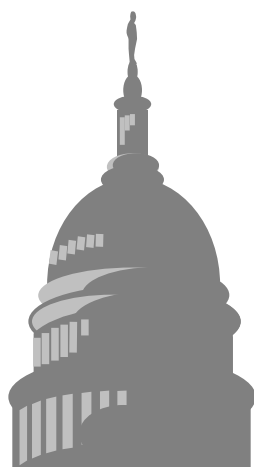


CONNECTICUT ADVISORY COMMISSION ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

A Multi-jurisdictional Agency Of Connecticut State Government



Annual Report For 2020 and Work Plan for 2021

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June 2021

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations Membership

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Lyle Wray, Vice-Chair	Connecticut Association of Councils of Governments

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Elizabeth Gara	Council of Small Towns

Staff

Bruce Wittchen	Office of Policy and Management
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To the Connecticut General Assembly:

In accordance with Subsection (b) of [Sec. 2-79a](#) of the General Statutes, the [Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations](#) (ACIR) submits this report on its activities since its previous report in 2020.

Last year's report noted the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the ACIR's effort to assist local governments in maintaining operations. As local officials developed work-arounds and the Governor issued emergency executive orders to enable municipalities to operate under trying conditions, the ACIR provided a central clearinghouse of options at <https://portal.ct.gov/ACIR/Resources/COVID-19-Resources>.

Earlier in 2020, the ACIR had a key role in the [Task Force to Promote Municipal Shared Services](#), which was comprised of the members of the ACIR and the chairs and ranking members of the General Assembly's Finance and Planning and Development Committees. ACIR members led the work groups that conducted the required study and wrote the [final report](#) in consultation with the legislators of the Task Force. The ACIR is now formulating a Local Government of the Future initiative building on that and on previous work in CT and elsewhere.

The ACIR continued most of its long-standing reporting in 2020. The mandate compendium supplement published in January, 2021 continued the new approach described in last year's edition of this report. To further improve its mandates work, the ACIR also is looking into possible changes to the classification of mandates and municipal impacts. Last year's report mentioned the ACIR postponing a planned analysis of how the actual impact of a sample of mandates compared with predicted impacts. The group might revisit that in 2021. The one long-term left undone in 2020 was the ACIR's municipal budget adoption experiences reporting. The reason and future expectations are discussed later in this report.

The ACIR welcomes comments and questions regarding the work described or proposed in this report. The ACIR is especially appreciative of suggestions that can help guide future activities. Please feel free to contact us, care of Bruce Wittchen, Office of Policy and Management, (860) 418-6323, bruce.wittchen@ct.gov.

Sincerely:



Brendan Sharkey, Chair



Lyle Wray, Vice-Chair

STATUTORY AUTHORITY

The Connecticut Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) is a 24-member agency created by the State of Connecticut in 1985 to study system issues between the state and its local governments, and to recommend solutions as appropriate. The makeup is designed to allow for open discussion across broad jurisdictional lines with a common interest in bettering local government.

As specified in [Section 2-79a of the Connecticut General Statutes](#) (CGS), the role of ACIR is to: (1) serve as a forum for consultation between state and local officials; (2) conduct research on intergovernmental issues; (3) encourage and coordinate studies of intergovernmental issues by universities and others; and (4) initiate policy development and make recommendations to all levels of government.

ACIR COVID-19 Response

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic that dominated the news of 2020, the ACIR provided a municipality-oriented summary of the Governor's emergency executive orders and developed best management practices guides to help adapt a variety of municipal functions to COVID-19. These documents were regularly updated on the ACIR's [webpage of COVID-oriented resources](#):

COVID-19 Emergency Executive Order Summary

Best Management Practices:

- Animal Control
- Assessor
- Building Official
- Elections
- Farmers' Markets
- Finance
- General Administration
- Housing and Homeless Services
- Human Resources
- Land Use
- Libraries
- Meetings
- Municipal Budgeting
- Municipal-Based Transportation
- Parks and Recreation
- Public Works
- Senior Centers
- Tax Collector
- Town Clerk
- Town Facility Re-Opening

The guide for senior centers guide was taken down when the CT Dept. of Aging & Disability Services issued guidance of its own, but other guides continue to be updated as needed. The parks & recreation guide, for example, was revised three times in less than two weeks as the governor imposed stricter requirements during the November surge in cases.

As illustrated by the [parks & recreation guide](#), each guide begins with a discussion of the critical functions and responsibilities of the municipal operation. That is followed by an accounting of significant statutory or executive order references. Those sections are followed by a discussion of needs for maintaining continuity. The parks & recreation guide, for instance, highlights that recreation departments/programs are leading providers of affordable childcare and of breakfast and lunch programs during summer months, as well as being major employers of seasonal summer workers in many communities.

Each ACIR guide continues with a discussion of any relevant state agency guidance and then outlines best practices based on those and other resources, which are listed in the final section. Each guide concludes by pointing out that the provided information is not intended to provide legal advice and directing any questions to OPM or to the town's legal representative.

In addition to providing links to its own work, the ACIR's COVID-19 page also identifies other federal, state, and local resources, including organizations representing a range of relevant interests.

*Report Regarding Issued
Executive Orders Relative to the
COVID-19 Pandemic for
Priority Continuance and
Potential Legislative Codification*

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Misc_Reports/2020/Executive_Orders-for_Priority_Continuance_and_Codification.pdf

The Governor's COVID-19 executive orders, out of necessity, altered a wide range of operations to enable governments and others to function despite the constraints the pandemic. Some of those changes drew attention to opportunities for change in operations that seem worthy of continuation even following the pandemic. In late 2020, the ACIR issued a report identifying some such changes that were considered to be priorities for continuation and possible codification through legislation.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF THE FUTURE INITIATIVE

The ACIR believes now is the time for new approaches to local government in Connecticut and the previously mentioned Local Government of the Future initiative is part of the framework for accomplishing it. Changes forced by COVID-19 demonstrate that government services can be provided in new ways. At the same time, people are recognizing that the existing structure of government can create barriers perpetuating racial and economic inequities.

The Local Government of the Future initiative reimagines local government operation. The initiative is informed by recent experiences forced by COVID-19, but also by the ACIR's long-time work with shared services and other intergovernmental practices.

Previous work by the ACIR and others has identified many options for achieving more effective, efficient and responsive public services. The Task Force to Promote Municipal Shared Services included the full membership of the ACIR and a bipartisan group of legislative leaders. The task force's [final report](#), issued in early 2020, highlighted seven priority recommendations. The onset of COVID-19 that year prevented any immediate legislative action:

- Shared services should be built on work done previously in the state
- Connecticut, at each level of government, must embrace the application of technology and data innovation
- Expand, within OPM, a government efficiency unit, within the Intergovernmental Policy and Planning Division to provide the bandwidth needed to implement and foster collaboration at each level of government
- Flexible school governance is essential to the function, sustainability and excellence of public education
- Collaborative programs are needed to help local school districts provide cost effective and efficient high quality services for Special Education
- Shared services are needed in mitigating fiscal disparities
- Pilot and incentivize shared services to foster real change

Reports issued by other groups have also recommended changes to public services, including reports issued by the [Commission on Municipal Opportunities and Regional Efficiencies](#) (MORE Commission), the [Lamont Transition Team's Shared Services Policy Committee](#), the [CT](#)

[Conference of Municipalities](#), and the [Commission of Fiscal Stability and Economic Growth](#). Individual ACIR members have been involved in some of these other efforts, but each of those reports reflects the objectives and perspective of the group that issued it. The ACIR is not endorsing any group's methodology or recommendations by listing it here. The objective is to bring them together so readers of this report can compare and contrast the recommendations of various groups.

It is important to note that while a variety of potentially worthwhile changes have been identified, implementation has lagged. A crisis like COVID-19 can change expectations and established ways of doing things, hence the well-known saying about not letting a crisis go to waste. The ACIR believes some of the changes implemented through emergency executive orders during the past year should be maintained following the crisis, as described in a previous section, but positive change generally requires a more purposeful approach.

