



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

**Testimony Before the Committee on Planning and Development
In Support Of**

H.B. 6448 - An Act Concerning Expanding Access to Local Government and Modernizing Local Government Operations

March 22, 2021

Chairwoman McCarthy-Vahey, Chairman Cassano, Ranking Member Zullo, Ranking Member Hwang, and members of the Committee on Planning and Development. My name is Brendan Sharkey, and I am the Chairperson of the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (“ACIR”). The Vice-Chair of the ACIR, Lyle Wray, and I offer this testimony in support of H.B. 6448 – An Act Expanding Access to Local Government and Modernizing Local Government Operations.

As you know, pursuant to § 2-79a of the General Statutes, the ACIR is a state agency whose purpose is “to enhance coordination and cooperation between the state and local governments” by “(1) Serv[ing] as a forum for consultation among state and local government officials; (2) conduct[ing] research on intergovernmental issues; (3) encourage[ing] and coordinat[ing] studies of intergovernmental issues by universities, research and consulting organizations and others; (4) initiat[ing] policy development and mak[ing] recommendations for consideration by all levels and branches of government.” It is pursuant to the latter statutory function that we come before you today.

Broadly speaking, state and local governments are under ongoing pressure to innovate to provide more effective, efficient, and responsive public services. Within that context, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, ACIR has sought to provide timely and relevant support to local governments. For example, throughout 2020, ACIR produced regularly updated summaries for local officials concerning the Governor’s executive orders that impact the operations of local government. In addition, ACIR engaged the University of Georgia and University of Connecticut in the development of best practices that might inform how local government can improve effectiveness, efficiency and responsiveness of their operations.

By the Fall of 2020, ACIR took notice of two phenomena taking place in Connecticut: 1) the increased efficiencies in local government that were the unintended result of COVID-19 protocols, and 2) the increased awareness of how our state’s balkanized system of local governance is contributing to societal injustice by institutionalizing divisions among communities. In response, ACIR embarked on the Local Government of the Future (“LGF”) Initiative, with the goal of re-imagining how local government should function in a more equitable, post-COVID world.

After several months of discussion, the LGF Initiative produced two legislative proposals. One was a list of recommended changes to local government functions that have been created by executive order in the COVID context and that should be codified in a post-COVID world. Many of those ACIR recommendations are among those offered by the governor in H.B. 6448.

The more sweeping proposal from the LGF Initiative, however, is found in Sections 9 and 10 of the H.B. 6448. The proposal re-purposes the existing Regional Performance Incentive Program (“RPIP”) to stand-up our existing Councils of Government (“COGs”) and Regional Education Service Centers (“RESCs”) to provide services in-house to their constituent members that are otherwise being performed on a town-by-town or district-by-district basis.

For the sake of this testimony, we will refer to this proposal as “RPIP 2.0.” As the committee knows, the original RPIP was created in 2011 to fund projects undertaken by two or more towns that agreed to collaborate on municipal services or capital purchases. While that was an effective and useful incentive for regional cooperation ten years ago, the RPIP has funded less ambitious projects in recent years. As a result, the ACIR believes that the RPIP grant should be re-imagined for the purposes identified in our LGF Initiative.

Under RPIP 2.0, a COG or RESC can propose to provide a service that their constituent members currently offer individually. If the majority of their constituent members agree, the COG or RESC develops a budget analysis that outlines a three-year plan of implementation, and then applies to the OPM secretary for review based on the criteria established in the legislation.

This is not a competitive grant. All proposals that meet the statutory criteria outlined in Section 9 of the bill would be funded for three-years, with the COG or RESC contributing a 25% match of the total cost.

The RPIP 2.0 program is completely voluntary. No COG or RESC is required to apply or participate, and there are no negative consequences for not participating. It is also not a requirement that all members of a COG or RESC participate in the service once a program is offered, though it would be available to any member at any time.

The full scope of RPIP 2.0 has been thoroughly vetted and unanimously endorsed by the full membership of the ACIR, which includes key stakeholders in local and regional government. Organized labor has played a key role in the development of the proposal, as has the education community, cities, towns and, of course, our COGs and RESCs.

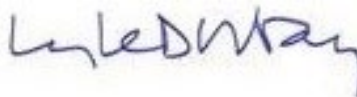
Importantly, Governor Lamont has endorsed this concept. Not only does the Governor maintain a long-standing commitment to creating efficiencies in local government through regional collaboration, but he has an even stronger commitment to the cause of racial and societal justice. The governor recognizes that the RPIP 2.0 concept is a small step toward breaking down institutional barriers among our cities and towns. By enabling our existing regional entities to become fully functional service providers for their members on a much broader scale, we can gradually move Connecticut toward a more collaborative footprint, where differences between urban, suburban and rural communities become less stark. By starting with the realization of the financial benefits of cooperation, including lower property taxes, communities may also recognize the benefits of breaking down the institutional structures that separate them.

We wish to thank Governor Lamont for his leadership by including the ACIR’s LGF Initiative as part of his vision for local government, and we thank the leaders and members of the Planning and Development Committee for your support for this concept as well.

Sincerely:



Brendan Sharkey, Chair
Owner, AmeriZone, LLC



Lyle Wray, Vice-Chair
Executive Director, SCRCOG