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# LOCAL GOVERNMENT COOPERATIVE VENTURES IN CONNECTICUT

A REPORT BY THE CONNECTICUT  
ADVISORY COMMISSION ON  
INTERGOVERNMENTAL  
RELATIONS

JUNE 2000

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**LOCAL GOVERNMENT COOPERATIVE VENTURES  
IN CONNECTICUT**

a report by the

**Connecticut Advisory Commission on  
Intergovernmental Relations**

June 2000

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## ADVISORY COMMISSION ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) is a 24-member agency of the State of Connecticut created in 1985 to study system issues between the state and local governments and to recommend solutions as appropriate. The membership is designed to represent the state legislative and executive branches, municipalities and other local interests, and the general public.

The role of ACIR, as contained in Section 2-79a of the General Statutes is to: (1) serve as a forum for consultation between state and local officials; (2) conduct research on intergovernmental issues; (3) encourage and coordinate studies of intergovernmental issues by universities and others; and (4) initiate policy development and make recommendations to all levels of government.

The Commission is staffed by the Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM) and is located at 450 Capitol Avenue - MS#54SLP, Hartford, Connecticut 06106-1308  
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Sonya Googins  
Chairman

David W. Russell  
Director

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# Local Government Cooperative Ventures in Connecticut

## *Introduction*

Local government cooperative ventures either may be authorized by statute or created by voluntary local initiatives. There are some 37 types of regional or inter-municipal organizations authorized by Connecticut General Statutes and federal legislation, including three inter-district education programs. There are also a wide variety of locally-generated, voluntary inter-municipal arrangements in Connecticut which address a wide range of issues. Since these locally-generated agreements are not required to be certified by, or registered with, any state agency, there is no comprehensive state-wide index of inter-municipal organizations.

The Connecticut Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) first analyzed inter-local cooperative arrangements in Connecticut in 1990 and updated that analysis in 1996. Now, with the interest in regional and inter-municipal cooperation growing, ACIR has conducted a third review.

Since the publication of this report in 1996, 61 local government joint ventures listed in the report have discontinued operation. ACIR analysis indicates no overall discernable pattern to or reason for the discontinuation of these joint ventures, nor is there any particular category of programs that is more impacted than another. It appears that what resulted occurred for a variety of specific local reasons, including, but not limited to, reduction or elimination of funding source(s), refocus of priorities, accomplishment of purpose, agency reconfiguration, and/or consolidation of programs.

On the other hand, since the publication of this report in 1996, ACIR, with assistance from a variety of sources, has identified and added approximately 300 new local government joint ventures. These include education as well as general government programs. As regards general government, there has been a significant increase in programs involving shared administrative, inspection and social services. Moreover, two new categories of programs have been added to the report under Section 3 - General Government Cooperative Programs. One category of programs, those dealing with Domestic Violence, is shown under the Public Health and Social Service listing, while the other category, Greenways, is included under the Environmental listing.

In regards to education programs, there has been a significant increase in the number of magnet schools as well as in specific programs designed to address issues of cultural diversity. Both the local education agencies and the regional education service centers have introduced new programs to reflect an emphasis on school choice and cultural

diversity. Additionally, there has been an increase in programs focused on improving student utilization of computer technology and internet services.

The purpose of this study is:

1. to identify and classify the types of regional and inter-local cooperation currently existing in the state;
2. to catalogue as many types of inter-municipal cooperative efforts as possible and to provide concise and useful information concerning such programs for possible replication by interested municipalities; and
3. to gather examples of the different types of operational agreements which led to the creation of such inter-municipal bodies, providing resource documentation to municipal officials interested in examining potential relationships further.

Approximately 1,000 inter-municipal cooperative ventures have been identified in this report using six primary sources including:

1. regional inventories of inter-municipal activity prepared by regional planning organizations;
2. intermunicipal activities supplied directly by individual municipalities;
3. program reports supplied by Regional Education Service Centers;
4. information obtained from Connecticut Conference of Municipalities publications;
5. previously acquired listings; and
6. information supplied by state agencies.

While this report constitutes the most comprehensive effort to date to identify and categorize the many inter-local agreements in Connecticut, it still may not be inclusive of all the informal multi-town organizations existing throughout the state.

Connecticut's inter-municipal arrangements vary substantially in purpose, formality, organizational structure, and financing. Their purposes cover a broad spectrum of activity, ranging from simple, low cost equipment sharing arrangements, to sophisticated and relatively expensive regional recycling programs and other complex administrative and educational activities. Some programs are informal in structure, while others involve formalized agreements, balanced representation requirements, and financial participation. Some programs do not have a budget, while others have budgets ranging into the tens of millions of dollars. Some are organized on a durational basis, while others have endured and prospered for decades. Despite these differences, virtually all such cooperative

relationships, whether authorized by specific state or federal legislation or informally created, are formed when two or more municipalities or boards of education voluntarily agree to address a situation on a joint basis.

The predominant common characteristics of Connecticut's inter-municipal cooperative ventures are that:

- ↳ they are single purpose in nature;
- ↳ they are specialized to meet well defined goals;
- ↳ participation is voluntary;
- ↳ financial contributions are self-regulated;
- ↳ program effectiveness is evaluated locally; and
- ↳ administrative requirements are minimal.

These characteristics allow municipalities and boards of education to maintain administrative control over the cooperative ventures. Voluntary inter-local agreements do not threaten local autonomy and do not constitute a step toward regional government or centralization of local powers. On the contrary, voluntary efforts identified in this report are examples of how creative local cooperative efforts can effectively resolve regional challenges. While Connecticut municipalities and boards of education have safeguarded their local autonomy, they have routinely demonstrated their willingness and ability to work cooperatively with other cities and districts, when such action can result in operationally efficient and cost effective solutions to common problems.

## *Analysis*

### **Categories of Cooperative Ventures**

There are five basic categories of organizations recognized in this report:

1. general government cooperative ventures that are specifically required or authorized by federal or state statute;
2. regional or inter-district education programs that are clearly organized under specific authorizing legislation;
3. general government cooperative ventures that are the products of inter-municipal contracts or other local agreements and which tend to be more informal in nature;

4. other inter-district educational programs organized locally to provide needed services on a multi-town basis; and
5. inter-district initiatives that are formed among previously constituted regional groups

Part C of this report contains five sections with examples of cooperative ventures in each of these five general categories.

In the first category, examples of which are contained in Section 1 of Part C, there are 34 different types of statutorily required or authorized general government organizations/activities identified with 233 individual entities listed. In Section 2 of Part C, three types and 231 programs and services are indexed 189 RESC programs. In Section 3 of Part C, 13 broad functional areas of general government activity are identified, with 30 subcategories of inter-local agreements and 436 specific programs. Section 4 contains seven categories, with eight subgroups of inter-district educational cooperative agreements with 208 programs or regionally organized services identified. Section 5 contains one category with one example identified.

Included in the first category above are Connecticut's three types of statutory regional planning organizations. The regional planning organizations include six councils of government, three regional councils of elected officials, and six regional planning agencies. The purpose of these regional planning organizations is to provide a broad range of regional planning functions and to serve as a forum for municipalities to undertake joint action on issues of concern (e.g., cooperative purchasing, organizing household hazardous waste collection programs, developing regional legislative priorities, etc.).

Interestingly, several types of statutorily authorized arrangements including Municipal Districts and Metropolitan Districts have not been utilized by any of Connecticut's municipalities despite prescribed statutory procedures for their creation. Rather, localized, informal or sometimes contractual agreements falling into Sections 3 and 4 seem to be the prevalent approach to cooperative activity in Connecticut.

Although many inter-local and regional bodies are formed in response to state policy or financial incentives, most cooperative ventures identified in Section 3 of Part C have resulted from local initiatives between or among two or more municipalities relating to basic local government functions. Municipalities, acting in what each perceives to be its own best interest, underwrite the cost of many of these ventures with local general fund appropriations. Each participating municipality evaluates the effectiveness of the program and determines the need for continuing the activity. Therefore, municipalities retain the highest degree of local autonomy while securing the benefits of cooperative activity, without the perceived dangers of creating additional layers of government or becoming involved in complicated long-term administrative entanglements. In Connecticut, inter-local cooperative activity is very often a "grass roots" phenomenon occurring frequently, even when government financial incentives are not available.

By contrast, in the formation of cooperative regional or inter-district educational programs identified in Sections 2 and 4, the availability of financial support/incentives from other levels of government seems to play a far more important role in the formation of such programs. In many cases, municipalities, hard pressed to find the additional financial resources to support new and expensive regional programs or capital construction, could only do so through the use of state or federal funds made available for those purposes. As a result, while a significant amount of effective inter-district cooperation is observable, significant new programming, particularly in the area of magnet school development, technological improvement and inter-district diversity initiatives, has been substantially facilitated by the availability of new, targeted state funding.

## **Geographic Distribution of Activity**

The following map (Chart A) shows the distribution of cooperative programs throughout the state. The table containing the town-by-town numbers is shown as Appendix A at the end of this report. The most striking information revealed by this data is that active cooperating towns are concentrated in the Greater Hartford, Greater New Haven and Greater New London areas. Lesser, yet still significant cooperative activity is found in towns adjacent to the aforementioned areas, as well as in Fairfield County. Two caveats to this data are that the numbers reflect only those programs of which ACIR is aware, and that the number of cooperative programs is at least somewhat impacted by the overall number of public services provided by the towns. Even with these cautions, however, it is evident that certain municipalities are making significant inroads in working together in numerous program areas. Finally, it is significant to note that no municipality participates in fewer than 33 cooperative programs, and several are involved in more than ninety.

## **Creation**

Discussions with the creators of cooperative ventures have identified the following as the primary reasons for the creation of cooperative programs.

### **1. Pragmatic Problem Solving**

Probably the most common reason for the creation of an inter-local cooperative program is the need to respond to a problem that best can be addressed on a multi-town basis. Examples of these programs include regional recycling efforts, multi-town transportation districts and specialized inter-town equipment and staff sharing agreements. These programs may be initiated because the problem requires a larger geographic response, i.e. rural transportation, or because financial reality dictates a common approach. In either



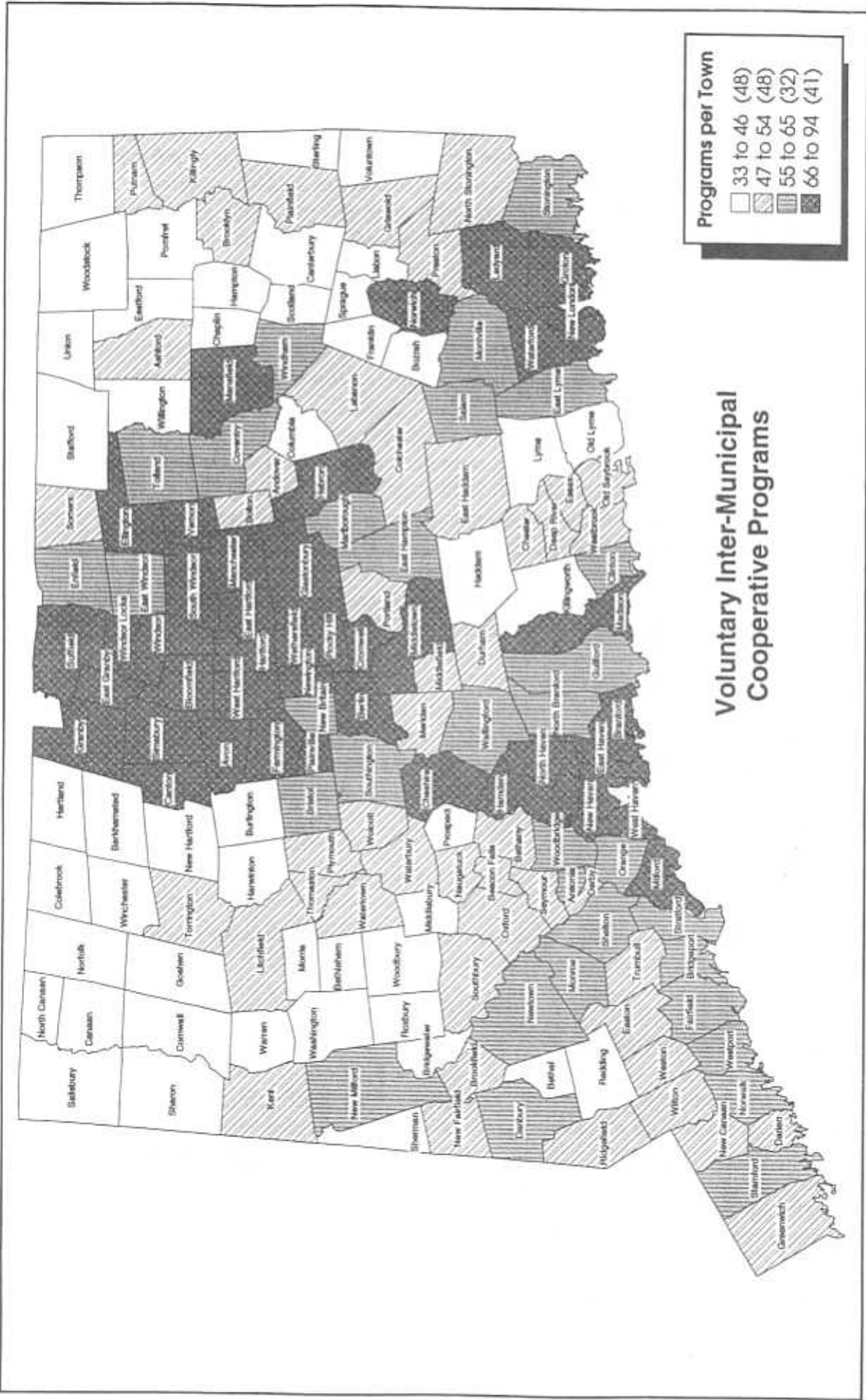


Chart A

case, the desire to respond in an operationally efficient manner and to function in a cost effective framework offers a compelling reason to initiate cooperative approaches to common problems.

## **2. Leadership**

In a number of cases, cooperative efforts have been initiated as a result of the powerful leadership of one person or a few key people. The Quinebaug - Shetucket River Heritage Corridor Advisory Committee, is one such example. In addition, many household hazardous waste collection programs, a number of economic development projects, and some human service programs have been formed through the determined and persistent leadership of a few individuals. These individuals may be elected officials, experts in their fields or interested citizens.

## **3. Incentives**

In some cases, cooperative programs have been formed in response to the availability of funding incentives from outside sources. These sources include state or federal grants or private sector support. Examples include special funding for magnet schools and planning districts and enhanced funding for targeted services such as job training, housing initiatives and regional facilities. In these cases, incentives have been created for local government or local school districts to work together to provide a service which the state or federal government has deemed important. However, incentives alone do not always result in the creation of an inter-local or inter-district agreement. Local government officials must also conclude that participation in the regional program is a reasonable and cost effective approach to the problem at hand.

## **4. Mandates**

A few of the organizations identified in this report have been created due in large part to state or federal mandates. Regional workforce development boards, metropolitan planning organizations, and area agencies on aging are examples of organizations that are structured in response to federal requirements. At the state level, while not directly mandating multi-town arrangements in developing requirements for such programs as resource recovery facilities, recycling programs, planning organizations and a range of educational and economic development projects, municipalities are encouraged to enter into cooperative inter-local arrangements.

## **Organizational Structures**

The organizational structure of most inter-municipal programs tends to be ad hoc rather than highly structured. Certain factors tend to influence the formality of organizational

arrangements, including the degree of capital investment, the size of operating budgets, the relationship of oversight board members to the chief elected officials of participating municipalities, and whether or not the programs are organized under categorical state legislation. The more specific the legislation, the larger the capital investment and the larger the operating budget, the more formal the organization is likely to be. These same factors also characterize regional and inter-municipal organizations that have a greater degree of permanence. Regional facilities, such as resource recovery authorities or regional sewer districts, which are governed by committees comprised of representatives of chief elected officials or legislative bodies, and which require extraordinary capital expenditures and annual budgets, are good examples of highly structured organizations with permanence.

In the case of educational programs, Regional Education Services Center (RES-C) boards, all of which oversee large budgets and regional facilities, are formally structured and maintain membership from each participating community. Because educational needs are often long-term in nature with responses requiring capital expenditures and operational budgets, many such programs and services are characterized by greater permanency and a more institutionalized structure.

A common organizational mechanism for inter-local agreements is a contractual arrangement, involving a representative board, local resolution or simple informal understanding. In many cases, such arrangements are unique to a particular program or concern, and when the immediate problem abates, the structure or arrangement disappears.

In addition, Connecticut has a group of statutes through which municipalities can create municipal districts and metropolitan districts to arrange for shared services and operations. These are non-specific in nature, providing for only the basic organizational requirements, and vest great discretion in the hands of participating communities. Despite the presence of this enabling legislation, very few inter-local ventures have been organized utilizing such provisions.

Instead, municipalities have utilized quite extensively either contractual powers or categorical enabling legislation relating to specific subject areas. For example, the state adopted legislation enabling the creation of regional planning agencies, councils of elected officials, councils of governments and regional education service centers. These entities have been formed throughout the state, as have other issue-specific organizations such as transit districts, enterprise corridor zones, substance abuse planning and action councils and regional economic development commissions.

## **Funding Mechanisms**

Just as there are many different types of inter-local structures, there are many different funding mechanisms and program financial requirements. Many inter-local cooperative agreements involve only modest expenditures and, in some cases, none at all. In practice,

the administrative costs related to inter-local structures and staff are minimized, with each participating municipality agreeing to pay for its share of service or staff time. Because so many of these arrangements are voluntary, each municipality can periodically assess the effectiveness of the particular program to determine if membership and financial participation is warranted. Even with mandated and/or more formal inter-local organizations, maintenance of local discretion and financial control is of paramount concern.

Budgets for the inter-municipal organizations range from zero, in the case of some equipment sharing arrangements, to the tens of thousands of dollars for joint animal control services and hazardous waste collection days, to hundreds of thousands of dollars for health districts, visitor's bureaus and regional planning organizations, to millions of dollars as in the case of the Metropolitan District Commission.

In looking at the range of cooperative ventures included in this report, it was found that funding arrangements fall into one or more of the following categories:

1. **Town Contributions** - There are many different creative formulas for determining the relative contributions of the participating municipalities. They range from flat amounts, to sliding scales based on population or the size of grand lists and budgets, to the hours of equipment time used and, in the case of the Lake Waramaug Inter-Local Commission, to the percent of lake-frontage each town possesses.
2. **State Grants** - In a number of cases, state funding has been the incentive to create a regional entity and to sustain its operation. State grants are used to promote certain programs and to encourage local government cooperation. State grant-in-aid funding has supported the operations of regional planning organizations for some forty years, while targeted state grants promote inter-district educational programming such as magnet schools and regionalized special services. Other state funding has led to the formation of multi-town health districts, substance abuse action and planning councils, tourism districts, Emergency Medical Service Councils and regional economic development commissions.
3. **Fees** - User fees are charges levied for services provided. Fees are common in the area of landfill services, resource recovery programs, recycling efforts, hazardous waste collection days and a variety of regional education programs.
4. **Private Contributions** - Individuals, corporations and foundations often support specific programs. Regional education programs, shelters, substance abuse programs, and, in some cases, very particular services, for example the Regional Connecticut Police Helicopter Program, enjoy private sector support.
5. **Federal Grants** - Although reduced in size and frequency, federal funding continues to provide financial incentive and support in a variety of program areas.

Job training and placement activities, social and senior services, transit districts, transportation programs for the disabled and river heritage corridor programs are funded by the federal government.

6. **Sale of Products** - Revenues generated from the sale of products, for example water from the MDC, or the sale of power by resource recovery programs, is an important source of financial support to certain programs.

7. **In Kind Contributions** - Free printing, postage, meeting space and professional staff support are significant factors in the success of some organizations. Such organizations or alliances include, for example, associations of public safety officials, health professionals, administrators of youth service programs and elected officials.

## **Conclusion**

In the absence of county government and mandatory regional bodies, there are no general purpose regional governmental structures in Connecticut. While highly structured regional planning agencies and councils of governments and elected officials fulfill wide ranging planning functions, they represent only one type of local government cooperative venture in Connecticut. Alternative cooperative structures that deliver specific government services on a regional basis are common.

An analysis of the types of inter-municipal and regional bodies detailed in Part C leads to the conclusion that the vast majority of such entities are single purpose in nature and are designed to achieve well defined goals. For the most part, participation in these organizations is voluntary and municipalities maintain control over their level of governmental and financial involvement. In almost all cases, municipalities seek to minimize administrative entanglements and preserve the highest degree of local autonomy possible.

Voluntary regional cooperative ventures have proven to be very valuable in Connecticut, and the approximately 1000 examples contained in Part C are illustrative of this fact. There are undoubtedly more successful voluntary inter-municipal ventures in Connecticut today that we have not yet identified, and even more that are in developmental stages. Connecticut's municipal leaders appear to have a strong commitment to regional approaches when they help to provide cost effective solutions to local problems.