

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Friday, February 5, 2021

A video recording is available at:

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Meetings/2021/2021-02-05_ACIR_telemeeting.mp3

Members present: James Albis, Carl Amento, Debra Borrero (alt.), Luke Bronin, Maureen Brummett, John Elsesser, John Filchak, Betsy Gara (alt.), Sam Gold, Brian Greenleaf, Leah Grenier (alt.), Rick Hart, Martin Heft, Marcia Leclerc, Brian O'Connor (alt.), James O'Leary, Francis Pickering, Lon Seidman, Scott Shanley, Brendan Sharkey (Chair), Bob Valentine, Lyle Wray (Vice-Chair)

Members absent: Kyle Abercrombie, Sen. Stephen Cassano, Neil O'Leary

Other participants: Dan Morley, Fran Rabinowitz

ACIR staff: Bruce Wittchen

1. Call to order and overview of telemeeting procedures

Commission chair Sharkey called the meeting to order at 10:33 and provided an overview of the meeting.

2. Agenda review and additions

Commission chair Sharkey said the presentation listed 3rd on the agenda will begin at 11:15, when Fran Rabinowitz is available.

4. Approval of the minutes of the 1/8/2021 meeting.

A motion was made and seconded to approve the [minutes of the January 8, 2021 meeting](#) and the motion was approved unanimously, with Debra Borrero and Brian Greenleaf abstaining because they had not attended the meeting.

5. ACIR Endorsement: [U.S. Census Bureau Planning Region County Equivalency Proposal](#)

Commission member Gold recognized the contributions to this effort by Dan Morley, Martin Heft, Francis Pickering, and others. He explained that CT was left without a county equivalent when the state ended the system of county government but noted that their intermunicipal and regional planning functions were taken on by the regional planning organizations founded at that time. Commission member Gold described the evolution of the original system of regional planning organizations into the nine Councils of Governments (COGs) that CT has now. He also highlighted that COG boundaries are not aligned with the boundaries of counties recognized by the US Census Bureau.

Commission member Gold said the change is proposed to take effect in 2023, following the completion of data products associated with the 2020 census. It will improve data accessibility and should also be helpful for future Natural Hazard Mitigation Planning. It has been published in the Federal Register and the comment deadline is Feb. 12. Dan Morley said [additional information is available on OPM's website](#) and Martin Heft added that municipal chief elected officials have supported the effort.

Commission vice chair Wray said NY's [Regional Plan Association](#) (RPA) just wrote a regional plan based on counties. He noted that the proposed change will also be good for emergency planning and provided additional background about the proposal. A motion was made and seconded to endorse the

change. Commission member Pickering pointed out the broad support for this and pointed out that municipalities will be able to apply jointly for federal funding.

Commission member Sharkey asked Commission member Gold to confirm that this proposal does not create county government or affect home rule. Commission member Gold confirmed that and added that COG boundaries are more rational than the county boundaries established hundreds of years ago. He highlighted that Old Lyme and Lyme are part of his COG but are in New London County because there was no bridge across the CT River when counties were established. He also noted that COG staff answer to the municipal CEOs, who run the COGs. John Elsesser added that the [CT Conference of Municipalities](#) (CCM) supports this. After further discussion, the motion was approved unanimously and Commission member Sharkey asked Commission member Gold and Bruce Wittchen to prepare the endorsement letter.

6. Old Business

a. UConn & UGA policy studies

Commission vice-chair Wray said there are four studies by students from UConn or the University of Georgia. The best practices study, based on the [Massachusetts model](#), and the shared services study are complete. He said a study of advanced IT is in progress and noted that Commission member Elsesser can talk about the local revenue study. Commission vice-chair Wray said a series of webinars is under consideration and noted that the lead time is 6-8 weeks. The first would feature Ryan Miller of UGA and his report on MA's best practices system.

Commission member Elsesser provided an update on the just-completed local revenue and described the background of Ilkka Kauppinen, the UGA student from Finland who completed it. He pointed out that the study mentions the implications of Connecticut's slow economic growth, high income disparities, and shrinking population. He said the report also highlights CT's unusually high reliance on property taxes and unusually low reliance on user fees, but he noted the potential vertical inequities of increasing user fees.

Commission member Elsesser listed the reports six policy recommendations. The first is a recommendation to consider establishing stormwater utilities, which he noted will be increasingly significant in the future. The second recommendation is to consider breaking out services from the property tax structure. He noted that the storm water utility proposal is an example. The next recommendation is to reconsider existing user fees that do not cover the cost of the service. Dog licenses are an example and he said they could be provided by a veterinarian when providing rabies vaccinations.

