



January 29, 2018

Hon. Robert Patricelli and James Smith, Co-Chairs  
CT Commission on Fiscal Stability and Economic Growth  
Legislative Office Building, Room 3700  
Hartford, CT 06106

*Re: Commission Hearing on Cities and Infrastructure*

Dear Mr. Patricelli, Mr. Smith, and Commission Members,

The Northwest Hills Council of Governments consists of the Mayors and First Selectmen from 21 member towns in the northwest corner of Connecticut. The City of Torrington, with a population of about 35,000, is our regional center. Most of the surrounding towns are small, rural communities with populations less than 5,000. Our COG appreciates the work of the Commission in seeking to develop and recommend policies to achieve state government fiscal stability and to promote economic growth and competitiveness within the state.

In response to the Commission's request to participate in the hearing on "Cities and Infrastructure", the NHCOC urges your consideration of the following five major recommendations.

**1) Address the impending insolvency of the Special Transportation Fund.** As recently documented by ConnDOT, existing revenue levels are insufficient to support the STF. If ConnDOT were to proceed at existing operating and planned capital improvement levels, the STF would have a deficit of over \$300 million by FY 2022. Since that cannot be allowed to occur, ConnDOT plans to implement drastic capital and operating budget cuts in order to lower anticipated expenditures to currently projected STF revenues. These cuts will adversely impact our towns, such as significantly reducing Town Aid Road funding. The cuts will also result in reduced budgets for normal bridge repair and road paving on state roads such as Routes 7, 8, 63, 202, 272, and others. Since diversion of funds from the STF for non-transportation purposes has occurred in the past, we urge your support for legislative adoption of a transportation lock box as proposed by ConnDOT, and additional revenues for the STF to prevent major program cuts.

**2) Help our municipalities control local tax increases.** Any attempt to balance the state budget by reducing state aid to municipalities is simply a tax shift from one unit of government to another. It does not address any fundamental structural change to help restore Connecticut to prosperity. The recent state "holdbacks" in municipal aid are illustrative of the dramatic impact that such budget adjustments at the state level can have. We urge your support in encouraging the legislature to maintain existing levels of state aid for such critical municipal programs as

- *Town Aid Road*



- *Education Cost Sharing*
- *Local Capital Improvement Program*

**3) Support Additional Voluntary Regional Initiatives That Will Save Taxpayers Money and Enhance the Level of Service.** As recommended by CCM, we would appreciate your support in restoring the Regional Performance Incentive Program and maintaining funding for Connecticut's Councils of Governments so that new regional service delivery initiatives can be pursued that will serve to save taxpayers money and improve the level of local government services.

It is important to recognize that the Northwest Hills region has a long history of embracing voluntary regionalism. Over the years, our local officials have regionalized health districts, public safety answering points, school districts, transit services, municipal solid waste and recycling facilities, and other public services. The area has also established a regional chamber of commerce, a regional economic development corporation, and a regional public safety task force.

The NHCOC has also implemented a number of cost-saving service delivery programs that are designed to benefit the City of Torrington and our member towns. These include a regional cooperative purchasing program and public works equipment cooperative that save the City of Torrington and other participating towns thousands of dollars each year. All of these multi-town cooperative efforts serve to strengthen the economic health of the City of Torrington and the surrounding towns.

**4) Prioritize Torrington and Other Regional Centers for Public Investment.** The member towns of the NHCOC recognize the importance of the City of Torrington to the socio-economic health of the Northwest Hills Region. Torrington is the regional hub of the Northwest Hills and all our member towns have a vested interest in continuing to promote the City's economic health. The NHCOC is in the process of designing a regional Animal Care Facility to serve Torrington and the surrounding towns, has long advocated for the construction of a Regional Transit Center in Downtown Torrington to enhance public transit services, and has directed numerous roadway improvement grant funds to the City of Torrington.

It is important to note that the City of Torrington is one of only three municipalities in the state that has met all four fiscal disparity criteria under Connecticut General Statutes, Section 7-148dd. As a result, consideration should be given to giving priority to these three communities when awarding state community and economic grant funds. In addition, DECD should more aggressively reach out to the small businesses in these three municipalities to enhance awareness of the State's economic development programs and to offer assistance in completing funding applications.

**5) Continue to seek relief from unfunded state mandates to enable more cost-effective state and local government services.** Over the years, our municipal officials have routinely requested relief from a number of unfunded state mandates. We are very encouraged that several mandate relief measures were enacted by the General Assembly this past year, including increasing the





threshold for prevailing wage for new construction. We urge the Commission to pursue additional mandate relief in cooperation with CCM, COST, and local officials (e.g. increasing the prevailing wage threshold for renovations to \$400,000; authorizing municipal legal notices to be placed on-line rather than in the newspaper).

Thank you for your consideration of the above recommendations that can be pursued to help enhance the economic health of the City of Torrington, the Northwest Hills Region, and the State of Connecticut.

Sincerely,

Rick Lynn, AICP  
Executive Director