Key recommendations of various task forces and commissions, including the ACIR, were unable to gain traction in the past. Having learned from those experiences, the ACIR is especially attentive to concerns that are raised and is looking at how to employ the process of change management to make progress.

The ACIR worked with administration officials, legislative leaders, and others to craft legislation for the 2021 session. The central goals have been to help government maintain and even improve needed services while reducing the burden on strained tax bases. Three bills were recommended for consideration in the 2021 legislative session.

The first proposal would modify the state's existing [Regional Performance Incentive Program](#) (RPPI) to increase opportunities for the sharing of municipal and education services. The goal is to encourage sharing, not dictate what is to be shared.

The second proposal is to codify some of procedural changes enacted through executive order that the ACIR considers to be priorities for continuation afterwards. The third proposal focuses on an education statute that imposes additional administrative burdens when school districts desire to collaborate without locking themselves into the long-term commitment of fully regionalization.

At the time of this report, bills have been introduced for the first and third concepts and it is the ACIR's understanding that the ACIR is not alone in advocating for the second. This initial effort was tightly focused so proposals would be ready for the 2021 legislative session.

As will be described in this report's 2021 Work Plan, monthly meeting times have been scheduled for this or other possible subcommittees to consider other concepts for the 2022 legislative session.

ACIR Policy Studies

The Master of Public Administration program director at the University of Georgia's [Department of Public Administration and Policy](#) contacted the ACIR in 2020 because of his interest in the work of the ACIR. Following further discussion with him and the head of the [Department of Public Policy](#) at the University of Connecticut, ACIR members mentored students from both schools in conducting research of interest to the ACIR. Reports were being completed at the end of 2020 and early 2021 and quarterly webinars are planned for 2021. The findings of the studies and the applications of that work by the ACIR and others will be described in next year's edition of this report.

NEW STATE MANDATES ON MUNICIPALITIES REPORTS: 2020

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Mandates/Session/ACIR_2020_Mandates_Report.pdf

Following a year in which the ACIR published reports covering three years of legislative sessions to catch up following a legislative deferral of such reporting, 2020 brought COVID-19 and the most limited regular legislative session in memory. Every 2020 public act containing a mandate was passed via emergency certification, without review by any committee and without a public hearing.

The legislative sessions of 2017, 2018, and 2019 yielded 17, 14, and 20 public acts that created or expanded a mandate, with most originating in each year's regular session. The legislative sessions of 2020 yielded only four, with the regular session accounting for only one of those. Three of 2020's public acts included sections identified as having the impact of a mandate, but not specifically directed at municipalities. That actually is similar to the previous years, when there were 3, 3, and 5, respectively, in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

The ACIR also tracks instances in which the state provides administrative and/or fiscal relief to municipalities through the reduction and/or elimination of mandates. The legislative sessions of 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively, yielded 11, 4, and 5 public acts that reduced mandates. There were no such acts in 2020. Even if 2020's sessions had matched 2017's total, the ACIR has

previously pointed out that highly publicized mandate reduction bills often address mandates having little impact.

*COMPENDIUM OF STATUTORY
& REGULATORY MANDATES: 2021*

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/ACIR/Mandates/Compendium/2021_Compndium_Supplement.pdf

The focus of the session mandates reports described previously is to identify every public and special act adopted in that year's legislative session(s) that created, increased, or reduced a mandate on municipalities. The compendium, on the other hand, is a listing of all existing sections of the state statutes and regulations that impose a mandate.

The ACIR was assigned to publish a compendium of mandates beginning in 1998, with a full compendium due every fourth year and an annual supplement due the other three years. A full compendium would have been due in 2018, but it was postponed by the previously described deferral enacted in a 2017 special session. Following that deferral, the ACIR published a full compendium in February 2020 and this year's annual supplement in January, 2021.

