

2017 Legislative Breakfast Schedule

Ridgefield Visiting Nurse Association, 27 Governor Street Ridgefield, CT 06877 • January 23, 2017

Time	Activity/discussion topic
8:00 AM	Welcome and Breakfast
Discussion with Legislators	
8:30 AM	Enact Meaningful Mandate Relief
8:45 AM	Protect Local Property Taxpayers
9:00 AM	Ensure Fair Share Education Funding
9:15 AM	Assist Towns in Lowering Energy Costs
9:20 AM	Support Cost-Effective Regional Programs
9:30 AM	Reform the Tax Code and Maximize Federal Transfers
9:40 AM	Fix and Upgrade Transportation Infrastructure
9:50 AM	Stem the Opioid Epidemic
10:00 AM	MPO Meeting
10:15 AM	COG Meeting
11:00 AM	Adjournment

Western Connecticut COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS



Thursday, January 19, 2017

Honorable Senators and Representatives,
Esteemed Colleagues:

The Chief Elected Officials of the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) are honored to present you with a comprehensive set of proposals for your consideration during the 2017 legislative session.

Our proposals this year mirror those endorsed by the Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST). This is no accident. The challenges our members are confronting—falling revenues due to cuts in state aid and exploding costs due to unfunded mandates—are anything but unique.

Every city and town in Connecticut is in the same boat.

It has been suggested to us that shared problems are best served by shared solutions. We agree. The proposals before you are the product of extensive collaboration across the state. **They are designed to enable municipalities to align costs with revenues and, consequently, avoid the need for large tax hikes or for service cuts—options that would have a negative impact on the state's economy.** Taken together, our proposals chart fiscally sustainable, economically vibrant path forward for state and local government in Connecticut.

We urge you to take up these proposals and look forward to discussing them with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt Knickerbocker".

Matthew S. Knickerbocker
Chairman

2017 Legislative Priorities

Message from COST

The state is facing daunting fiscal challenges due to a persistent state budget deficit, runaway state pension and benefit costs, failing cities, and discouraging revenue projections. Midyear cuts to education funding and the unavailability of funding for the Local Capital Improvement Program (LoCIP) have left towns scrambling to address budget shortfalls and defer capital projects.

At the same time, lawmakers are under pressure to address disparities in public education highlighted by a recent court decision in CCJEF v. Rell, which is currently under appeal to the Connecticut Supreme Court. And, given the size of the state budget deficit, additional cuts in municipal aid are under consideration. In addition, the state has recently enacted laws aimed at restricting municipal spending, capping property taxes on motor vehicles, mandating various property tax exemptions, and restructuring Payment in Lieu of Tax (PILOT) grant payments.

Cuts in municipal aid coupled with unfunded state mandates and declining local revenues are imposing an impossible burden on Connecticut's small towns. Municipalities are struggling to deliver critical education, transportation, public health and safety services to residents and businesses while holding the line on property tax levels. Given the ongoing budget challenges facing towns and cities, lawmakers must provide towns with relief from unfunded state mandates and give towns the tools they need to operate efficiently.

Our legislative proposals for 2017 are as follows:

Base Proposals

These proposals have been endorsed by COST.

Enact Meaningful Mandate Relief

- Refrain from adopting any new or expanded unfunded mandates during the 2017 legislative session and require any future unfunded mandates to be approved by a 2/3 majority of the legislature;
- Enact meaningful mandate relief to assist towns in reducing costs and holding the line of property tax levels, including:
 1. Reducing construction costs for municipal projects by (a) revising the prevailing wage thresholds for municipal public works projects to \$1 million for new construction and \$400,000 for renovations to exempt small projects such as salt sheds, pavilions, and town garages from prevailing wage requirements; and (b) increasing the \$50,000 project threshold for municipal set aside requirements, consistent with prevailing wage requirements;
 2. Reforming the Municipal Employees Retirement System by creating an additional defined benefit plan tier for new hires, consistent with the state's tier III;
 3. Identifying a viable mechanism for funding the newly created firefighter cancer relief fund to ensure that

- municipalities are not burdened with additional costs;
4. Eliminating the requirement that towns publish legal notices in newspapers and allow towns to post such notices on their municipal websites, consistent with state agencies; and
 5. Modifying binding arbitration laws to require that grievance arbitration and unfair labor practice awards be issued no later than 60 days following the date post-hearing briefs are filed.

