

Draft 6:

CRCOG Legislative Agenda for 2022

*The **Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)** is the largest council of governments in Connecticut and comprises 38 cities and towns and serves one million residents. It covers most of historic Hartford and Tolland counties.*

Introduction

Given the striking events of the last two years, the next legislative session should focus on economic recovery and expansion. The Federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding is a rare opportunity that is here today but will disappear in several years. Given this limited time horizon, we should prioritize uses of ARPA funding to lay a foundation for economic expansion moving forward even after the enhanced federal funds have stopped.

Connecticut currently finds itself in a very strong financial situation for the first time in many years. This is a great opportunity to commit stable funding to regional councils of government such as CRCOG. Strengthened COGs can serve to further encourage the development of regional collaboration that should increase efficiency and effectiveness and strengthen our economic recovery and expansion.

Beyond town business process and IT infrastructure improvements, the state should consider and prioritize multi-town capital redevelopment projects when allocating the state's share of ARPA dollars. Taken together, these ideas would help foster a regional approach to recovery and reinvention as we work to put the pandemic behind us.

COVID-19 Response and Recovery

CRCOG has been active since March 2020 in responding to the COVID-19 emergency in the region to assist our towns and residents. With the Connecticut Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (CT DEMHS), CRCOG has activated our Regional Distribution Site plan and distributed over 20 million pieces of personal protective equipment to our member towns, first responders, schools, and long-term care facilities. CRCOG will update our Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy to speed up workforce development efforts by advocating for a state flexible training fund for use by Industry Sector Partnership (ISPs). CRCOG stands ready to shoulder additional responsibilities in the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic.

Solid Waste Management

In the 1970s, Connecticut acted to replace landfilling of raw solid waste with recycling and waste-to-energy plants. This policy is about to be reversed with the coming closure of the MIRA waste-to-energy plant in the CRCOG region. This will present us with the likelihood of exporting and landfilling 500,000 to one million tons of trash annually in the next few years. CRCOG is calling on the legislature to work toward a long-term statewide solution to preserve modern waste disposal options. Many of the elements of permitting and ash disposal are beyond the reach of regions. CRCOG has been proactive in this area several times and now has an RFP out to gather input for a whatever the next stage may be. In short, we need state leadership and action on this large and emerging issue.

Transportation

Boston Rail Service. CRCOG has been an advocate of restoring improved Hartford-Springfield-Boston passenger rail service. This project would provide benefits ten times greater than costs and yield \$60 to \$80 billion to a corridor that has been lagging the Northeast. With new federal infrastructure and rail funds, it is urgent to take advantage of the opportunity to advance this critically important project for the CRCOG region and the state.

New Federal Transportation Funding. The passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will result in significant increased availability of federal transportation funding over the next five years. This increase will result in a corresponding increase in non-federal match requirements. It is critical that Connecticut's Special Transportation Fund be kept solvent and flexible to utilize all available funding. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) will be significantly challenged to manage and fully implement the new funding given estimates that the state civil service, including CTDOT, could lose over 20% of its staff to retirement over the next year. One possible way to improve capacity is delegating some functions to better utilize the resources and expertise of the COGs/MPOs. This assistance in managing appropriate transportation programs and projects could prove to be critical in the next three to five years.

STBG Funding and LOTCIP. Under the federal bill, Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) funding levels will be significantly increased. LOTCIP provides State monies to urbanized area municipal governments in exchange for control over the suballocated federal STBG funding that would otherwise be available to them. Therefore, the annual level of LOTCIP funding has directly reflected the annual level of STBG funding for each COG/MPO region. It is imperative that any increase in a region's annual STBG allocation be matched by an equal (or greater) annual LOTCIP allocation. The program should be expanded to cover climate change issues such as failing culverts and small bridges.

CRCOG as a Pilot for CTDOT Delegation to COGs. Given the serious staffing shortfall CTDOT is facing and will face for years to come, CRCOG proposes the State consider contracting with CRCOG as a pilot effort to manage on behalf of CTDOT a select set of

transportation projects or programs in the Capitol Region. CRCOG has showed knowledge and experience to efficiently manage a wide range of transportation projects and programs and has piloted the Master Municipal Agreements for the state. Delegation of certain functions could include managing smaller transportation projects and acquisition of rights of way.

Public Service Modernization

Partly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we should speed up modernization of public services in the state and towns and leverage existing systems: GIS regional data systems for land records, online assessing and facilitate local government service innovation and “touchless” service delivery. CRCOG supports implementing the recommendations of the MORE Commission’s report titled “Transforming Local Government Service Delivery through Technology” (<https://bit.ly/2sNS7FT>). As an example, the state and regions could have a single GIS services portal. If the legislature finds that regional dispatching can be done in cost saving way, the legislature should allocate funding to build or convert several dispatch centers to serve the state rather than force towns to consolidate on their own. A system for municipal contribution for operating costs would need to be developed.

Broadband Access

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a light on the importance of broadband access for K-12 education, for providing “touchless” public services and for businesses. There are federal and state funding opportunities available, but more will likely be needed to fully solve the broadband challenge. There are geographic gaps in broadband access in rural and urban areas and issues of economic access to available broadband service. CRCOG requests that the state build on existing measures, such as CEN providing middle mile services, to further access to broadband across the state. Additionally requiring one touch pole attachments will speed the implementation and decrease the cost. A recent national report on broadband access may be found here: https://www.benton.org/sites/default/files/BroadbandAmericaNow_final.pdf

Funding and Roles for Councils of Government

For CRCOG to further speed up shared services at the regional level, and to be a strong partner to meet the challenges listed above, Councils of Governments in Connecticut need stable funding and clear roles.

- **Continue Stable Funding for Councils of Governments.** To be vibrant and effective, Councils of Governments need long-term stability in funding. Continuing the existing source of funding, not dependent on either the state or municipalities, is critical.
- **Expand Municipal Shared Services.** Several CRCOG members were involved in the work of the Connecticut Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations on shared municipal services. The report was presented to the Legislature just before the COVID-19 emergency. It contains a series of recommendations on technology, municipal and K-12

school shared services. See the December 2, 2019, report at: <https://tinyurl.com/3pjrnxjw> . The Legislature should prioritize moving forward with the recommendations in the ACIR report.

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