

# 2026 Policy Agenda

Western Connecticut Council of Governments' (WestCOG) 2026 Policy Agenda outlines a focused set of legislative priorities developed by the region's eighteen member municipalities. These recommendations are grounded in on-the-ground municipal experience and are intended to strengthen Connecticut's fiscal health, infrastructure, housing supply, environmental resilience, public safety, and capacity for regional collaboration.

The agenda emphasizes practical, implementable reforms that improve outcomes for residents while respecting local control and fiscal realities. It highlights statutory reforms that modernize state law, streamline administration, strengthen local and regional capacity, and improve the effectiveness of public spending. Taken together, these priorities reflect WestCOG's commitment to supporting vibrant communities, responsive government, and a high quality of life across Western Connecticut.

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## 1. FINANCES

These recommendations focus on strengthening municipal fiscal stability, improving equity in state funding formulas, and reducing structural pressures that drive property taxes upward. Collectively, they aim to better align state policy with local cost drivers, demographic change, and modern service demands.

### 1.1. Fix the method to identify distressed municipalities

Many state programs give preference to municipalities that the state has identified as “distressed.” However, the method the state uses to identify distress is inconsistent with federal programs, making it harder to stack federal and state funds. To improve the ability to leverage federal funds, the method should be revised to mirror federal definitions of economic distress.

### 1.2. Use people-centered, not property-centered, funding formulas

Many state formulas treat low property values as a proxy for need. This disadvantages communities where housing costs are high but household incomes are not, shifting aid away from places with the greatest affordability pressures. State funding formulas should instead be based on actual household burden—such as taxes relative to income—rather than on property values.

### 1.3. Allow municipalities to recover costs from tax-exempt property

Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) reimburses municipalities for revenue lost to mandated tax exemptions. When PILOT is underfunded, the cost of local services is shifted onto residents and taxable businesses—particularly in communities with large concentrations of tax-exempt property. To address this, municipalities should be allowed to recover the cost of non-educational services consumed by tax-exempt facilities when PILOT falls short. This approach would reduce pressure on property taxes, limit tax-avoidance incentives, and give communities a practical tool to manage service costs.

### 1.4. Eliminate or reform the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR)

The MBR has not allowed municipalities to adjust spending in proportion to dropping enrollment. This policy has resulted in shrinking districts spending more per pupil, without a clear rationale. To address this, the MBR should be abolished or reformed to serve as a floor that reflects the cost of providing a quality education to a child, rather than a shadow of previous spending.

### 1.5. Shorten the early voting period

Connecticut’s 14-day early voting period imposes considerable staffing and operational costs on local governments. While a longer voting period can turn more voters out, beyond a certain point, extending the period provides only marginal additional participation even as municipal costs continue to rise with every extra day. Connecticut should reduce early voting to one week (7 days) to preserve the core accessibility benefits of early voting while avoiding the high costs associated with maintaining a second full week. Voters unable to vote in person during that week would still have the option to vote absentee.

## 2. TRANSPORTATION

The transportation priorities emphasize sustained investment, congestion relief, and modern funding tools to maintain regional mobility. The proposals seek to improve system performance, advance major projects, and give regions flexibility to deliver infrastructure efficiently.

### 2.1. Continue funding transportation

The Special Transportation Fund, which supports the state's transportation system, has experienced close calls in the past and is expected to face challenges in the future. To keep the Fund healthy and adequately resourced. To this end, the state should:

- Fully fund the STF, with no revenue diversion or suspension.
- Press to adjust the federal gas tax to account for inflation, which has eroded over 50% of its real value. (Connecticut receives more from this tax than it pays in, so increases to the tax would be a net positive for the state.)
- In conjunction with peer states, develop a revenue source for electric vehicles so that their users also share fairly in supporting the transportation system, such as through a kWh fee.

