



CRCOG Weekly Legislative Report

2019 Legislative Session

March 7, 2019

Weekly Legislative Feature Issues:

This week at the Capitol has seen the Appropriations Committee continue holding budget-specific public hearings as well as the other legislative committees holding public hearings of their own. There was one committee that held a hearing of particular note, the Transportation Committee. On March 6th, the Transportation Committee held a public hearing on a number of bills, including [HB No. 7202: AN ACT CONCERNING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF CONNECTICUT'S TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE](#), which is the bill that provides Governor Lamont's recommendations for the implementation of a statewide electronic tolling system.

The public hearing went late into the night while the committee members heard testimony from public officials and members of the public who wanted to give their input into whether an electronic tolling system in Connecticut should or should not be implemented. The committee clerk reported that thousands of pieces of [testimony](#) had been submitted on this bill. The committee members will now take this feedback into consideration as they make their decision on tolls in Connecticut. If this bill is passed out of the Transportation Committee, it will then move to the House for further consideration. We will be sure to keep you updated.

This past week has revealed new developments of particular interest to you:

Bob Duff and Cathy Osten: A Goal for Our School Districts and Our Future

In this article, Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff and State Sen. Cathy Osten discuss their views on the recent push for school district consolidation. The senators argue that consolidating school districts with fewer than 2,000 students is the pragmatic solution to the state's funding issues. Although administrative functions would be merged, they want to make it clear that they're not "talking about closing neighborhood schools, busing children long distances or local communities losing control over important education decisions." They base this "2,000-student" number off of a 2010 UConn study that found the optimal district size, in terms of both student educational achievement and cost effectiveness, is around 2,800 students. Duff and Osten point out the positives that could come from consolidation. They claim it could give students more access to Advance Placement courses, electives, and athletics.

They argue that consolidation could give schools an advantage in cost negotiation for busing and food contracts. The senators believe consolidation could help the state financially and students academically.

[CT Post: Bob Duff and Cathy Osten: A goal for our school districts and our future](#)

Opponents of School Regionalization to Descend on Capitol

The opposition to school district consolidation from the Connecticut public has been outspoken. In response, Lamont has tried to emphasize that he wants a “carrot, not stick” approach to regionalization, incentivizing schools for consolidating without mandating consolidation on unwilling districts. That is not what some are hearing, though. Lamont’s proposal, Senate Bill 874, states that the “Commissioner of Education may withhold (funding) from any municipality... that continues to employ its own superintendent.” Lamont’s bill would also prioritize bonding to larger districts that pool resources. Some have called this measure “coercion” by the governor. Families have pointed out that merging school districts might also break up the local sense of community and change their school’s culture. The research seems to yield no conclusive evidence that consolidation will affect students’ academic performance, but there is evidence that students’ access to resources will be improved.

Patricia Buell, superintendent of Brooklyn schools in Connecticut, rejects the implication that consolidation will always save money. She thinks legislators have a lot to learn about how small districts, like hers, are facilitating cost-saving in less controversial ways. The bill in question would require the creation of a committee to facilitate consolidation. Betsy Gara, executive director of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns, will support the bill if the state helps facilitate redistricting only in cases where it is proven to save money. Rep. Gail Lavielle also raised concerns about political appointees having control over school districts that they were not elected to represent. Senate Bill 874 is not the only option on the table, though. Sen. President Martin Looney proposed Senate Bill 738, which would force municipalities with a population fewer than 40,000 to consolidate. A second proposal—Senate Bill 457—would require any district with fewer than 2,000 students to join a new or existing district; to opt out, a district would need to give a reason in writing to the state Department of Education.

[CT Mirror: Opponents of school regionalization to descend on Capitol](#)

Gov. Lamont says Infosys to Double Commitment to Hartford, but Later Clarifies that Expansion is Possible

Governor Lamont confirmed that Infosys, a global IT company, will double its commitment to Hartford. He later clarified that he is in discussions about “possible opportunities for expansion” with Infosys. Lamont claims he played a large role in attracting Infosys to Hartford through business connections to Infosys’ President, Ravi Kumar. Infosys is estimated to bring 1,000 jobs to Hartford by 2023. A spokeswoman for Infosys did not have any details to offer. This event is part of a trend, reinforcing that

Lamont is adamant about working directly with businesses. During the four-week government shutdown, Lamont found more success working with private businesses than legislators to provide interest-free loans to federal employees.