Commission member Elsesser said the fourth recommendation is to consider user fees for electric vehicles and the fifth is to consider user fees for school activities. He highlighted that subsidies would be required for people having low incomes and also noted that costs for some such activities are included in municipalities' Minimum Budget Requirement calculations. The final recommendation is to establish a statewide reporting system regarding municipalities' user charges and fees. There currently is no good statewide source. He added that Ilkka is willing to present this at a webinar.

Commission member Pickering, who also worked with Ilkka, noted CT's extremely high and low rankings for reliance on property taxes and user fees, respectively, and said statewide data are needed. There was a discussion of the time frame of the reports being produced and others are invited to participate.

Commission member Hart asked if the report includes a discussion of municipalities charging user fees for nonprofits. Commission member Elsesser said it does, describing different sides on the issue and the impacts, but does not take a strong stance.

Commission member Filchak said it is an impressive report and asked if shared services or revenues were considered. Commission member Elsesser said they were not but maybe should have been. Commission member Pickering said those are a separate, but related issue and Commission member Filchak said that might be a topic for a future study.

Commission member Valentine asked if such a change is anticipated to reduce property taxes or to slow the increase. Commission member Elsesser said a user fee based approach to trash in Coventry resulted in a savings of 1 mill. For storm water, he expects such an approach to reduce the expected future increases. Commission member Pickering mentioned that the 2018 change in federal tax law capping the property tax deduction at \$10,000 reduced the previous tax advantage of having a municipal cost be recovered through the property tax rather than as a separate fee. There was further discussion of solid waste management.

Commission vice-chair Wray asked if there any concerns about the previously described webinar concept and approach. Hearing no opposition, Commission chair Sharkey asked Commission vice-chair Wray to proceed as discussed. Commission chair Sharkey noted that Fran Rabinowitz had joined the meeting and asked people to remain in the meeting after her presentation to discuss the Local Government of the Future proposal.

3. Presentation: [CAPSS Blueprint to Transform Connecticut's Public Schools](#)

Fran Rabinowitz, executive director of the [CT Assoc. of Public School Superintendents](#) (CAPSS), introduced herself and said was pleased to be able to provide this presentation to the ACIR. She provided some background about the preparation of the report and the need for a new approach. She said the state is reducing [education cost sharing](#) funding to places that need it. CAPSS's proposal is a 15-year plan with 30 recommendations and she highlighted that she is available to speak on it at any time.

Ms. Rabinowitz said the state needs to make the pie larger. She noted that 39-41% of local education costs have been provided by the state for many years. Some states pay 47%. She said the state should reconsider the \$11,000 foundation for ECS funding. She also said the state should do 3-year budgeting for education, not year-by-year, and changes should be made by May. CAPSS also recommends full funding of school districts' special education costs, not just a percentage of it. She added that congress is looking at the federal share and also noted that CAPSS is also looking at changes in programming, not just in funding.

Ms Rabinowitz said CAPSS's proposal also advocates for more construction funding and for moving adult education responsibilities from the school districts to the [regional educational service centers](#) (RESCs), but with enrichment programming remaining with the district. She said doing things differently can save money and mentioned [English as a second language](#) (ESL) and early childhood programming for children living in poverty. She added that the proposal also advocates for increasing transportation funding for districts having higher per-pupil transportation costs.

Ms. Rabinowitz mentioned that the increased cost to state would be \$78 million in the first year. She noted that the proposal provides several recommendations for addressing structural racism. It also has recommendations regarding remote learning and about student assessment. Testing at grades 3, 5, and 7, not also at grades 4, 6, and 8, can save \$1 million per year. The proposal also recommends state funding of statewide PSAT at grade 9.

The proposal also recommends state have model curriculum to save districts the expense of curriculum development. Ms Rabinowitz said CAPSS also recommends developing a network, with community providers, for addressing students' mental health needs. The proposal includes recommendations for streamlining teacher certification and for increasing the number of teachers of color. She added that the new teachers of today are not committing to long careers as they had in the past.

Ms. Rabinowitz noted the goal of improvements through regional efficiencies and mentioned the desire for further funding of RESC operations. She also mentioned a desire for a new approach to mandate waivers, as well as to merge various state grants into one. Ms. Rabinowitz also mentioned CAPSS's proposal for improved school district governance. The next concept is regarding magnet schools and she said there are a number of issues, but there should be no new ones until they are funded better.

Ms. Rabinowitz outlined issues for further research, including variations in per pupil expenditures and the increase in special education costs. She said a task force is needed to accomplish this plan, with goals and timelines. CAPSS is following bills and she added that she will be talking with the Governor's office later. She highlighted that the people and groups working on this do not have to agree with everything but be willing to work together. She added that it hasn't been raised as a bill, but CAPSS is committed to working on this.