### 2.2. Advance regional transportation priorities

In 1999, New England was warned that it risked “losing connectivity to the global network and becoming increasingly isolated” due to inadequate infrastructure. Since then, however, infrastructure capacity has not kept up with demand; I-95 in the Stamford area now ranks as having the worst congestion in the country (INRIX, 2023). Getting people and goods flowing efficiently will take investment across a range of major transportation projects. These include:

- Add capacity to I-95 from the New York State line
- Reconstruct and add capacity to I-84 in the Danbury area
- Complete the Route 7/15 interchange
- Coordinate signals on major routes such as Route 1
- Reduce New Haven Line travel times and improve speeds (execute Time for CT)
- Implement the Danbury Branch study, including electrification and extension to New Milford
- Implement quiet zones on the New Canaan Branch
- Add rail station parking
- Implement bus rapid transit on Route 1
- Complete the Norwalk River Valley Trail/Still River Greenway/U.S. Bike Route 7
- Demand reduction through fiber to every home and business

### 2.3. Enable Payment-in-Lieu-of-Sidewalks (PILOS)

PILOS allows a municipality to waive the construction of sidewalks and crossings (pedestrian infrastructure) in a development where they will not get much use (e.g., on a small cul-de-sac) in exchange for payment into a PILOS fund. A municipality may then use this fund to build sidewalks where they are most needed (e.g., on the main road the cul-de-sac opens onto). Connecticut should join the many states that explicitly provide for PILOS.

#### 2.4. Build schools with sidewalks

Interest in walking to school is growing at the same time that pedestrian deaths are rising. A factor in these fatalities is a lack of safe infrastructure. To promote physical activity, facilities that are designed to enable children to walk or bike to school should be treated as eligible costs under state school construction grants, even if they are not on school property.

### 3. HOUSING

Housing recommendations focus on expanding affordability across the income spectrum, modernizing incentives under §8-30g, and removing statutory barriers to housing production and preservation. Together, these changes are intended to increase housing supply, support municipal planning efforts, and better reflect today’s housing economics.

#### 3.1. Expand the local conveyance tax option statewide to support housing trust funds

Housing trust funds, which bridge the gap between what a lower-income household can pay, and what it costs to create a home, are a common way counties and municipalities across the country finance affordable housing. These funds are often supported by a local or regional option on the conveyance tax. While state law provides a local 0.25% option on the conveyance tax, this option is not available in most Connecticut municipalities – including those where housing costs are higher (and where the housing finance gap is greater). The state should expand the local conveyance tax option to all 169 cities and towns, allowing municipalities to decide for themselves whether to use this tool to support local housing trust funds.

#### 3.2. Add more HUE point tiers under §8-30g

§8-30g does not award extra housing unit equivalent (HUE) points deep affordability: a home restricted to 20% of median income (MI) earns the same points as one at 40%. Nor does the law give any credit for units above 80% MI—even though, because construction costs have grown faster than incomes, housing affordable to 100% MI households is now *below market rate* and cannot be built without assistance.

The state should solve this by adding lower and higher point tiers. This proposal (see below) gives more points for units at or below 20% of MI, recognizing extremely low-income housing as a distinct need. It also grants partial credit for units 80–120% of MI, aligning the law with state initiatives like Build CT that help finance moderate-income housing. Together, these changes modernize §8-30g to reflect the full spectrum of affordability without rewriting its core structure.

Income Cap	Current Points/Unit	Adjustment	New Points/Unit
≤20%	2.0 /2.5 (same as ≤40%)	+0.5 from ≤40% level	2.5/3.0
≤40%	2.0/2.5	—	2.0/2.5
≤60%	1.5/2.0	—	1.5/2.0
≤80%	1.0/1.5	—	1.0/1.5
≤100%	0.0/0.0 (currently ineligible)	-0.5 from ≤80% level	0.5/1.0
≤120%	0.0/0.0 (currently ineligible)	-1.0 from ≤80% level	0.25*/0.5
No cap (market-rate)	0.25/0.25	—	0.25/0.25

Point values are for rented/owned units.