To further help the state's finances, Lamont also emphasized that public-sector unions will need to cooperate in reining in pension costs. Other proposals, such as an all-vehicle tax, are also on the table to help Connecticut's financial situation. Lamont claims that higher tax rates are not on his agenda, and he would rather reallocate the funds such as the current sales tax to fund additional services.

[Hartford Courant: Gov. Lamont says Infosys to double commitment to Hartford, but later clarifies that expansion is possible](#)

Some Lawmakers Seeking Tax Relief for Crumbling Foundations

Lawmakers are trying to provide tax relief to Connecticut residents struggling with crumbling concrete foundations. Legislators are trying to find tax breaks that could benefit these residents. One such break would eliminate the real estate conveyance tax for residents buying houses with damaged foundations. Rep. Luxenberg has proposed another bill that provides a tax credit of \$2,500 on the personal income tax for residents with crumbling foundations. Luxenberg believes this "drop in the bucket" of funding could be critical in helping residents, especially those with repair costs as high as \$300,000. Others, like State Sen. Rob Sampson, are sympathetic of homeowners' situations but wary of potential tax cuts. It is a tricky situation that legislators will continue to navigate.

[Hartford Courant: Some lawmakers seeking tax relief for crumbling foundations](#)

Republicans Question Discounts for Connecticut Drivers Ahead of Toll Hearing at State Capitol

Part of Governor Lamont's "all-vehicle" toll plan has included a "discount" for Connecticut residents on these tolls. Senate Republican Len Fasano worries about the technicality of implementing such a decision, pointing out that a recent court case allows out-of-state residents to buy Connecticut E-Z Passes—a decision that would allow out-of-state drivers to get in-state rates. In fact, 14% of E-Z Pass transponders in Massachusetts are owned by out-of-state drivers, as well as 18% in New York state. Because of this fact, Fasano rejects the idea that 30% of funds from tolls would come from out-of-state drivers, like Lamont projects. Maribel La Luz, Lamont's communication director, commented that this problem is easily avoidable. For example, Connecticut could require an "initial cost to register [for a Connecticut E-Z Pass] or a special monthly fee to maintain the account if your home address is out of state."

The proposed tolls would be on I-95, I-91, I-84, and Route 15, and they are estimated to raise \$800 million annually. In response to the tolls, many towns and cities are passing resolutions opposing toll

construction in their municipality. Supporters of highway tolls point out the potential revenue stream, while those opposed to them bring up how tolls will add to Connecticut's already high cost of living. Senator Martin Looney, D-New Haven, criticized the Republicans' proposed alternative to use bonds to pay for ongoing transportation projects. He says that "The Republican plan will put all transportation projects on Connecticut's credit card," while tolls provide a here-and-now solution to our debt crisis. The debate is sure to continue in ongoing public hearings.

[Hartford Courant: Republicans question discounts for Connecticut drivers ahead of toll hearing at state Capitol](#)

Transportation Authority Debate Sets Stage for Larger Battle Coming on Highway Tolls

While the toll debate rages on in the background, others are worried about a resolution by the state legislative body to create a state transportation authority. The state's trucker association believes this authority could be another angle at creating tolls, circumventing the legislative process. Joseph Scully, president of the Motor Transport Association of Connecticut, worries that the New York MTA has not set a good example for Connecticut to follow. He wants Connecticut legislators to "learn from other people's mistakes" and consider the dangers of a "quasi-governmental body" having power over transportation. Rep. Roland Lemar, a New Haven Democrat who co-chairs the transportation committee, agrees that this bill should not be used as a proxy for potential toll debates. Legislators are encouraging residents who are against tolling to send in their testimony and speak out.

[Hartford Courant: Transportation authority debate sets stage for larger battle coming on highway tolls](#)

Tracked Bills:

Please see attached document.