

March 3, 2022

Esteemed Chairs Lemar and Haskell,
Members of the Transportation Committee:

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the following bills:

- Senate Bill 215, *An Act Concerning the Development of a Transportation Engineering Recruitment Program*. WestCOG **supports** actions that will ensure an adequate supply of talent to maintain and improve the state's transportation system. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) constitutes a historic increase in transportation funding – and a correspondingly large growth in the need for transportation experts. At the same time, a wave of retirements – the so-called 'silver tsunami' – is expected to impact the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) particularly hard, with up to 40% of staff retiring in some areas. Many new hires will be needed to sustain and, in line with IIJA, accelerate investment into the state's transportation system. Unfortunately, the state's colleges and universities are not producing enough new graduates to fill even half the need for transportation professionals.

SB 215 may help attract more students into transportation programs, which is important, but it will not alone result in more talent joining DOT, or in helping the Department do more given its labor constraints. To this end, WestCOG suggests that you consider:

1. Recruitment process reform, with broad advertising of current and expected vacancies, recognition of professional licenses from other jurisdictions, a shorter timetable to hire, and flexibility and incentives.
 2. Increased use of technology to raise productivity.
 3. Delegation of responsibility for local and regional programs and projects to the regional councils of governments, so that DOT resources may focus on major state concerns. LOTCIP is a successful example of such delegation that could be extended into additional phases of project development (design, rights-of-way, construction) and to programs similar in scale (e.g., Community Connectivity, Local Bridge Program).
 4. Dedicated grant writers, so that scarce engineering talent can do what it trained to do, and the state can maximize competitiveness under IIJA's discretionary programs, which could net the state an additional \$2 billion. If grant writing is not a core DOT function, grant writers could be housed at the COGs, which are well-positioned for this role.
- Senate Bill 216, *An Act Concerning the Expansion of Passenger Rail Service on the Waterbury Branch of the Metro-North Commuter Railroad*. WestCOG broadly supports expansions of passenger rail service. However, WestCOG is confused as to how the Waterbury branch could be expanded to Derby, Seymour, and Shelton. All three towns currently are served by the Waterbury branch; indeed, service on the line dates back to the mid-19th century.

WestCOG would suggest that any expansions of service be directed to municipalities that are on a rail line and desire passenger rail but that are not currently served. WestCOG recommends that your Committee examine adding service to:

1. Georgetown. Passenger service to Georgetown is key to the redevelopment of the Gilbert and Bennett Wire Mill. The region has been seeking to convert this large complex at the quardripoint of Redding, Ridgefield, Weston, and Wilton into a diverse mixed-use transit-oriented community, with strong job creation and affordable housing components. Passenger rail is necessary to make this exciting and equitable project work.
2. Brookfield Four Corners. Substantial public and private investment has been directed in the last several years into transforming an obsolete commercial strip characterized largely by gas stations and vacant storefronts into a town center. Passenger rail would turbocharge this project, building on existing momentum, and providing a model for the retrofit of vibrant human-scale town centers in suburban areas throughout the state.
3. Downtown New Milford. The downtown developed around passenger rail. While the historic architecture and downtown form has been well preserved, the loss of passenger rail service limits the area from achieving its full potential as an economic center and a transit hub for southern Litchfield County.

Should you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis Pickering". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Francis R. Pickering
Executive Director