\* The existing floor of 0.25 points per market-rate unit would apply here.

### 3.3. Scale HUE points for senior housing to affordability

§8-30g assigns 0.5 HUE points to senior units affordable at or below 80% of MI, regardless of how affordable they are. A senior rental unit at 80% MI earns the same as one at 40% MI. This ceiling discourages the creation of deeply affordable senior housing, even though seniors often need units priced well below 60% MI.

The 0.5-point ceiling should be replaced with a simple deduction of 0.5 points from whatever a unit would otherwise earn, while preserving the floor of 0.25 points per unit. This would reward deeper levels of affordability in age-restricted projects, while still limiting the credit for senior housing relative to unrestricted housing but rewards. This reform preserves the intent of prioritizing family housing while giving communities a real incentive to support meaningful senior downsizing options that can free up larger homes.

Income Cap	Current Points/Unit (Age-restricted)	New Points/Unit (Proposal #2 above)	Minus 0.5 Deduction for Age-restricted
≤20%	0.5	2.5/3.0	2.0/ 2.5
≤40%	0.5	2.0/2.5	1.5/ 2.0
≤60%	0.5	1.5/2.0	1.0/ 1.5
≤80%	0.5	1.0/1.5	0.5/ 1.0
>80-100%	0.25*	0.5/1.0	0.25/0.5
>100-120%	0.25*	0.25/0.5	0.25/0.25

\* The existing floor of 0.25 points per market-rate unit would apply here.

### 3.4. Recognize and incentivize single-room occupancies (SROs)

Historically, SROs such as rooming and boarding houses provided safe, low-cost accommodation for workers, students, seniors, and individuals transitioning between living situations. However, despite their historic role and their relevance to today’s housing affordability challenges, SROs are invisible within the §8-30g framework. Municipalities receive no credit for producing or preserving SRO beds, even though SROs can provide the lowest-cost housing available in the private market.

§8-30g should recognize SROs as an important form of affordable housing and assign each SRO bed a fractional HUE point toward the moratorium calculation and a fractional unit toward the 10% affordability threshold to incentivize this vital but overlooked housing option.

### 3.5. Enable tax abatement of housing renovation/conversion

Under CGS §12-65b, municipalities may provide tax abatements explicitly for the rehabilitation of existing structures for retail business use. However, the statute does not include residential rehabilitation, limiting the ability to use tax abatements for the creation of affordable housing through the conversion of existing buildings into housing or the renovation of existing affordable housing (such as those under §8-30g).

Municipalities should be able to give tax abatements for the rehabilitation of housing units, as well as the conversion of non-residential buildings into housing, to incentivize the renovation—and

extension of affordability restrictions—on existing affordable housing, including §8-30g units, as well as support the conversion of underutilized commercial properties into homes.

### **3.6. Correct the affordable middle housing penalty**

CGS §8-2s allows municipalities to earn ¼ HUE point for each middle housing unit developed as-of-right. However, two wording issues prevent this incentive from operating as intended and, in fact, risk penalizing affordable housing development.

First, the statute is ambiguous about whether municipalities must rezone all residential and commercial properties to allow middle housing as-of-right to qualify for the ¼-point credit. This uncertainty may discourage municipal participation. Second, and far more serious, §8-2s(b) awards only the ¼-point referenced in §8-30g(l)(6). Under a plain reading of the law, all units in a middle housing project developed as-of-right receive ¼ HUE point. For affordable units, this is less than what they would earn, if they were built under special permit. In cutting HUE points for affordable middle housing developed as-of-right, the statute creates a disincentive for municipalities to permit housing using this process.

To correct this, the law should be amended to (1) clarify that municipalities earn ¼ HUE point for each middle housing unit developed as-of-right, regardless of how extensive the as-of-right zone is, and (2) explicitly provide that the ¼-point award is additional to—and does not cancel out—the HUE points that affordable units earn under § 8-30g(l).

