

Capitol Region Council of Governments

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DATE: MARCH 5, 2007
TO: CHAIRMEN AND MEMBERS OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT
FROM: LYLE D. WRAY, PHD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
SUBJECT: TESTIMONY ON RAISED BILL NO. 1215, AN ACT IMPLEMENTING A PROCESS OF STATE-WIDE RESPONSIBLE GROWTH

CRCOG is the regional planning organization serving the City of Hartford and the 28 surrounding suburban and rural communities. The CRCOG legislative priorities for 2007 include support for a range of issues necessary to improve our regional economic competitiveness. Our legislative agenda includes: implementation of busway and commuter rail transit initiatives, and other actions supportive of transit-oriented development; inter-town cooperation and municipal and service sharing on public safety and other municipal services; and general support for expanding affordable and supportive housing opportunities, farmland and open space preservation, increasing state support for education to reduce local property tax burdens, and developing and maintaining a skilled work force.

Many of the issues addressed in Raised Bill No. 1215 support these regional priorities. Our testimony will focus on aspects of the bill that most directly relate to the role of regional councils of governments. CRCOG was the first official council of governments established in the State of Connecticut in 1973. Over our 34-year history, we have benefited from the strong support of our member municipalities, and a willingness and ability to conduct our core transportation and land use planning mission, while expanding into other areas of concern to our members, including cooperative purchasing, public safety and disaster preparedness, and direct technical assistance to our member communities. We firmly believe that the council of governments form of regional cooperation holds great potential to help coordinate responsible growth on a statewide basis.

We acknowledge that growth is necessary to the continued health and vitality of the region and the state. As our towns grow, it is important that the growth is carried out in a well-planned manner that preserves the best of what Connecticut and New England offer. Low-density development erodes the individual character of our urban, suburban and rural towns. Also, as we continue to spread out, it becomes increasingly hard to build a balanced transportation system and provide good access to jobs. Long and congested commutes make it difficult for employers to attract employees. And, when jobs, retail stores, and new housing are dispersed farther and farther out many people living in our City and older suburbs are denied access to them because they do not have cars to get there.

Well-planned development helps to preserve and strengthen our communities. It also saves tax dollars by making the most of available capacity in roads, sewers, water and other public services. At the same time, it helps protect key working farms, forests, and open space. We need state and local policies that support livable communities and encourage development in areas where infrastructure already exists. We can move in this direction by having more data, better tools and increased planning coordination to facilitate informed land use decisions that work in the long-term interest of Connecticut residents. Over the past several years, organizations such as the Regional Institute for the 21st Century, the Center Edge Coalition and the State's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Property Tax and Smart Growth, and most recently, the 1000 Friends of Connecticut, are calling for similar policies.

Within this broader context, we offer the following comments on Raised Bill 1215.

1. **Office of Responsible Growth.** We support enhancing planning capacity at the Office of Responsible Growth. Such capacity is critical to the intergovernmental coordination envisioned through this bill.
2. **State Economic Development Plan.** In concept, we support creation and implementation of statewide economic development plan. To be effective, this plan must be developed through consultation with all relevant State agencies, COGs, municipalities, and other agencies such as the MetroHartford Alliance, which have already developed Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies for their areas of operation. Both the proposed State Economic Development Plan and the State Plan of Conservation and Development must have extensive regional and local input if they are to be relevant and comprehensive in meeting local and regional needs. Public hearings alone will not be sufficient to obtain meaningful input. The process should also include an outcome analysis to evaluate the overall effects of proposed actions on the economy.
3. **Councils of Governments.** As stated previously, we firmly believe that the council of governments form of regional cooperation holds great potential to help coordinate responsible growth on a statewide basis. We encourage other regions that do not currently operate as COGs to explore the benefits of this structure.
4. **Planning Consistency.** Several sections of Raised Bill 1215 refer to planning consistency. In concept, we support working toward consistency between state, regional and local plans and using these plans as a basis for coordinating state investment decisions. This will only work, however, if the type of interagency and intergovernmental consultation proposed in item 2 above is part of the planning process. The objective of consistency reviews should be making sure that guiding policies established in the plans are not in conflict—not requiring that the plans be exactly the same. Regional plans should be developed in the same manner as State plans, with some form of consultation with other regional entities, State agencies, and member municipalities throughout the planning process.
5. **Review of Projects of Regional Significance.** CRCOG has long supported regional review and comment on projects of regional significance, but only if such reviews are strictly advisory to the decision-making bodies charged with approving the projects. State statutes already require advisory reviews of zoning and subdivision proposals abutting or spanning town lines. Advisory reviews of projects of regional significance are a logical extension of existing COG powers. The new review process could be evaluated after several years, to determine its effectiveness in guiding and coordinating regional growth, and determine if further changes to the process are required. Key questions to be asked might include: Are projects that are truly significant from a regional standpoint being captured by the referral criteria? Are the regional comments being incorporated into final decisions regarding projects? Are they resulting in development that is more responsive to inter-municipal issues and concerns? Is the review process resulting in approvals that support regional and state growth and conservation objectives?
6. **Incentive Grants to COGs and Municipalities.** Good planning takes financial resources. Municipalities and COGs will need staff assistance to create the plans and implementation mechanisms/regulations that are envisioned by this act. Simply providing incentive grants after plans, regulations and other implementation actions are in place will not be enough to bring about voluntary action. CRCOG has identified key areas in which state financial resources could help spur inter-town cooperation and municipal service sharing. These ideas are applicable to planning initiatives as well. They include capacity building, incentives, and possible use of a pilot region to test particularly

promising ideas. If the state moves forward with this proposal, it should provide planning dollars to help municipalities and regions achieve the desired results, and provide technical assistance—either directly or through COGs—so that each town and each region is not trying to reinvent successful strategies. CRCOG would welcome the opportunity be part of such a technical assistance network, if funding is provided.

Furthermore, if an incentive grant program is put in place, it should include a comprehensive scoring system that is based on the wide range of initiatives that support responsible growth. Factors to consider might include: adoption of mixed use land use regulations, land assembled and zoning regulations put in place to facilitate transit oriented development, amount of open space and farmland preserved, adoption of cluster provisions, infrastructure improvements in villages and downtowns, and redevelopment of brownfield sites, to name a few.

- 7. Grants to Streamline Governance and Regional Assets Districts.** In the 2007 legislative session, CRCOG has gone on record as supporting state incentives to promote municipal service sharing (Raised Bill 1056, An Act Concerning State Revenue Sharing for Cooperative Municipal Activities). CRCOG is currently engaged in a service sharing initiative, which is moving forward on several high-priority projects. We have been a leader in the state with regard to addressing public safety issues on a regional basis, an activity that began over 10 years ago and has expanded post 9/11. We also run a very successful cooperative purchasing program that has been in place since the CRCOG's inception, and that now serves 64 Connecticut communities. CRCOG and our member municipalities have proven that there are financial savings and increased efficiencies to be achieved through inter-town cooperation and municipal service sharing, and our current projects only scratch the surface of what is possible.

Several years ago, CRCOG was also part of a coalition supporting a legislative proposal that would enable COGs and Councils of Elected Officials to operate as regional assets districts. CRCOG viewed this as a voluntary mechanism that could help us achieve several regional objectives: to support and finance regional assets with a stable funding source, to assure cost-effective development and/or operation of regional assets, to promote inter-town collaboration; to promote economic growth and vitality, and to strengthen urban centers as the economic and cultural hubs of their regions. We still feel that this would be a useful tool to make available to regions.

- 8. Affordable Housing Program Incentives.** CRCOG municipal officials and staff serve on the HOMEConnecticut Steering Committee, and CRCOG has presented testimony in support of Raised Bill 7149, An Act Concerning Housing for Economic Growth (the HOMEConnecticut bill). We believe that the voluntary program proposed through Raised Bill 7149 will provide incentives to encourage the creation of housing affordable to working families, something that is much needed in the Capitol Region and the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these comments.