

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

Bellin Gallery Room, CCSU Student Center
Ella Grasso Boulevard, New Britain, Connecticut

Thursday, July 28, 2011, 10:00 A.M.

MINUTES

Members Present: David LeVasseur (Chairman), Mark Allaben, Barbara Henry, Robert Kaliszewski, Linda Krause, James O'Leary, Joe Oros, Mark Paquette, Leo Paul, Virginia Seccombe, Joyce Stille and Michael Stupinski

Members Absent: John Finkle, Alice Meyer (Vice-Chairman), Sen. Stephen Cassano, James Finley, Ronald Harris, Scott Shanley, Timothy Stewart and Adam Stolpen

Staff: Bruce Wittchen

Other Attendees: Steve Kliger, Jonathan Salomone

Opening Remarks: Commission member LeVasseur called the meeting to order at 10:10 and introduced Steve Kliger of CCSU's Center for Public Policy and Social Research, who is hosting the meeting. Mr. Kliger thanked the ACIR for meeting at CCSU and spoke of the Center's mission and how it can assist the ACIR. He also introduced Jonathan Salomone, a CCSU student interested in municipal issues and son of Newington's Town Manager.

Commission member LeVasseur described the potential benefits of the ACIR collaborating with the Center and recommended everyone introduce themselves.

1. **Consideration of Minutes of May, 2011 Meeting:** Commission member Paquette made a motion to accept the minutes and Commission member Stille seconded it. The motion passed unanimously, with Commission members Henry and Stupinski abstaining.
2. **Consideration of ACIR reports:** There were no new reports.
3. **Old Business:**
 - Connecticut Municipal Budget Adoption Experiences survey, FY 2011-2012: Bruce Wittchen said the survey went out last week and he has received around 70 responses so far. He will send the first reminder to towns he has not heard from and he expects the report to be ready for approval at the ACIR's September meeting.
 - Legislative activity: Nothing new to discuss today, but please stand by.
4. **New Business:**

- **RPO consolidation:** Commission member LeVasseur said the CT River Estuary Regional Planning Agency (CRERPA) and Midstate Regional Planning Agency (MRPA) voted yesterday to merge. Instead of being separate regional planning organizations (RPOs) having 9 and 8 towns, respectively, they will become the 17-member Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments (LCRVCOG). The COG will include the towns of Middlesex County plus Lyme and Old Lyme.

Commission member LeVasseur said the towns of the two RPOs have a long history of cooperation across the regional boundary and noted that the towns had formed a combined Council of Elected Officials (CEO) ten years ago. Because of their concern regarding the prospects for legislation mandating mergers, they are taking this step to be proactive and maintain control over the process. There was a discussion of the process and Commission member LeVasseur explained that individual towns must hold town meetings to ratify the change.

Commission member Secombe asked about the advantages and disadvantages of this change. Commission member Krause said the most important consideration was the concern that the towns might otherwise be divided among neighboring RPOs that include larger cities. There also are financial advantages, such as having a larger pot of money to work with. The towns already do a lot together, so there is less to be gained in terms of additional cooperative efforts.

Commission member Krause said the basic disadvantage is that the new COG will be larger and more bureaucratic. There also are concerns regarding the potential loss of services or of regional investments. She mentioned a regional waste management facility developed by one of the RPOs that will be too small for the combined COG. Commissioned member Krause also mentioned that RPOs have made different investments in transit and also have to decide how to allocate reserve funds. There was a discussion of the number of details left to be resolved in the merger.

Commission member LeVasseur said LCRVCOG is being created as a defensive measure by the CRERPA and MRPA towns and the statutes identify the process for consolidation. He noted that the RPOs provide different levels of service, so their towns will need to adapt as the RPOs merge.

Commission member Henry asked how the merger would affect the two current executive directors. Commission member Krause explained that both are ready to move on and that she would stay on to begin the transition before a new executive director is chosen.

Commission member Paul asked Commission member LeVasseur to update the group about the planning region boundary study OPM is required to complete. Commission member LeVasseur said the legislation promotes the restructuring of regions around economic development districts (EDDs), but metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) would be a more appropriate base for such a change. However, the existing RPO

boundaries have been in place for 50 years and have a proven track record. RPOs routinely work together and we should respect existing boundaries and relationships.

Commission member LeVasseur pointed out that the original boundary study relied in large part on factors that were more significant then, such as newspaper distribution patterns and hospital regions. The original effort took 15 years and we do not have comparable data, so we have to be cautious in changing the system now.

If RPOs consider consolidation to be in their best interest, they can access the \$300,000 set aside to help with consolidation. That funding has survived the budget cutting process. Commission member LeVasseur added that there are good reasons to keep existing regional ties, so he recommends imposing no changes and letting any consolidation occur on its own, with the assistance of the current bonus pool. He has briefed Senator Cassano and Representative Gentile.

It is important to document existing relations and Commission member LeVasseur said RPOs considering consolidation should not have to risk losing federal transportation planning funds if they choose to merge. There are idiosyncrasies to such funding, but the concern has been discussed with federal representatives and funding can be maintained to avoid creating a barrier to consolidation.

Commission member Paul asked if Senator Cassano and Representative Gentile agree with this approach and noted that the proposal for consolidation to result in 8 regions raises a concern that consolidation is intended to be along county lines, since there are 8 counties. Commission member LeVasseur said there is no commitment to the number 8.

Commission member Oros asked if the legislature will codify the approach the ACIR has discussed this morning. Commission member LeVasseur said this approach really just provides an opportunity for voluntary consolidation and enables municipalities to access the RPO bonus pool funding that will be available this fiscal year and the next. Commission member Paul mentioned that consolidation has job security implications for those who work for the RPOs. Commission member Krause said the merged LCRVCOG intends to provide jobs for everyone at CRERPA and MRPA who wants to stay and, so far, it seems like it will work out. However, assigning leadership roles might be a challenge.

Commission member LeVasseur said the efforts of CRERPA's and MRPA's towns help encourage the legislature to provide breathing room for voluntary efforts. Commission member Paul thanked Commission member LeVasseur for his efforts and mentioned that the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials (LHCEO) and Northwest Connecticut Council of Governments (NWCCOG) will meet next week to discuss shared emergency dispatch services.

Commission member Krause noted that one factor that keeps their merger efforts progressing is that town leaders want it to happen before the next election. It takes time

to understand the issues and, if the incumbent in an election is in favor of something, an opponent will be inclined to oppose it. RPO consolidation can also raise concerns about big government.

Commission member Seccombe suggested that CCSU students assess data regarding existing relationships between regions and Commission member LeVasseur said he will discuss that with Steve Kliger of CCSU. He is concerned the legislature might decide to consolidate around cities and we do not want to lose what we have developed. Commission member Seccombe said students might show a lack of cost savings for such an approach. Commission member LeVasseur said OPM's report should be complete soon after this year's elections.

Commission member Stille reported that Marlborough has dropped out of CRCOG and there was a discussion of the circumstances. Commission member LeVasseur said there is nothing to prevent a town from attending meetings of another RPO, but noted that Ashford requested to be officially transferred from the Windham planning region to the Northeast Connecticut planning region and that request was denied by former OPM Secretary Robert Genuario. If towns could move based on whim, RPO boundaries might change every few years.

There was a discussion of whether RPOs would require an urban center and Commission member LeVasseur said CRERPA's urban center is Old Saybrook. Commission member Henry asked what the purpose would be for requiring an urban center in an RPO and Commission member LeVasseur noted that urban areas have an economic development focus and rural RPOs are interested in forestalling development.

There was a discussion of how CRERPA and MRPA towns are proceeding with the RPO merger without knowing all the details. Commission member LeVasseur said they cannot begin the transition until they vote, with the understanding that the mutual goal is to make the process work. He believes the MRPA towns will be willing to pay more for regional services when they see what CRERPA towns receive.

Commission member Seccombe asked if every town has to vote in favor and Commission member Krause said 60% do. Commission member LeVasseur said other RPOs considering consolidation will have to go through the same steps, but this situation is unique because the two regions already have a combined Council of Elected Officials. There was a discussion of the transition money available for such mergers and Commission member LeVasseur explained the distinction between a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and a Rural Planning Organization, which is a different use of the RPO acronym.

There was a discussion of how transportation funding is allocated among metropolitan and rural planning organizations and Commission member Paquette said rural planning organizations receive very little and that amount is about to be cut. Commission member Henry pointed out that Roxbury, which is currently 9th on NWCCOG's transportation

priority list could find itself 17th on the list of a combined NWCCOG and LHCEO. There was a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of merging the transportation funds available to separate RPOs. Commission member Krause noted that it can cost a town less to use its own funds to complete a project than to use outside funds and there was a discussion of joint town road project management.

Commission member Krause said a driving force behind the CRERPA and MRPA merger is that the towns want to control their own destiny and this has taken 8 years. They have to give up CRERPA's informal character, but some towns might have otherwise been reassigned to a region centered on New Haven. Commission member LeVasseur said the process is fluid and dynamic and, if towns are happy, he is happy. Like CRERPA's and MRPA's merger, it has to be a grass roots effort.

Commission member Seccombe said she is concerned that the legislature will see how the CRERPA – MRPA merger is happening and try to impose the same on other RPOs. Towns have to be vigilant and ACIR members can help keep an eye on it. Commission member asked how the probate court consolidation is working and whether information is available regarding effects of the changes.

There was a discussion about how a number of people want fewer, larger regions but how, to date; no action has been taken to mandate consolidation of the regions. Commission member LeVasseur mentioned the distinction in Connecticut between *Places* and *Spaces*. Three areas of the state – the northeast, the northwest and the lower Connecticut River Valley – are spaces and we need to protect them.

- **2011 mandates report:** Bruce Wittchen said he has been reviewing statutes to identify possible mandates and said he's appreciate it if any ACIR members or others let him know of mandate that are of concern to them. He checks every statute but can miss the significance of something that might alarm one of the members. The target date for completing this report, like the budget adoption experiences report, is the ACIR's September meeting. Bruce said he will circulate the draft report beforehand and will highlight any items that he is uncertain of.

The next meeting will be 10:00, September 22, 2011, at the CCSU Student Center, New Britain

The meeting was adjourned at 11:20.