### **3.7. Faster and cleaner moratorium review**

Under current law, the Department of Housing (DOH) has 90 days to act on moratorium applications under §8-30g, and the statute provides no stay during this review period. This often results in a surge of §8-30g filings before a decision is issued, a dynamic that runs counter to the moratorium’s purpose of offering orderly and predictable relief to towns that have achieved the required level of affordable housing production.

Connecticut should streamline and protect the moratorium process by shortening DOH’s review window, requiring DOH to offer an optional pre-application meeting at municipal request, and allowing municipalities to stay acceptance of new §8-30g proposals until DOH renders a decision. If the moratorium is approved, stayed proposals would not proceed; if the moratorium is denied, they would resume. These changes ensure that municipalities pursuing a moratorium in good faith are not overwhelmed by strategic filings, while preserving full procedural rights for applicants when a moratorium is not granted.

### **3.8. Extend the option for current use value taxation to affordable rentals**

While property is generally taxed based on its “highest and best use”, all states have provisions that tax property on its current use, when such use is of societal benefit. Connecticut law (PA 490) reduces assessments and thus taxes on working farms and forest tracts in exchange for 10-year commitments from the owner to keep the farm a farm and the forest a forest. This reduces the pressure on owners to convert the land to other uses. In addition to farms and forests, PA 490 provides a municipal option to reduce assessments on properties whose owners have committed to maintaining them as open space.

Just as PA 490 reduces pressure to convert farmland or forest to higher-value uses, a parallel mechanism could help preserve naturally occurring affordable rentals as market rents rise. Specifically, creating a municipal option in PA 490 for affordable rental housing, where landlords receive assessment reductions for voluntarily committing to below-market rate rent, would incentivize landlords to keep their units affordable. A municipality in turn would receive credit under §8-30g for each rental that is participating in the program. If modeled on the open space option, such a commitment would be for ten years, with penalties for breaking the commitment, and with units counting toward §8-30g for the same period.

### **3.9. Update Prevailing Wage Thresholds to Reflect Inflation**

Affordable housing developments rely on public that can trigger prevailing wage requirements. Because the thresholds have not been adjusted for inflation, more projects are swept into prevailing wage coverage each year, largely due to rising costs rather than expanded project scope. This raises development costs and reduces the number of affordable units that can be produced with limited public resources.

Prevailing wage thresholds should be updated to reflect cumulative inflation since the last adjustment and indexed prospectively, so that prevailing wage stays focused on large public works, rather than modest state-assisted housing, projects.

As an alternative or complement, the state could revise how prevailing wage applicability is calculated so that only labor costs, not total construction costs, determine whether the threshold is met. This approach would ensure that increases in material prices, such as those driven by tariffs or supply chain shocks, do not inadvertently trigger prevailing wage requirements for smaller affordable housing developments.

### **3.10. Reduce Building Material Costs by Improving Regional Logistics**

Building materials are substantially more expensive in Connecticut than in many peer states, due in large part to logistics constraints—delivery routes, warehousing limitations, distribution inefficiencies, and higher cross-state transportation costs. These factors drive up municipal construction costs and increase the cost of producing both affordable and market-rate housing. Connecticut should work with neighboring states to improve regional logistics for building materials, including coordinated freight movement, shared warehousing solutions, enhanced multimodal freight corridors, regional procurement strategies, and other cooperative approaches.

### **3.11. Require ROI / Benefit-Cost Analysis for New Building Code Mandates**

Code updates can significantly increase the cost of constructing public facilities and housing. While many code changes improve safety or performance, not all yield lifecycle savings that justify their added upfront costs—particularly for municipalities and affordable housing developers operating under tight fiscal constraints. Connecticut should require cost-effectiveness or benefit-cost analysis for new code provisions that materially increase construction costs. When mandates exceed reasonable payback periods, the state should provide flexibility or alternative compliance pathways to ensure building code updates remain grounded in both safety and fiscal responsibility.

