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**YOUR VIEW: BRIAN RENSTROM**

## **Hard Times Demand Municipal Reform**

November 24, 2009

Government reform and regionalization has been discussed for the past decade, but little has been accomplished — or attempted — in any meaningful way. This is hardly surprising considering Connecticut's makeup and history — a small state of 169 municipalities where home rule abounds.

But in 2009, fiscal necessity dictates that some kind of municipal government reform — possibly through regionalization — must happen soon. Better local government efficiency is needed.

Times are hard and may soon get harder. Connecticut's budget deficit is twice as bad as initially thought, and hundreds of millions more in revenue are needed. That revenue simply is not there, not today and not tomorrow — the state's population is aging, which ultimately means less revenue and a greater need for services.

This is an equation that cannot be altered by tax increases or drastic cuts. We must take a serious look at government services, assessing the current efficiency and taking steps to ensure better bang for the buck.

It cannot be a stopgap or band-aid approach, but rather a holistic look at all municipal services. This must start with a scientific and strategic assessment to gauge the cost-effectiveness of services provided.

Regionalization is too often thought of as an excuse to make thoughtless cuts, settle political scores or bust unions. Rather, it should be about first measuring the efficiency of services and then implementing necessary change in broad, meaningful and thoughtful ways.

Here's how an assessment could be conducted, to get Connecticut on a path where government reform and regionalization of some services could become a beneficial reality.

- The Right Process.** Everything begins with a process that measures the effectiveness and accountability of municipal services. Are they as cost-effective as can be? Are the right investments being made in technology and key resources? Can things run more smoothly, more seamlessly? Having the right measurements in place can answer these questions.

- Examine Benchmarks.** Once the process is developed, benchmarks can be examined to identify what works and what doesn't work. This way, government services will not be fused together haphazardly or without thought. But if there is some consolidation needed, the areas best suited to it will have been carefully identified.

- Use Data to Implement Reform. The data gathered through the first two steps can be used to bring about change and reform, because now it will become evident — based on new, reliable data — what changes can and should be made.

- Municipal Participation. Lastly, the state can play an essential role in providing municipalities with incentives to regionalize. One way is by tying a portion of municipal aid to a mandate requiring towns to regionalize certain services, such as 911 call centers or public safety departments. Another is to devise easier ways for cities and towns to privatize some regional services.

But none of this can happen in a vacuum. The business community needs to take the initiative and demand more from our leaders. The state's eight regional chambers of commerce had the right idea recently, when they called for a working group of public- and private-sector officials to look at cost-saving and reform-based measures, including the idea of regionalization.

What's more, enough of our political leaders — the governor, the General Assembly, local elected officials — need to embrace the idea of conducting the right assessment to establish benchmarks, find the areas where reform is most needed, and implement changes in smart, effective ways.

Connecticut residents know all too well that change is never easy. But in this economic climate, with an aging population and an increasingly limited revenue stream, there really is no choice. What Connecticut needs is a mandate to get the process of real reform started.

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