

March 3, 2023

Esteemed Chairs Kavros Degraw and Rahman,
Members of the Planning and Development Committee:

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) appreciates the opportunity to comment on Proposed Bill 6394, *An Act Concerning Incentives for Transit-Oriented Development*.

WestCOG **supports** this bill.

This bill would entitle locally-driven projects that increase housing density around transit stations in any municipality to higher priority and reduced local cost share under state grants that provide funding for housing creation, economic development (including brownfields remediation), and infrastructure (including wastewater, mobility, public space, and broadband).

The bill would do this by giving applications for projects that add housing within one-half mile of a transit station the same status as an application from a “distressed municipality.” Station areas, which are often saddled with the legacy of industry, including underutilized buildings and environmental hazards, are among the poorest and most disinvested areas of our state. Yet state law does not treat these areas as such – it only recognizes distress at the municipal level.

The bill works around a problem with Connecticut state law, which only applies the concept of “distress” at a municipal level. This is inconsistent with best practices and with federal agencies, which assess distress at a more granular level (e.g., Census tract). In other words, Connecticut fails to recognize and thus address distress at the submunicipal level.

The consequence of this is that station areas around the state languish. These areas should be prime development sites but largely have not redeveloped because cleaning up brownfields, adding sewer capacity, and rehabilitating mills and factories into housing is only financially viable with financial assistance – and because Connecticut’s unusual definition of distress only applies at the municipal level, the state does not provide that assistance in sufficient quantity. Communities such as Bethel, Branchville, Georgetown, despite genuine need and huge opportunity, are stuck on the wrong side of the statutory tracks.

Housing advocates have called for the creation of new housing, at a variety of income levels, centered around transit stations in a range of communities. This bill would do exactly this: it would catalyze transit-oriented redevelopment and the development of affordable housing in areas where this has not yet happened to date. In doing so, the bill represents a course correction from a “distressed” municipality approach that, in preferentially giving funding for affordable housing to a short list of municipalities, has not promoted economic diversity but instead concentrated need.

Bill 6394 will advance equitable, transit-oriented development throughout Connecticut in partnership with – rather than against local communities – to redevelop our historic station areas as vibrant, sustainable, and diverse places to live and grow.

Should you have questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.
Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis R. Pickering". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Francis R. Pickering
Executive Director