## 4. WORKFORCE

Connecticut's ability to deliver housing, transportation, energy, and public infrastructure is increasingly constrained by shortages in skilled trades and licensed professionals. These gaps raise costs, delay projects, and limit the effectiveness of public investment. The following proposals focus on expanding workforce capacity in practical ways that support municipal delivery, improve project timelines, and strengthen the state's capacity to meet its housing and infrastructure goals.

### 4.1. Modernize Hiring Ratios to Expand Capacity in the Construction Trades

Connecticut's restrictive apprentice-to-journeyperson ratios limit entry into high-demand construction fields, slowing municipal public works, delaying affordable housing production, and constraining the workforce needed for infrastructure upgrades and the state's energy transition. These ratios no longer reflect industry practices or workforce shortages.

Hiring ratios should be modernized to permit greater apprentice participation under appropriate supervision. Updating ratios to match current labor needs would expand training capacity, accelerate project timelines, and support more cost-effective delivery of municipal and state-assisted housing and infrastructure projects.

### 4.2. Establish Cross-State Credential Reciprocity

Connecticut faces shortages in licensed trades, including electricians, plumbers, HVAC technicians, building inspectors, and surveyors, constraining municipal projects, slowing housing production, and limiting capacity for energy and infrastructure modernization. Other states, such as New Hampshire, have implemented credential reciprocity, and Connecticut has already adopted reciprocity for nurses and social workers, providing a clear model to follow.

Connecticut should establish streamlined cross-state credential reciprocity, or "universal recognition," for licenses from states with substantially similar training and safety requirements. Expanding regional licensure compacts and enabling more qualified tradespeople to work in Connecticut will help alleviate workforce shortages and support timely delivery of municipal, housing, and state-assisted construction projects.

### 4.3. Expand Workforce Pathways through Pre-Apprenticeships and Apprenticeships

Connecticut has an estimated 119,000 young people who are not working or enrolled in school, even as the state faces acute shortages in the construction and technical trades needed for housing, infrastructure, and energy projects. This mismatch limits economic mobility and slows priority public investments.

Connecticut should expand pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs tied directly to in-demand trades and partner with COGs, school districts, and training providers to connect young residents with regional workforce needs. Aligning workforce development with the state's housing, infrastructure, and resilience goals will strengthen municipal capacity and create clear pathways into stable, middle-class careers.

## 5. ENVIRONMENT

Environmental priorities emphasize water protection, waste reduction, and smart growth strategies that reduce long-term public costs. The proposals focus on updating standards, filling funding gaps, and directing development toward already-served areas to protect natural resources and public infrastructure.

### 5.1. Update water efficiency standards

Connecticut is tied for last in New England and New York regarding water efficiency standards. These outdated standards fail to reflect advances in fixture efficiency and changes in the climate – which include longer and more intense droughts. Modernizing Connecticut’s standards to match those of its neighbors will provide needed relief to the drinking water and wastewater challenges the state faces, improving sustainability while ensuring that the state has the capacity to continue to grow. The state should follow its neighbors’ lead and adopt the same standards as Maine and New York for the water efficiency of plumbing fixtures and irrigation sprinklers.

### 5.2. Set minimum standards for river- and streambank protection

Connecticut is the only New England state that does not require setbacks from rivers and streams. (Instead, this responsibility is pushed onto municipalities. The result is a patchwork of standards where setbacks vary up and down and even on opposing banks of a river.) Consistent minimum setbacks better protect water quality and reduce flood damages from the higher intensity storms the region is experiencing. Connecticut should require minimum setbacks at least equal to those of Vermont, which are 50 and 100 feet for streams and rivers, respectively. (The averages of the five New England states outside Connecticut are 95 ft. and 150 ft, respectively.)

### 5.3. Fund cleanup of emerging water contaminants

Contamination of drinking water by perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), arsenic, uranium, and chlorides is a growing problem. While Connecticut is phasing out products that contain PFAS, prevention, testing, remediation, and treatment needs remain, with few exceptions, unfunded. The state should improve guidance to local agencies about sources of contaminants and best practices to avoid them; assist public and community water systems in complying with EPA PFAS regulations; and provide financial support for testing, remediation, treatment across the range of public, community, and private water systems and wells in Connecticut.

### 5.4. Repeal the Aquarion sale legislation

Over the past year, PURA analyzed a proposed leveraged buyout of the Aquarion Water Company. The transaction, financed entirely with debt and offered at a substantial premium above market value, would impose long-term costs on the system’s 750,000 customers—none of whom have had any voice in the arrangement. PURA unanimously rejected the sale due to defects in governance and unacceptable risks to ratepayers, yet the proposal is now being appealed in court.

To ensure that this unwarranted financial burden cannot be revived, Connecticut should repeal the statutory provisions that made the proposed transaction possible. The state should also place all regional water systems under PURA jurisdiction, ensuring uniform oversight and equal ratepayer protections regardless of a utility’s ownership structure.

### 5.5. Provide tools to support waste diversion and reuse, composting, and recycling

The issue of municipal solid waste has garnered substantial attention in the last several years. While ecological reforms have been discussed, additional authority and funding are needed to implement them. These include:

- Enable regions and municipalities to impose a 10¢ fee per wine, beer, and liquor container. The lack of a deposit on these containers results in these recyclable containers ending up as refuse. Eligible uses of these fees should include as deposits on return of these bottles and support of glass and plastic recycling programs.
- Exempt reuse, composting, and recycling facilities from the \$1.50 per ton state tipping fee to encourage their development. For other resource recovery facilities, the tipping fee, which was last adjusted in 2003, should be adjusted for and indexed to inflation (equivalent to \$2.56 today) and directed to waste reduction, reuse, and recycling.
- Provide funding to secure industrial land for reuse, composting, and recycling facilities. Commercial operators are willing to fund the construction of new facilities at their expense but are unable to afford the land needed.
- Clarify that state incentives for manufacturing apply to reuse, composting, and recycling to encourage the growth of innovative materials operations in Connecticut, such as construction materials incorporating used plastics.

### 5.6. Focus on redevelopment and reinvestment

By focusing growth in areas with existing water, sewer, and transportation systems, Connecticut can maximize the use of underutilized assets, avoiding costly new infrastructure and improving the finances of existing (and often underfunded) systems. This approach strengthens public finances by increasing tax productivity without proportionally increasing public expenses, while avoiding environmental impacts and stimulating growth in communities that have lagged economically. In a state with slow growth and a high debt load, a smart and focused approach to development is needed to ensure long-term resilience. Accordingly, state policies should encourage incremental, compact redevelopment in established areas, including downtowns, brownfields and gray fields, and around passenger rail and bus rapid transit stations.

## **6. PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY**

These proposals address emerging and persistent public safety challenges, including substance use, emergency response capacity, and the safe use of new technologies. The emphasis is on evidence-based approaches that protect residents while supporting local service providers.

### **6.1. End the opioid crisis**

Reductions in access to prescription opioids, coupled with inadequate treatment options, have resulted in users turning to black market drugs, notably heroin and often the fentanyl that heroin is increasingly laced with. Social isolation and economic hardship have worsened this crisis, leading to an overdose epidemic. To bring this crisis under control, Connecticut must develop, implement, and adequately resource an evidence-based strategy that reduces harm and saves lives.

### **6.2. Provide state incentives to recruit and retain volunteer first responders**

Fire and paramedic services are at risk of losing capacity as volunteers retire at a faster rate than they are replaced. While municipalities provide incentives to recruit and retain volunteers, the most significant of these incentives – tax abatements – are only available to their own residents. This limits the ability of municipalities to attract first responders from neighboring jurisdictions, including ones that have larger, younger populations. The state should identify options to support volunteering across the state, regardless of jurisdiction. State-level incentives for volunteering may include state tax credits, tuition support, and access to state plans (e.g., Partnership, 457b).

### **6.3. Establish age-appropriate safeguards for children’s use of artificial intelligence**

Artificial intelligence is increasingly accessible to children without adult supervision. While AI can be valuable when used intentionally and in structured settings, younger children lack the critical thinking and judgment needed to use it safely. Connecticut should ensure that AI is introduced in schools through age-appropriate curricula, with clear guidance on when and how students are permitted to use AI tools. Policies should emphasize supervised, instructional use aligned with developmental readiness, rather than unrestricted access. The goal is to harness the educational benefits of AI while protecting children’s cognitive development, mental health, and safety.

## **7. ENERGY AND TECHNOLOGY**

Energy and technology priorities focus on managing the transition to electrification, protecting municipal systems from unintended impacts, and modernizing administrative processes. The recommendations seek to balance innovation with reliability, cost control, and local authority.

### **7.1. Develop an electrification and grid capacity plan**

Connecticut's electric grid was not designed to support the combined growth of electric vehicles, heat pumps, and energy-intensive data centers. Together, these demands could double or triple statewide electricity consumption—exceeding existing generation and local distribution capacity. Without a coordinated plan, the state risks higher costs, reliability challenges, and premature or uneconomic infrastructure investments. A practical, data-driven roadmap is needed to guide decisions about new generation, transmission, distribution, storage, and load management.

Connecticut should develop a realistic electrification and grid capacity plan that assesses how much new generation is required, where transmission and distribution upgrades are needed, and how distributed generation, demand reduction, storage, and load management can reduce peak demand and lower total system costs. The plan should also evaluate rate impacts and ensure that reliability remains central to all decisions. Such a clear, practical roadmap will help municipalities plan for growth, support economic development, and avoid costly surprises as electrification and high-demand facilities continue to expand.

### **7.2. Build capacity to manage energy use at the regional level**

In recognition of the technical challenges associated with the energy transition, many counties have created the position of an energy manager, who is responsible for overseeing energy use and advancing efficiency across a region. The manager's duties include monitoring energy use, developing energy plans, implementing energy conservation (through capital and operational improvements), developing cost analysis and budgets, retrofitting buildings and equipment, redesigning processes and educating employees to improve efficiency and conservation, and providing direction on federal grants and incentives.

The specialized nature of energy management, combined with its redundancy throughout a region – municipalities provide comparable facilities and services – make this work ideal for provision at the regional level. WestCOG estimates that municipal energy and efficiency needs in the region are sufficient to occupy at least one full-time employee. As with the previous item, additional funding will need to be identified to support this role.

### **7.3. Address data centers: tax clarity, energy impacts, and siting authority**

Large data centers impose substantial demands on local electric infrastructure and can require costly upgrades to serve concentrated load. Their taxation status under existing statutes remains unclear, raising questions about municipal revenue, and their siting can have significant land-use and infrastructure implications. The state should clarify property tax treatment and ensure municipalities retain a central role in land use decisions so that infrastructure needs can be responsibly planned and local taxpayers are protected.

#### **7.4. Criminalize AI-generated false emergency communications**

AI systems can now generate highly realistic fake 911 calls, false police or fire reports, and deepfake emergency alerts. These synthetic communications can trigger emergency responses, endanger public safety, and consume scarce municipal resources. Connecticut should strengthen penalties for using AI to generate or transmit false emergency communications or to impersonate victims, witnesses, or callers during emergency reporting.

#### **7.5. Authority to confirm human status and discard synthetic submissions**

Municipalities increasingly receive FOIA requests, public comments, complaints, and other formal submissions generated by bots or synthetic identities. Because current law does not distinguish between natural persons and automated systems, towns must process these submissions, creating administrative strain and opportunities for misinformation or manipulation.

The state should clarify that “person” means a natural person or their authorized representative, and allow municipalities to request reasonable verification of personhood—such as email confirmation links, CAPTCHA checks, or mailed verification postcards. Verification would not require disclosure of identity: Anonymous participation would remain fully protected.

