

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Friday, January 6, 2023

A recording is available at: https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Meetings/2023/2023-01-06_ACIR_Audio.mp3

Members present: Kyle Abercrombie, Maureen Brummett, John Elsesser, John Filchak (Vice Chair), Matt Hart, Martin Heft, Laura Hoydick, Keith Norton, James O’Leary, Francis Pickering, Brendan Sharkey (Chair), Ron Thomas, Mike Walsh

Members not present:

Other participants: Rebecca Dahl, Steve Mednick, Rick Porth, Rich Roberts, Margaret Wirtenberg

NOTE: the presence of a quorum was confirmed but attendance otherwise was not recorded. Members and non-members in addition to those listed here might also have been present.

Member vacancies: Nominated by COST: Municipal official: Town of <10,000 population

OPM staff: Bruce Wittchen

1. Call to order and overview of telemeeting procedures

Commission chair Sharkey called the meeting to order and vice chair Filchak noted that a quorum was present. Commission chair Sharkey acknowledged the passing of Rep. Williams earlier this week.

2. Approval of the minutes of the [December 2, 2022](#) meeting

A motion was made and seconded to approve the draft minutes of the December 2, 2022 meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

3. Reminder: [2023 meeting dates](#)

A motion was made and seconded to adopt the 2023 schedule and the motion was passed unanimously.

4. Membership update, if any

Martin Heft said the only current vacancy is the representative of a town of 10,000 – 20,000 nominated by the Council of Small Towns (COST) and appointed by the Governor. He noted that Steve Cassano, the designee of the Senate President Pro Tempore, is still a member despite no longer being a senator because that position is not restricted to members of the senate. Commission chair Sharkey said he would contact the Senate President Pro Tempore about the possibility of designating one of the new [Planning & Development Committee](#) (PD) co-chairs to fill that role.

5. CT Local Government of the Future initiative (notes of [11/29/2022 meeting](#))

- [Draft Property Tax Restructuring Report](#)

Commission chair Sharkey summarized the ACIR’s work on this. He noted that the report was still a work in progress when presented to the group in December but had invited further input and the report has been updated to clarify some recommendations. He thanked Commission vice chair Filchak for his work on in completing the report and invited any further input. Commission member Hoydick said it is excellent, providing flexibility for the general assembly while addressing core issues affecting all of our communities and organizations. Commission member Hart asked

about the proposed change to [Regional Services Grant](#) (RSG) funding and there was a discussion of how different COGs will be impacted, which will depend on how funding would be reallocated and whether the state adds more funding.

Commission member Hart also recommended adding some narrative to the recommendation for further regionalizing of services and Commission vice chair Filchak offered to add that if the group agrees. Commission chair Sharkey asked him to add that. Commission member Hart also said, regarding the [CT Municipal Employees Retirement System](#) (CMERS) recommendation, that #4a is unnecessary because CMERS already is portable and suggested that the #4b recommend additional tiers.

Commission member Pickering said we should not presume COG boundaries are appropriate for all state regions, noting that some could be based on state snow plowing or watershed boundaries and that boundaries should only be aligned where appropriate. Commission chair Sharkey agreed. Commission member Pickering added that, regarding the CMERS recommendation, that many towns not currently in CMERS might be better served joining a regional plan.

Commission member Elsesser said part of the CMERS concept is that many towns are not in CMERS and if a non-CMERS town wants to hire someone from a CMERS town, that employee's CMERS pension is not portable unless the hiring town brings everyone into CMERS. He noted that a neighboring town is looking at bringing its firefighters into CMERS and the upfront cost would be \$1 million per person. CMERS could offer other portable benefits as well and he noted that is available in MA. Commission member Hart later said he has an edit he can send to address the CMERS issue Commission member Elsesser had raised. As for identifying areas for regional approaches, he said that can increase opposition. Commission member Elsesser also said [regional councils of governments](#) (COGs) and [regional educational service centers](#) (RESCs) could collaborate more, noting that they compete for money.

Commission member O'Leary asked if the word "existing" can be added to #3c: "Re-align state service districts onto existing regional platforms" and said better alignment of DOT regions with COGs there could be more combining of municipal public works and state services. Commission chair Sharkey said we aren't recommending that such combinations be dictated but be allowed to develop organically. He noted one health district model, with someone operating out of a different town each day and said it is important to incentivize it. Commission vice chair Filchak noted the number health districts and lack of alignment with COGs and with [DEMHS](#) districts and issues that arose during the pandemic and recommended communicating with [DPH](#).

Rick Porth referenced #4c and noted that CCM and many municipalities would like to push for proactive training to help them before a formal state response is required. Commission chair Sharkey said they had dabbled with such language in an early draft but the framing of it might have been more obtrusive than what Rick is suggesting. It could be phrased differently to provide what Rick recommends. Commission vice-chair Filchak offered to rephrase #4c. Commission member O'Leary mentioned guides previously produced by UConn's former Institute of Public Service and said the ACIR might look at what it can encourage in that or other areas. Commission chair Sharkey mentioned that there will be more about that later in the meeting.

