's regional Councils of Government (COGs) for the efficient, effective and economic delivery of needed services. However, reforms must be enacted.

The budget situation in Connecticut has resulted in a growing capacity gap for municipalities relative to the services they provide. In response to budget reductions and a reluctance to raise property taxes, towns have reduced staffing and hours available for such services — stressing the capacity for towns to properly deliver necessary services. COGs can manage this capacity gap by providing those services on a shared or regional basis. In the long term, stronger regional capacity benefits our state by enhancing the ability to put in place shared and/or regional programs.

The now mothballed MORE Commission, during its tenure, prompted a valuable statewide discussion on shared and regional services. The MORE Commission's work resulted in multiple tools to enhance the capacity of our regions. Among the notable proposals were the consolidation of 15 planning regions into nine COGs, a dedicated fund to enhance the capacity of each COG to provide shared services and the Regional Performance Incentive Program (RPIP) to enable COGs to enact new programs.

The monies for this regional system came from a new fee placed on hotel and car rentals with a portion dedicated to the COGs. Unfortunately, the funding system put in place to support the COGs was short-lived. The money was recently swept into the state's operating budget. That was followed by a subsequent reduction in funding for the COGs and zero funding for the RPIP program.

Shared and regional services are not new to Connecticut. A few regions, including the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (NECCOG), have a long history of aggressively using regional and shared services. NECCOG has a large portfolio of shared and regional programs provided to towns both in and out our region. These programs cover a spectrum of services including Regional Paramedic Intercept, Regional Property Revaluation, Regional Animal Services, Regional GIS Services, Regional Engineering Services and more. These programs have saved significant local taxpayer dollars and improved the efficiency and effectiveness of these services as well. They each demonstrate the effectiveness of a region with both the capacity to deliver services and a membership embracing the shared /regional approach.

Connecticut made the decision to establish nine COGs just a few years ago. In doing so, the General Assembly gave municipalities, through their respective COGs, broad authority to utilize regional approaches to meet their individual and collective needs — making the need for county government unnecessary. The actions taken by the COGs to provide services are determined by their member towns — through their respective CEOs — which are accountable to voters. In essence, Connecticut now has a system that provides the benefits of a county government system in terms of acting regionally without the added administrative layer and costs that counties bring.

In the vast majority of states, counties play a significant role in the provision of services. Connecticut has eight counties that serve no administrative function. The state's 169 cities and towns hold strong to their identity and home rule authority both real and perceived. The reluctance to embrace regionalism or shared services has little to do with the absence of a county system.

Connecticut has COGs that have embraced the approach and provide a range of services that result in measurable efficiencies and significant cost savings. These regional approaches demonstrate that there is not a “one size fits all” solution to the service challenges of our towns. COGs, unlike counties, provide a more flexible opt-in or opt-out of service options. COGs better fit the New England and Connecticut traditions of governance. The challenge is to utilize the opportunities provided by COGs to most fully benefit our state.

Many towns favor “home rule” and fear of giving up their independence. In some instances, the funds provided to COGs were not used strategically to build regional or shared service capacity. The result is that for large parts of Connecticut the promise of regionalism remains elusive.

The legislature needs to set policies that encourage state and local governments, to combine and strengthen regional coordination and capacity-building efforts, and bolster their existing investment by making regional programs more directly responsive to their collective needs. The same mechanism could provide a more coherent framework for channeling federal funds to meet the needs of the state. In other words, we need to move from a 169-town fragmented approach to a regional one of rationality with the COGs as the foundation.

The challenge of revenue sharing must be addressed to realize the full potential of shared and regional services. At the state level, revenues from various state and federal sources are blended and distributed for a wide range of needs. Municipalities have little option for raising revenue beyond the property tax.

Connecticut needs to take multiple actions to enable regionalism to flourish. First, we must rededicate the hotel and rental car surcharge to fund the COGs. This change would provide approximately \$10 million annually to build capacity for regions.

This approach is more realistic than that suggested by the Commission on Fiscal Stability and Economic Growth which recommended regional fees, a regional sales tax or a regional property tax to underwrite regional initiatives. Predictable funding is essential to building and maintaining regional and/or shared programs.

Second, the legislature should establish a new select committee on shared services to promote and facilitate the implementation of shared and/or regional services.

Third, the legislature should examine the manner in which the distribution of state funds to the local level is conducted. The current town-by-town approach should be evaluated in comparison to a regional model in terms of the following: economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The current system, which perpetuates a fractured approach to services, has not been evaluated in terms of optimizing program delivery.

Fourth, the legislature needs to re-examine the current state agency system in terms of the delivery of services. This should be coupled with a complementary review of duplication of effort by state agencies and a detailed evaluation as to how to best deliver the required services, including the examination of a COG option to administer and/or deliver such services.

The need to act regionally has never been more important.

*John Filchak is the Executive Director of the **Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments**.*

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