State of Connecticut

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February 23, 2009

Chairman Eric Coleman, Chairman Brendan Sharkey, Ranking Member Leonard Fasano, Ranking Member William Aman and other distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Planning and Development

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support ***HB 5526, HB 5550, HB 5869 HB 6388* and other bills that address mandate relief for our towns and cities.**

We are living through historic economic times that many predict will change our country and state forever. It calls us as legislators to make difficult but necessary adjustments. Mandates that may have merit and made sense when enacted may no longer be feasible.

In listening carefully to our residents, our local boards, selectmen and mayors it became clear that we need to provide them with relief from financial burdens that can not be borne under the constraints they are now experiencing. Towns are facing a public that is demanding a zero percent increase in their taxes. A Ridgefield Board of Education member expressed to me that "mandate costs are passed on to local taxpayers who are in full scale revolt against any more tax increases." When the Governor's two-year budget included a proposal to require a two-third majority of the General Assembly for passage of any new municipal mandate, a delay in the in-school suspension mandate and serious binding arbitration reform, she was responding to this new reality.

Continuous dialogue with town officials of my districts produced the following suggestions:

Repeal or suspend in schools suspensions; delay treating 16 and 17 year old violent offenders as adults; freeze wages and salaries; reforming binding arbitration providing greater flexibility to mediators and arbitrators in their decision making; reforming the burden of proof in the unilateral outplacement of special education cases; reforming or rescinding prevailing wage; removing certain mandates on health care plans. Wilton Selectman Harold Clark wrote" we further urge the creating of formal review process of all existing funded and unfunded state mandates that impact town for additional possible elimination."

HB 5526, HB 5550, HB 5869 and HB 6388 along with other bills on to day's agenda address the concern of many legislators who are responding to feedback from town officials experiencing the financial burden of state mandates

HB 5550 and 5869 expand mandate passage to a two-third support in each chamber, and this will allow for closer scrutiny and deliberation when determining the merit of future state mandates.

In an effort to alleviate towns' financial burden from the in-school suspension mandate, I support several bills which delays the in-school suspension mandate.

Both the Bethel Board of Education and Ridgefield Board of Education have expressed the concerns of most districts regarding the costs of staffing and administering in-school suspensions. The delay in the implementation date will provide municipalities an immediate savings on costs associated with housing students on-site during their suspension periods and allow municipalities more time to implement a long-term plan for meeting the intent of the law. In addition, town law enforcement agencies in my district have informed me that a state mandate without adequate funding contradict the intent of the mandates and compromise local public safety.

I understand how state mandates burden towns by requiring towns to carry out state policies with little or no state funding for I served as a board of education chair, selectman and state board of education member during previous serious recessions. This one is much worst. In fact, some economists predict that it could be the closest we will come to conditions experienced during the great depression.

Thank you for your thoughtful and careful consideration of these proposals and with the understanding that we were voted into office to make the hard decisions that these difficult times require us to make.

Sincerely,

Toni

Toni Boucher
State Senator