Protect Local Property Taxpayers

- Provide towns with greater authority to manage local budgets, including education budgets, and respond to changes in revenue, including reductions in state aid;
- Authorize reimbursements for local capital projects beginning in March 2017 by adjusting the cap on Local Capital Improvement Program (LoCIP) funding;
- Eliminate the Municipal Spending Cap which unfairly penalizes communities that increase general budget expenditures to deliver critical services;
- Eliminate the administration's authority to impose midyear cuts in municipal aid, including MORE Commission Lapses;
- Assist municipalities in maintaining infrastructure needed to maintain economic vitality by sustaining funding for the Town Aid Road, Local Bridge, Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP) and Clean Water Fund programs;
- Restrict the use of 'budget implemented' bills to ensure that any policy/fiscal implications for municipalities are fully analyzed and considered;

- Eliminate the motor vehicle property tax cap if funds to reimburse municipalities for revenue losses are not appropriated and refrain from adopting any new or expanded property tax exemptions;
- Provide towns with stable, alternative revenue sources, such as authorizing towns to charge a fee for tax exempt properties equal to the services provided for police, fire, emergency services and roads; and
- Authorize towns to increase and retain a greater percentage of municipal fees.

Ensure Fair Share Education Funding

- Ensure that any revisions to education funding are fully considered in an open, transparent and collaborative process that provides all school districts with a sustainable, predictable, and realistic base level of education funding;
- Eliminate the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) for high- performing school districts and provide other school districts with greater flexibility under MBR to reduce education spending, including authorizing towns to reduce spending below MBR to reflect any decreases in education funding enacted in current and prior fiscal years; and
- Assist towns in managing special education costs by (1) requiring Regional Education Service Centers to provide increased special education services to school districts; (2) shifting the burden of proof in special education hearings from the school district to the claimant, consistent with federal standards; and (3) requiring the state to pay 100% of the costs of special education for severe-needs students.

Assist Towns in Lowering Energy Costs

- Protect the viability of Connecticut's trash to energy plants and control municipal tipping fees and costs through a Renewable Energy Credit;
- Increase the statutory cap on Virtual Net Metering (VNM) to enable more communities to utilize VNM to reduce energy costs and improve energy efficiency; and
- Address concerns associated with the siting of small cell facilities in public rights of way.

Support Cost-Effective Regional and Shared Services Programs

- Assist municipalities in facilitating consolidation of services, such as 9-1-1 Call Centers, by addressing statutory or contractual barriers to consolidation;
- Protect the viability of the Resident State Trooper program and expand efforts to allow towns to share Resident State Troopers or partner with other local law enforcement agencies; and
- Reject top down efforts to force consolidation of services/programs, including the consolidation of local/regional health districts, without performing comprehensive cost-benefit analyses.

Additional Proposals

These proposals are in addition to COST's legislative priorities.

Reform the Tax Code and Maximize Federal Transfers

- Eliminate or reform taxes that encourage populations with low service demands (such as empty nesters and retirees) to move away (e.g., estate tax, gift tax);

- Adjust policies to retain and attract persons with high earning potential;
- Reduce tax burden on small businesses and startups (e.g., base exemption);
- Evaluate the state tax code and restructure where possible to take advantage of opportunities to increase federal deductions and thus lower the effective tax on residents and businesses;
- Evaluate state policies/practices and restructure where possible to take advantage of opportunities to increase federal transfers and obtain larger, positive multiplier effects; and
- Request that the federal government recognize COGs as county equivalents for statistical purposes and for federal funding eligibility.

Fix and Upgrade Transportation Infrastructure

- Fully fund maintenance of the state's transportation infrastructure, including operating funds for transit service;
- Improve reliability, speed, and capacity on the New Haven Line;
- Electrify and extend the Danbury Branch;
- Implement Bus Rapid Transit on Route 1 in southwestern Connecticut; and
- Proceed with the widening of I-84 in Danbury.

Stem the Opioid Epidemic

- Create a state, cabinet-level position to coordinate action on opioids and other problem drugs (a drug "tsar");
- Develop, fund, and implement an evidence-based, outcome-oriented strategy to curb drug abuse and its consequences across the state;
- Develop a comprehensive accounting of the costs of drug abuse and integrate into economic and budget calculations.