*MUNICIPAL BUDGET
ADOPTION EXPERIENCES
IN CONNECTICUT*

The ACIR for many years has surveyed the 169 Connecticut municipalities and 17 regional school districts to study their experiences adopting each year's budget. (See Publications section of this report).

With the onset of COVID-19, the ACIR has paused its annual review of municipal budget processes. The current fiscal year's adoption process was stipulated by executive order, eliminating the need to survey towns about their process. At this time, it is unknown how municipal budgets will be adopted for 2021-22.

The ACIR's municipal budget studies are believed to have begun when, approximately thirty years ago, people wondered if the large number of budget adoption delays were associated with particular budget adoption processes. Lacking the easy availability of such information on the internet, the ACIR surveyed towns that year, again the next year, and continued doing so until this interruption.

This seems an opportune time to reconsider and possibly reorient the ACIR's long-time approach to studying

municipal budgeting. The 2019 edition of the budgeting report included this:

Locally derived revenues are largely generated by property taxes so, if a municipality's budget increases more quickly than the value of taxable property increases, property tax rates will increase, all else being equal. The ACIR found that municipal budgets have tended to grow at a higher rate than municipalities' grand lists of taxable property. Recently, in fact, the rate of budget growth exceeded the rate of grand list growth by a factor of two or more in 100 of the state's 169 municipalities. Taxable property grew at a higher rate than budgets in only 29 municipalities.

COVID-19 and the financial crises accompanying it could amplify the problem described last year. Municipalities face new costs at the same time the value of many taxable properties might plummet. Municipal budgeting will face many challenges in the coming years and the ACIR will focus its efforts where they can provide maximum benefit. The ACIR appreciates suggestions that can help guide those efforts.

ACIR WORK PLAN FOR 2021

Local Government of the Future initiative

As described earlier, the ACIR's goal for its new Local Government of the Future initiative is to reimagine local government operations and intergovernmental relations. It began in late 2020 and, in its initial phase, has already led to the introduction of three bills in the current legislative session, one of those a Governor's bill. The ACIR will offer any needed support during the session and, during 2021, will continue to evaluate needs and identify other opportunities for change.

Some ideas to be explored by the ACIR will require legislation. For those, the ACIR will again work with and support legislative and administration leaders in developing concepts for next year's legislative session. Other opportunities not requiring legislation can be taken directly to relevant local, regional, and state leaders.

To accelerate its work in 2021, the ACIR has scheduled a regular monthly subcommittee meeting. On a topic-by-topic basis, a subcommittee will form to tackle a task assigned at the previous ACIR meeting. Depending on the scope of the assignment, a subcommittee might provide recommendations for the ACIR to act on at its next meeting.

ACIR COVID Assistance

The ACIR will continue the COVID-19 response work it began in 2020. At a minimum, this will include regular updating of the best practices guidelines on the ACIR's COVID page, but the ACIR is ready to assist in other ways as circumstances evolve.

ACIR Policy Studies

A series of quarterly webinars is planned in 2021 to present the findings of the previously described policy studies conducted by students from the universities of Connecticut and Georgia who have been mentored by ACIR members. Their findings and recommendations will help guide the Local Government of the Future initiative. Opportunities will be considered for additional studies in 2021.

Mandate Research and Reporting

The annual review and reporting of mandates will continue in 2021 but, as noted in January's Compendium Supplement, the ACIR is reconsidering its approach to the classification of mandates and their fiscal impacts. The ACIR might also evaluate a sample of established mandates to determine how impacts actually experienced by municipalities compare with those predicted at the time of passage and how different municipalities might experience those impacts differently. That work was expected to begin in 2020 but was interrupted by COVID-19. Depending on competing needs, the mandate look-back might begin in 2021.

*Municipal Budget
Adoption Experience Studies
And Reporting*

As noted earlier in this report, the ACIR has paused its traditional reporting on municipal budgetin, which the ACIR had done for decades although it is not mandated by statute. The most recent report began to refocus that work and further refinement will be considered when municipalities regain discretion over their budget adoption processes, possibly not until after budgets are adopted in 2021.