

# Op-ed: Let Regional Councils Tax So We Can Build And Serve



Regional councils want to be able to tax residents, as counties in other states do, for services and projects like transit systems. (Hartford, Rick / Hartford Courant)

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**T**he governor and state legislature have rightly looked to cooperation among towns to deliver more cost-effective municipal services to Connecticut's residents. The state has recognized that many municipal operations — ranging from computers in police cars to animal control, human resources, internet-based phone systems, dial-a-ride, purchasing, and building permits — can be delivered most efficiently at a larger scale than a single city or town can do. Regional councils of governments can lend expertise and coordinate efforts.

Unfortunately, under current state law, regional councils of governments are left to fulfill this role with a severe constraint: They have no way of directly raising funds.

Regions rely today primarily on a mixture of municipal dues and federal and state grants. This last source has varied dramatically depending on the state's fiscal condition. But often when regional efforts are most needed, the least funding is provided. Whether by design or accident, the state puts its regions in the position of begging for money to fund the services it says wants them to provide.



Funding for regional councils of governments to carry out the tasks their member municipalities want done can be supplied through direct and open taxation.

In most states, a number of municipal functions are performed by the county, which provides services and taxes residents to fund those services. This model can be applied to regional organizations in Connecticut, with services provided for member municipalities in exchange for direct taxation of those municipalities' residents.

This tax need not be onerous: A 0.2 percent sales tax on retail and restaurant establishments within each region would provide sufficient funds to carry out many important service improvements.

Nor do regions need to duplicate efforts: A service or function developed in one region can be used by municipalities across the state.

For example, the purchasing council originally started by the Capitol Region Council of Governments is currently being used by many local governments and boards of education, as are CRCOG-developed systems for online building permitting and police communications.

Money could also be raised through modest taxation to fund projects, if permitted under state statute. States from North Carolina to California have funded specific projects including recreational facilities, transit systems and roads, and industrial park development this way, raising money using five principles:

- Ideas for projects are reviewed by citizen surveys.
- What is to be done is clearly stated up front.
- Any associated tax ends after a specified time period.
- Tax receipts are kept strictly separate from other revenues.
- The proposal must be approved by referendum vote.

One example of this approach is in Santa Clara County, Calif. A county-wide measure would fund infrastructure to support housing and business development and the extension of the **Bay Area Rapid Transit** rail network to the northern part of the city of San Jose.

If our state is going to rely on regional councils of governments to provide local services, it must allow the regional councils a reliable funding source.

It's time for the legislature to grant regional councils of governments the ability to levy taxes to support the services Connecticut's residents need.

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