Commission chair Sharkey invited any further comment and then said he had shown a clean draft to [Dept. of Revenue Services](#) (DRS) Commissioner Boughton, as he had said he would, but the initial response from office staff was sticker shock at the projected costs. He said that requires pushback from the ACIR and noted that recommendations having lower costs had a more positive reaction. He noted the state currently has the finances to recalibrate the state-local administration and the Governor is beginning a new administration. New ideas should be coming forward. The response he received led to outreach to certain legislative leaders and he has requested a meeting with the Governor to put it in front of him more directly. He recommended the ACIR launch an

informational campaign, including a press conference, including legislators from both sides of the aisle and ACIR members, to build the case for what the ACIR is recommending, acknowledging that it cannot all be done this year.

Commission chair Sharkey said some recommendations have high costs but it is important to not throw those out just because of their cost. The ACIR should convey the bigger picture. The legislature might choose to lead. He noted Commission member O'Leary's earlier question: does the ACIR envision itself being the catalyst and not going away after the report. Commission chair Sharkey invited comments. Comment member Hoydick said CCM has been advocating for many of the topics and she has spoken to the senate and house minority leaders, who are interested, and noted this is a good vision and everyone should be together on this. Her COG is interested in this too and let's all do this together. It helps when there are many to lift.

Commission vice chair Filchak highlighted that it will be too easy to deal with different items in isolation. The property tax is holding the state back in multiple ways and we are providing a menu of options for beginning that reform. Commission member Pickering agreed and recommended preparing a one-page fact sheet comparing CT to other states, noting that CT is even more dependent on local property taxes than NH.

Commission chair recommend members circulate the report among people they collaborate with, once today's changes are incorporated. He and others should start scheduling meetings, such as a joint hearing of the PD Committee and the [Finance Committee](#) on this report, preceded by the previously discussed press conference. Time is of the essence and we should begin strategizing. Commission member Elsesser mentioned 1000 Friends of CT report: [Property Tax Reform in Connecticut: If Not Now, When](#) and urged people to read it. There was a discussion of the Governor's interest in tax reform and that the property tax hits the middle class harder than other taxes.

Commission member Thomas said he agrees with the combined committee approach; we should all try to get others involved and show up for that hearing. We've been talking about this for decades. Commission chair Sharkey said we were careful to be nonpartisan and not pit the state against municipalities. He asked if there are people who will oppose the content of the report. Commission member Thomas said there can be outspoken or quiet opposition, but he does not expect a group to oppose it. Commission member Hoydick said she has spoken with ranking members of the Education Committee and noted broad acceptance of special education changes and there will need to be more meat on the bones to see where the opposition is. Commission vice chair Filchak said the opposition will be against the price tag and alternative funding approaches. He mentioned reports of how much revenue is not being collected because DRS lacks the people and technology. It would pay for it all.

Commission member Elsesser said elected state officials do not get credit for reducing property taxes and added that there will be a lack of trust, a concern that municipal officials would use this as an opportunity to spend more. People will point that out and there will need to be guard rails to create permanent reductions in costs. Rick Porth agreed and said the genius of the list is that it's a short list that identifies things that people can understand and are crucial for property tax relief.

Commission member O'Leary said it would be useful to identify the options for where money would come from. A phased approach provides flexibility and results can be measured and results estimated. DRS should be able to put those numbers together. Commission vice chair Sharkey said this has to proceed while we are in good financial shape and the opportunity is now. Commission member Sharkey said he had received a message that the Governor will be available to meet on this next week and said people should be circulating the report to lay the groundwork for this effort.

6. Other Old Business

- Update: ACIR representation on [Task Force To Study Title 7 Of The General Statutes](#)

Commission chair Sharkey mentioned that Commission member O’Leary had been contacted by the Senate Minority Leader, who is to appoint an ACIR member, and said he decided to decline the offer to be appointed due to the difficulty of attending meetings in Hartford. There was further discussion of options and Commission member Heft said he does not know of any members being appointed yet and noted that the PD Committee will meet next week and offered to work on this. There also was a discussion of whether the group might offer remote access. Commission member Heft noted he had offered to work on this and recommended that the CT Assoc. of Municipal Attorneys be involved. Commission vice chair noted that Atty Steve Mednick is here and Atty Mednick said Rich Roberts will be involved. There was further discussion of waiting to see how this plays out and Commission chair Sharkey asked anyone interested in representing the ACIR to inform Bruce.

7. New business or any other municipal, regional, or state matters for ACIR consideration

Commission chair Sharkey mentioned that people are discussing the potential for an Institute for Public Service to be reconstituted at UConn within the [School of Public Policy](#) and said he will report back after a meeting next week.

8. Additional public comments if any

There were no additional comments.

9. Next meeting

Upcoming meetings will be:

- Tuesday, December 27, 2022, 10:30 am Subcommittee
- Friday, January 6th, 10:30 am Full ACIR

10. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned.

Minutes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM