



CRCOG Weekly Legislative Report

2020 Legislative Session

February 28, 2020

Weekly Legislative Feature Issues:

This past Monday [HB No. 5044](#) AN ACT CONCERNING IMMUNIZATIONS was passed by the Public Health Committee and sent to the state House of Representatives for further action. H.B. No. 5044 eliminated the religious exemption for students in schools and grandfathered students who are currently unvaccinated. The elimination of the religious exemption for students in schools has been one of the most contentious issues the Connecticut legislature has had to deal with this session.

Hundreds of parents, many with small children attended Monday's Public Health Committee meeting and argued that they were losing their rights and vocalized their disapproval of the bill's passage. Meanwhile, local communities around the state are preparing themselves for a potential Coronavirus pandemic.

The City of Shelton has formed an ad hoc emergency committee in an effort to prepare for a potential outbreak within the state. In the midst of the vaccination bill moving forward in the legislature, municipalities are now facing a potential public health crisis. Regardless of one's view on vaccinations, the threat of a public health crisis has made many more aware of the public health issues that are currently present in the State of Connecticut.

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

Legislative Leaders Move On From Tolls

Legislators leaders have stated that there are no hard feelings about Governor Lamont's decision to abandon the idea of truck-only tolls. Legislators are in agreement, that the year-long debate regarding tolls has left everyone aware of the issues in Connecticut's transportation system and the need to improve it. House Speaker Aresimowicz said he couldn't continue to put the entire General Assembly on hold over this one issue and that they're moving on. Even though it's not the best path forward because it won't allow the state to access the lowest interest rates from the federal government, the speaker welcomes a discussion about borrowing for transportation improvements and as a tolls supporter is prepared to move on from tolls. Senate President Martin Looney said it's been a difficult process and his caucus has tried to be creative in order to help get legislation over the finish line. On Wednesday, Looney had asked for an extra five days before holding a debate on the bill. He claimed that Republicans threatened a 30-hour filibuster, which would have required his members to make changes to their schedules. According to Looney, he doesn't place the blame on anyone for the governor's decision to pull the plug on the debate and that he doesn't have any hard feelings over the decision. Senate Republican Leader Len Fasano said they could still debate his proposal that would use money from the Rainy-Day Fund to pay off some of the unfunded pension liability. However, Aresimowicz and Looney both have said they aren't interested in using money from the Rainy-Day fund for that purpose.

[Legislative Leaders Move On From Tolls](#)

Lamont keeps pledge, begins release of stalled municipal aid

Governor Lamont kept his promise to municipalities on Friday, by beginning the process of releasing \$150 million in municipal aid that's been stalled since last summer because of the debate over tolls. The release of the aid to municipalities comes a few days after Governor Lamont publicly gave up on his Transportation bill being adopted by the Democrat controlled legislature. The administration has also indicated it was ready to work with legislators to authorize bonding of another \$475M this fiscal year for municipal school construction projects. However, billions of dollars in financing still need to be negotiated for dozens of capital projects and programs throughout the state. Before any bonds can be issued, the State Bond Commission must endorse borrowing, but the ten-member panel is chaired by the governor and his budget office sets its agenda, so after the bill turns into law the administration could gain the commissions endorsement within a few days or weeks. On Wednesday, Lamont said he would ensure the three delayed grants would move forward in the near future, regardless of the transportation bills outcome. There are three municipal grants that the state funds with long-term financing, specifically by selling bonds on wall street. The three stalled grants include the Town Aid Road Program, Local Capital Improvement Program, and Grant for Municipal Projects. Lamont proposed on Friday for maintaining funding levels for all three programs at 2018-19 levels.

[Lamont keeps pledge, begins release of stalled municipal aid](#)

Vacant buildings, parking lots continue to blanket a key gateway to downtown Hartford.

Many old vacant office buildings in Hartford have been repurposed in recent years, however a key block that welcomes visitors downtown has struggled to be redeveloped. Landlords controlling properties in the area have claimed that they've been unable to redevelop their historic properties due to financial or logistical reasons. These properties are some of the first things that visitors see when entering the city's central business districts. According to city and economic development officials the area has plenty of potential for redevelopment and could build off of TheaterWorks into an arts hub or add new dining or housing options. However, a collective effort to transform the block is difficult because each of the properties have different owners. Each of the owners have a different perspective on the matter and there are numerous ideas for what should be placed in the area. Last month, the old Hartford Fire Department headquarters had been decommissioned and added 64,000 square feet of empty office/storage space to the street. In the coming months, the city is inviting developers and investors to submit proposals to buy and redevelop the three-story firehouse at 275 Pearl. Mayor Luke Bronin came out and said that the empty fire station "creates opportunity for us all to think bigger and for property owners in that area to think bigger about what that part of town could be."

[Vacant buildings, parking lots continue to blanket a key gateway to downtown Hartford.](#)

Town Aid Stranded by Tolls Debate Isn't Out of Political Limbo Yet

The debate surrounding tolls in CT seems to have reached an end, but millions of dollars in town aid that was being held up by the debate continues to be in political limbo. The reason being that the legislature with a Democratic majority is faced with a difficult decision in the midst of an election year and lacks an easy solution. Democrats could accept the offer presented by the governor in which the state borrows \$150 million for three operating grants and another \$475 million for school construction projects. However, Republicans who are in the minority are against the idea of excessive borrowing and often use it as an attack against Democrats would be in favor of such a proposal. Which would allow Republicans to use the bill authorizing a small bonding package to help with their re-election. Although, Democrats can choose to wait until negotiations between the legislature and the current administration are completed and authorize a two-year bonding package that includes borrowing for municipal aid, school construction, economic development, affordable housing, transportation work, and other capital projects. A move that wouldn't allow Republicans to score any political points for rescuing aid to towns, but forces Connecticut's city and towns to continue to wait for the funds they've been waiting for since July 1st. Communities are currently in the process of developing their budgets for the upcoming fiscal year, and many of these budgets are implemented in early May. If the uncertainty surrounding State aid isn't resolved by then, it may force municipal leaders to decide to raise local taxes in an effort to cover the difference. Legislative leaders have said they appreciate the municipalities concern and have yet to make any final decision on how to proceed. Senate President Pro Tem Martin M. Looney said on Thursday that they're still

weighing both options. Connecticut annually borrows billions of dollars by selling bonds on wall street. This financing supports municipal school construction, capital projects at state universities, transportation upgrades, clean water and other conservation efforts, economic development programs and affordable housing. Most of the aid to cities and towns is paid out of the state's operating budget, however over the past decade as legislators struggled with budget deficits Connecticut began to borrow to fuel some municipal grant programs. Last June lawmakers and Lamont settled on a two-year state operating budget but were unable to agree on a complementary biennial bond package because Lamont had wanted lawmakers to endorse tolls first on all vehicles, then later only on large commercial trucks. While the debate surrounding tolls continued, municipalities continued to wait as three grants left unfunded. The Town Aid Road program which helps towns pay for summer road repaving, fall tree clearing and winter snow removal. The local capital improvement program, which provided \$30 million for sidewalk, parking lot, and other infrastructure work and municipal building upgrades. And the Grant for Municipal Projects, which provided \$60 million last fiscal year for various public works initiatives. The delay in funding has forced towns to postpone or cancel some projects, or dip into their reserves to limit the disruption.

[Town Aid Stranded by Tolls Debate Isn't Out of Political Limbo Yet](#)

Tracked Bills:

Please see attached document.