Municipalities should have authority to pause processing until verification is received and enjoy safe harbor when following a consistent verification process.

#### **7.6. Allow online notices instead of newspaper notices**

Statutory newspaper notice requirements impose unnecessary costs while reaching a shrinking portion of the public. Municipalities should be allowed to meet legal notice obligations online. Posting notices on a centralized platform, such as CTBids, would broaden access not only for residents but also for vendors, contractors, and other interested parties who rely on timely notice of procurement opportunities. Centralized online posting improves transparency, expands the pool of potential bidders, and can lead to more competitive and lower-cost bids, while reducing municipal expenses associated with traditional newspaper publication.

#### **7.7. Allow municipalities to require land use applications to be submitted digitally**

Many land use applications include surveys, parcel maps, and site plans. These documents are generally prepared on a computer but often printed out. Municipalities should be able to require that spatial documents be submitted in their original digital form (not a print and scan or PDF), so that they may be imported into municipal data systems and without the expense of re-digitization.

#### **7.8. Expand digitization of building records to property records**

Digital workflows can reduce the costs, delays, and errors associated with paper-based processes, while enabling the data produced to be used for new purposes (e.g., to create high-resolution geospatial databases and to support comprehensive analyses/modeling). These efforts should cover property records such as paper deeds and their subsequent transfer into assessing systems. Digital land records yield substantial improvements in records administration (including elimination of municipal vaults) and in property sales, where it has decreased the cost associated with property sale – significantly reducing administrative costs as well as the closing costs that are often a financial barrier for families looking to buy a house.

## **8. REGIONAL AND SHARED APPROACHES**

These proposals support collaboration, local democracy, and efficient service delivery through regional structures. The goal is to reduce duplication, strengthen municipal capacity, and enable shared solutions to challenges that cross local boundaries.

### **8.1. Support grassroots democracy and local control**

Connecticut has a rich tradition of democratic, participatory decision-making, thanks to the numerous opportunities provided for civic engagement and volunteer service at the local level. These opportunities, which range from serving on school boards and civilian review boards to planning and zoning commissions, keep government close to voters, building trust and pride in the state's diverse communities. The state should support this spirit of civic engagement by strengthening opportunities for local decision-making and local control.

### **8.2. Devolve administration of more state grants to the COGs along the lines of LOTCIP**

The Local Transportation Improvement Program (LoTCIP) has been a success, delivering projects via the COGs more quickly than was possible through the state. Other programs may benefit from and should be considered for a similar approach.

### **8.3. Support consolidation of fire districts**

In some municipalities, fire response is fragmented among two or more independent fire districts. These districts are holdovers from a time before municipalities provided fire service townwide via a municipal department. In recognition of local interest in moving toward a more rational structure, the General Assembly commissioned a study of the "obstacles to merging or consolidating municipal fire districts and departments" (SA 21-12). It does not appear this study was completed. The state should complete this study and, based on its findings, assist municipally supported mergers of fire districts and departments.

### **8.4. Reform the land use referral process**

Under state law (CGS §8-3b), COGs review local land use proposals against their regional plans. However, this process (known as a "referral") by statute is only invoked when a proposal affects land within 500 feet of a neighboring Connecticut municipality. This arbitrary threshold produces situations where a 500 sq. ft. home addition may be reviewed, but a 500,000 sq. ft. project is not. To improve the utility of the referral process, this threshold should be replaced with rational criteria that determine whether a project is of regional significance and merits regional review, much as the referral process in New York State operates.

### **8.5. Extend municipal immunity to regional services**

Municipalities increasingly rely on regional structures, but regional Councils of Governments lack the liability protections municipal governments enjoy. The gap discourages regionalization and raises costs. The state should extend municipal immunity protections to COGs to reduce barriers to shared services, encourage collaborative approaches to public safety, emergency management, health, and infrastructure, and lower costs for taxpayers.