Commission chair Sharkey noted the overlap with the ACIR's efforts and said the Governor's involvement is needed to implement big ideas. He asked what CAPSS's strategy is and if they are building a coalition. Ms. Rabinowitz said they are building a coalition and mentioned that teachers' unions support 80% of this. The CT Assoc. of Boards of Education (CABE) and CT Assoc. of School Business Officials (CASBO) support this. She mentioned that there have been various meetings and discussions.

Ms. Rabinowitz highlighted concerns about the cost of this proposal. She said one approach would be to accept the plan now and begin allocating funds in 2022. She also spoke of needs for prioritization and said CAPSS will appreciate any recommendations. Commission member Seidman mentioned discussions of a [uniform chart of accounts](#) (UCOA) for [education spending](#), but noted that it is not program-based. It could be helpful when making comparisons between districts. Ms. Rabinowitz agreed that comparisons are not always apples to apples and that funding should not be looked at in isolation. She added that she is willing look into that further.

Commission chair Sharkey described the potential role for RESCs in the ACIR's [Regional Performance Incentive Program](#) (RPIP) proposal that is included in [HB 6448](#). Ms. Rabinowitz said it dovetails very well with the CAPSS proposal. Commission member Leclerc said she is mayor of a distressed municipality and it has to fund students attending magnet schools. She noted that schools must look at the whole child, addressing issues of homelessness, continuity of care, food availability, and mental health. It touches on every local commission.

Ms Rabinowitz said she spoke about this with Sen. Osten. The plan is more far-reaching than just education; the districts are charged with doing so much. There can be better ways to combine community services with schools and we should be less territorial. She noted the difficulties of schools trying to provide meals.

Commission chair Sharkey suggested a subcommittee get together at the meeting time scheduled later this month to review the CAPSS proposal. A motion was made and seconded to do so and Ms. Rabinowitz said she will join the meeting. The motion passed unanimously. Commission chair Sharkey asked the subcommittee to review the proposal and provide input to the full ACIR at the 3/5 meeting if possible. Ms Rabinowitz thanked the group and the meeting returned to agenda item 6b.

6. Old Business

b. “CT Local Government of the Future” 1/26 meeting overviews and next steps

Commission chair Sharkey asked about the status of the ACIR’s RPIP proposal and Commission member Heft said it is being worked on and will appear in a Governor’s bill that will come out following the budget (see HB 6448).

Commission chair Sharkey mentioned [SB 446](#), a bill to modify [CGS 10-240](#), submitted by Sen. Needleman based on the concept suggested by Commission member Seidman. He mentioned additional language suggested by Commission member Filchak. There was a discussion of the language and Commission chair Sharkey said the proposed addition makes the ACIR’s proposal more comprehensive than SB 446.

There was a discussion of SB 446 being a proposed bill, not raised or drafted yet, and commission member Filchak said the committee might welcome the additional language being discussed here. Commission chair Sharkey said the ACIR usually works through the [Planning & Development Committee](#) (PD), but SB 446 is in the [Education Committee](#). He noted that he spoke with PD co-chair McCarthy Vahey and provided an over view of the options he had discussed with her.

There was further discussion of the concept and Commission member Filchak recommended proceeding with the vetted language if members are ready. He read his suggested added language (in green, following the blue language SB 446 would add to the existing CGS 10-240):

Each town shall through its board of education maintain the control of all the public schools within its limits and for this purpose shall be a school district and shall have all the powers and duties of school districts, except so far as such powers and duties are inconsistent with the provisions of this chapter. [Two or more Boards of Education operating in a cooperative agreement under 10-158\(a\) may, following approval by the State Board of Education, have such cooperative agreement recognized as a single school district. The State Board of Education shall adopt regulations in accordance with the provisions of chapter 54 in order to determine that a proposed cooperative agreement will \(1\) result in cost savings and operational efficiencies and \(2\) not aggravate or add to racial or economic disparities.](#)

There was a discussion of how to proceed and Commission chair Sharkey asked Commission member Seidman to draft revised language. Commission member Seidman said he will and noted the concerns of labor organizations.

7. Other municipal, regional, or state matters for ACIR consideration, if any

There were none.

8. Additional public comments

Commission chair Sharkey recommended skipping ahead to Sec. 9 and, when the group returned to Sec. 8, there were no public comments.

9. Future Discussion Topics

Commission member Elsesser confirmed that the presenters are available for a presentation on the statewide radio system at the ACIR’s March meeting. He provided an overview and said it provides a huge financial benefit. People need to know. There was a discussion of the length of presentation, which will be 15 minutes. Commission member Filchak said the state’s COGs were directed to examine public safety answering points among other regional priorities. A report will come out soon.

10. Next meeting

Commission chair Sharkey said the next meeting will be Friday, March 5, at 10:30, and the previously discussed subcommittee meeting will be at 10:30 on Feb. 23.

11. Adjournment

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting and it was approved unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 12:07.

Minutes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM