

THE QUESTION OF BOUNDARIES FOR CONNECTICUT'S REGIONAL PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS

**Adopted by the
Connecticut Association of Regional Planning Organizations
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1. INTRODUCTION

The group known as the Connecticut Association of Regional Planning Organizations was created by the State's regional planning organizations (RPOs) to promote and maintain sound regional planning in Connecticut.

From time to time the Association and its members are asked to explain how the boundaries of Connecticut's 15 distinctive regions came into being, what criteria they represent, and their relationship to municipalities and the State. This Association provides perspective on this issue for all those seeking to make use of regional planning.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF CONNECTICUT'S SUBSTATE REGIONS

Requirements for human settlement have a geographic scope broader than the locality. Historically in Connecticut, part of the need was met by counties. In the 1920's and 1930's academia in the United States was extolling the virtues of regional approaches to public issues, and the first regional planning organizations went into operation around the country.

In Connecticut during this early period, the approaches to regional planning included voluntary regional planning associations with no official status, single-purpose regional entities for water supply, and the development of regional plans by state agencies.

The real birth of regionalism in Connecticut was in 1947, the year the General Assembly passed the State's first regional planning enabling act. The RPO's to be formed were to address the complex interactions of physical, economic, and social variables with a process known as "comprehensive planning." The statute required any newly created RPO's policy to "be based on studies of physical,

social, economic and governmental conditions and trends and shall be designed to promote with the greatest efficiency and economy the coordinated development of the region within its jurisdiction and the general welfare and prosperity of its people."

In 1948 the first RPO was formed by a few of the municipalities within what is now the South Central Region. However, the 1947 law did not define specific planning region boundaries as a precursor to the operation of RPO's. Instead, regional boundaries were to be formed solely on the basis of cooperative agreements between municipalities. Without additional state guidance this process could have led to the formation of a chaotic statewide boundary system.

In the 1950's interest in regional approaches continued to grow, stimulated in part by areawide consciousness gained from common efforts to deal with flood devastation. In 1955 the General Assembly took action to prevent the RPO formation process from proceeding piecemeal. A new law that year gave geographic structure to the formation process by requiring that municipalities joining RPO's do so within regional boundaries approved in advance by the Connecticut Development Commission.

The work of defining the regional boundaries was authorized in the 1957 legislative session, where the Connecticut Development Commission was directed to proceed to define "the logical economic and planning regions of the state and to promote the establishment of regional planning agencies therein." The Commission's findings, and the roots of the geographic scope of regional planning today, are contained in the Development Commission's 1959 report entitled "Progress Toward Regional Planning."

The Commission took a professional approach and conducted classic planning studies to identify the strength of intermunicipal ties. Within these studies the key definition of "logical and economic planning region" was determined to be "a group of closely related municipalities." It was believed that to be viable, "regional planning authority must be clearly identifiable with local objectives and local problems."

It was also believed that "within a region kept small in area the relationships between municipalities, and the need for a joint approach to common problems, are very real and practical matters." This nexus for regional identification had then, and retains today, the great advantage of being easy to understand and experience.

The Commission was to "evolve a number of homogeneous areas where common interests and problems across municipal boundaries could be anticipated." The regional designation process was also structured to give strong weight to the views of municipalities themselves, not just research criteria. This key criteria for regional boundary definition, strong intermunicipal relationships, became the prime force leading to the formation of 15 regions in Connecticut, rather than a lesser number such as 11 or 13.

Research criteria were designed to identify urban centers and those towns exhibiting social, economic, cultural and physical orientation to such core areas. Municipal orientation was rated by studies of variables such as readership of daily newspapers, commuting patterns, destination of phone calls, and usage of major hospitals, all logical measures of what local people could easily understand, and in most cases already knew to be, their surrounding regional community.

The potential use of some county boundaries was also reviewed. However, it was found that these historic designations had lost their validity as measures of regionalism due to Connecticut's metropolitan growth pattern. County boundaries were rooted in colonial times and simply bore no relationship to the distinctive metropolitan areas that had emerged. Thus county boundaries were of little use in drawing boundaries for substate areas of intermunicipal attraction.

In 1959 the Capitol Planning Region became the first to be organized under the new and carefully crafted regional boundary structure. Capitol was followed by the Central Naugatuck Valley Region in 1960. By 1968 there were regional planning organizations operating throughout the state within the carefully defined boundaries.

According to a 1989 CT OPM report summarizing RPO history entitled "Profiles of RPO's in Connecticut" the "initial regional planning organizations formed around large cities. The boundaries of the fifteen regional planning organizations that subsequently were formed were defined after sophisticated studies by the state government and reviews by municipalities. Distinctive metropolitan and rural regions emerged."

Thus Connecticut's fifteen naturally distinctive regions were demarcated, into what time as shown to be an inherently logical division of Connecticut's diversity, each of which was soon to have an RPO providing comprehensive planning and intergovernmental coordination. Regional planning boundaries have been stable throughout the state for 20 years, the last minor change

having been made in 1972.

All RPO's have been supported financially by the state through CT OPM annually and continuously since the early 1960's. The fifteen official CT OPM designated regions for Connecticut are as follows:

1. Capitol
2. Central CT
3. Central Naugatuck Valley
4. CT River Estuary
5. Greater Bridgeport
6. Housatonic Valley
7. Litchfield Hills
8. Midstate
9. Northeastern CT
10. Northwestern CT
11. South Central
12. South Western CT
13. South Western
14. Valley
15. Windham

3. RELATING RPO'S TO OTHER SUBSTATE REGIONALISM

RPO's generally developed and evolved positively during their early years. Comprehensive regional plans were prepared in all of the 15 regions. Over the years these and other RPO activities heightened public consciousness as to the presence of regional boundary lines, and induced the formation of other needed regional institutions.

RPO boundaries received important federal recognition in 1973 when, in response to an option provided by the Federal-Aid Highway Act, the ten larger RPO's were designated by the Governor and the U.S. DOT to receive planning and veto powers over federally funded transportation projects in their regions.

The U.S. DOT wanted substate districts appropriate for metropolitan transportation planning, since transportation project impacts were often regional. The basic requirement that RPO geography represent natural regions was found to fit the federal need for regions very nicely.

Then in 1974, the governor selected the boundaries of the 15 planning regions as the logical units to be coterminous with regional housing councils which

would address regional housing needs. Since that time housing has been increasingly acknowledged by state statutes as a regional and not only a local issue. The newer state housing laws also make use of the RPO boundary system.

However, by 1975 problems were developing with other sets of regional boundaries, mainly required for federal social service grant programs. A report entitled "Substate Regionalism in CT" was prepared for the forerunner of CT OPM in April of 1975 to examine the issue and rationalize boundaries.

While Connecticut's system of 15 regions was based upon the close ties of proximate municipalities, a plethora of federal agency single social service grant programs were setting differing and conflicting regional administrative boundary criteria.

Connecticut's response was to require that when a federal grant mandated administrative district must be larger than an RPO, then the single purpose district should be composed of complete multiples of RPO's, not splitting RPO's. Results were seen with area agency on aging and health systems agency designation, with RPO's having some appointment powers on the new boards.

According to the 1975 "Substate Regionalism" report "the proposed human service district boundaries attempt to bring order through the designation of five master Substate districts. It is significant to note that these five districts are essentially aggregations of the 15 planning regions of the state, and that in no Council on Human Service Substate district are the planning regional boundaries breached."

The 1975 "Substate Regionalism" report also concluded that at present "there is no preferred regional lead agency responsible for or empowered to bring the varying functional and areawide programs together to form a comprehensive approach to multi-jurisdictional problems. The only organization which approaches a lead agency is the regional planning agency."

It became clear during this period (1975) that physical planning, for public facilities, infrastructure, waste disposal and other spatially based systems, was the most readily adapted to the configuration of Connecticut's 15 regions, probably because they were both naturally bounded by metropolitan area geography.

An endorsement of this view soon followed when in 1978 the RPO's were

selected for areawide water pollution control planning by U.S., EPA and CT DEP. A law was also passed requiring CT DEP to make use of the planning regions in its solid waste planning.

The next landmark year for Connecticut's regions came in 1983, when all aspects of RPO's were reassessed by the Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Planning and Development. The Committee's findings were most favorable to RPO's, stating that "there is no question that the RPO's have become uniquely utilitarian means of fulfilling essential functions for municipalities large and small....They are widely accepted mechanism through which towns voluntarily join together in solving common problems...Regional agencies can play increasingly important roles in accomplishing certain goals more effectively and economically than any other existing means."

The Committee found no need at that time to recommend investigations into the geographic scope of RPO's, concluding after hearings around the state that "there was little comment or concern expressed on the possibility of consolidating or merging regional agencies in the future."

In 1986 the state government faced another regional geography dilemma when water supply planning was regionalized by state law. While RPO boundaries were factored into the decision making and the new regional water utility coordinating committees created had RPO's on their boards as the sole public sector representatives, the boundaries of the single-purpose water regions were not coterminous with the RPO's.

This however was seen at the time as acceptable to RPO advocates, since water supply was one of the "single issue" variables requiring a regional approach, but where the regions involved included drainage sheds that had no bearing to classic metropolitan area boundaries, thus there was sufficient reason for variance.

In 1987 the University of Connecticut's Institute of Public Service conducted a probing survey of attitudes towards RPO's. Questionnaires were sent to municipal chief elected officials and to present and former RPO board members. The Institute summarized the responses as "very favorable and indicating strong support for the goals and objectives of regional planning."

4. REGIONALISM IN CONNECTICUT TODAY

By 1991 intermunicipal relationships within planning region boundaries had significantly solidified beyond what had been identified in state studies of the late 1950's. A 1989 CT OPM report entitled "Profiles of Regional Planning Organizations in CT" concluded that "forty-two years after its initial authorization, a review of Connecticut's regional planning system shows it to be meeting modern needs."

CT OPM's own comprehensive plan for growth and policy coordination, known as the "1992-1997 Conservation and Development Policies Plan for Connecticut", states that a major issue is the strengthening or regional approaches, to be based, according to the OPM plan, on the regional planning program that already exists.

Fascinating byproducts of the decades of RPO activity are the many special purpose regional organizations have regional names and identical or nearly identical geographic service areas as RPO's. This is not surprising, since regional boundaries were by definition natural areas of common interest, and it was often that common interest itself that led to the creation of the special service districts.

The continued formation of new groups covering the same territory lends credence to the validity of the original geographic designations. A sampling of the variety of this phenomenon is demonstrated by such organizations as the:

- Capitol Region** Council of Churches
- Central Naugatuck** Valley Region Higher Education Center
- Estuary** Council of Senior Clubs
- Greater Bridgeport** Board of Realtors
- Housatonic** Area Regional Transit District
- Litchfield Hills** Regional Housing Council
- Northeastern CT** Association of Historical Societies
- Northwest** Emergency Medical Services
- South Central CT** Regional Water Authority
- Southeastern CT** United Way
- Southwest** Area Commerce and industry Association
- Valley** Red Cross
- Windham** Regional Community Council, etc.

Increasingly in recent year, RPO boundaries have become integrated into state agency planning. OPM's 1989 report on RPO's predicted that "looking toward the future, there is the emerging trend of state agencies seeking to make their expenditures more efficient by utilizing in area's regional planning organization

to address intermunicipal issues of traffic and transit, water, sewer, waste disposal, and emergency services. This is a stimulus to the work of the regional planning organizations."

A recent addition is the 1992 CT DOH state master housing plan known as Connecticut's "Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy." This important state plan formally integrates itself into the boundaries of the 15 planning regions, declaring that "municipalities and regional planning organizations will be the basic building blocks of both needs assessments, prioritization and resource allocation, "for all of Connecticut's housing strategies.

Also, CT DEP has structures substate air quality planning boundaries under the Federal Clean Air Act to be aligned along the boundaries of groups of RPO's, rather than along county lines or other criteria used elsewhere. CT DEP already segments its "Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan" along RPO boundary lines, just like CT DOH does.

5. REGIONALISM IN THE FUTURE

The flow of logic will be backwards if it is proposed in the future that metropolitan and rural area boundaries are merged or moved only to gain the small benefit of congruence with state agency administrative districts or field offices.

Rather, the incorporation of regional policy units into state agency plans should follow the successful models at CT OPM, CT DEP, CT DOT, and CT DOH. At these agencies, RPO boundaries and comprehensive planning activities are successfully drawn into state agency planning.

It will remain valid that comprehensive planning is a vital activity examining the impacts of many variables and their interrelationships at one time, and that such planning is best when based upon boundary definitions derived from comprehensive criteria, not just from one or two currently popular variables. Connecticut's regional planning system was designed to address complex, multidimensional issues and is poised to take on more responsibility.

Substate regional boundaries of the 21st century will not serve the public well if they are tied to single planning variables no matter how important, examples being bioregions or labor market areas. It is the distinct metropolitan and rural regions with common political identities and interests that will best serve as units

for planning and action.

In the future, some issues involving two or three planning regions can be addressed by better use of existing legislative authority. Under current statutes two or more RPO's may establish an interagency committee to recommend policies relating to matters of an interregional nature. The RPO's are also explicitly authorized to share staff and the staff from one RPO may work in the area of another. This type of cooperative approach between two regional policy boards will be more fruitful than contemplating boundary changes to address each new issue.

Efficient government for Connecticut requires that substate districts exist and be coordinated. However, different governmental services naturally have their best economy of scale at different geographic sizes; ultimately there is no one set of substate districts, including RPO'S, that can serve all needs. However, this is not an unmanageable problem.

Where the planning or service delivery of one particular variable cannot logically fit precisely into existing RPO boundaries, then 1) all or parts of RPO boundaries should be factored into the new districts whenever possible, 2) new districts should if possible be multiples of RPO'S, and 3) RPO's should be represented in the management of the new entity. There is successful precedent for each strategy.

Municipalities consider their choice of planning region to be their prerogative, not the state's. Linking communities with common interests remains the key to regional success. This fact is as valid today as it was in 1958. An orderly public process for making any changes that may become advisable should be welcomed, especially when expressed by the municipal units of government which are expected to exert the most effort to "think regional."

6. ADDENDUM OF JUNE 2003

RPO's became part of the Transportation Strategy board planning process in 2001.

RPO's became emergency response planning units for the CT Office of Emergency Management in 2002.

RPO's or multiples thereof became the CT Department of Health's ten bioterrorism response planning regions in 2002.