INNOVATIVE IDEAS
FOR MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A Connecticut Town & City Compendium
Compiled from the year 2009 issues of Connecticut Town & City
January 2010

Dear Municipal Official,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town and City Compendium – our 23rd annual compilation to help municipal leaders run local governments more effectively and efficiently. These ideas save taxpayers money while providing municipal services that enhance community life.

The ideas are reprinted from Connecticut Town and City, the bi-monthly newsletter-magazine of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM).

Connecticut Town and City developed these stories from many sources, including visits to Connecticut local governments; suggestions from municipal officials; newspapers and magazines in Connecticut and other states; publications of the National League of Cities; and publications of other state municipal leagues. We would be happy to hear from readers about any ideas we should publish in the future.

An index of major categories and specific topics begins on page 46. For easy reference, many of the articles are presented in more than one category.

For further information on any article, write to the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, 900 Chapel Street, 9th Floor, New Haven, CT 06510; telephone (203) 498-3000; or email kmaloney@ccm-ct.org.

Good Reading!

Sincerely,

James J. Finley, Jr., Executive Director and CEO

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CIVIC AMENITIES

Fund raiser goes to the dogs

The Glastonbury Parks and Recreation Department staged an innovative event this past Easter to raise money for a community dog park. It sponsored an egg hunt in which the searchers were the family pets themselves and the reward inside more than 3,000 plastic eggs was not candy, but biscuits donated by a local pet supply store.

Anna Park, the town’s aptly named recreation supervisor, said some of the eggs also contained coupons for prizes, such as gift cards from other event sponsors like Home Depot and Target.

Activities for humans included children’s games and face painting. Money was raised from the $10 donation asked for each dog entered in the hunt.

It was held at Riverfront Park, where the dog park is to be built.

Libraries surge in hard times

Libraries across the state are seeing more patrons walk through their doors, a consequence of the weak economy that, ironically, also is squeezing library budgets.

In relatively affluent West Hartford, library director Pat Holloway reported that one of the library’s newer, popular programs is a job coaching class taught by a volunteer. Also drawing increased traffic is a recently created resource center for people learning English as a second language. Overall attendance was up by more than 10,000 in the months of October and November, according to a West Hartford News report. The same pattern was being repeated across the state, Tom Newman, data coordinator for the Connecticut State Library, said in a Connecticut Post report.

“This has happened before,” he said. “It shows that we’re an essential part of what government does for people and that when people need it the most they come to their libraries.”

The Post survey confirmed higher usage in Fairfield, Bridgeport and Stratford. Fairfield reported circulation had increased 16 percent over the previous year. In Stratford it was up about 20 percent. In Bridgeport, library director Scott Hughes said people seem to be attracted to programs that are either informative or fun, citing the library’s low cost college exam prep course and a Halloween event.

“It’s more affordable than going to Chuck E Cheese,” he said.
Preserve America adds Connecticut towns

Old Lyme and Southbury are among the 26 municipalities nationwide that this year won federal designation as “Preserve America Communities.” The program recognizes communities that celebrate their heritage and use historic assets to promote economic development, tourism and public appreciation of history.

The designation entitles them to apply for matching grants for efforts that “demonstrate sustainable uses of their historic and cultural sites,” according to the Preserve America website. Grants range from $20,000 to $250,000 and complement “bricks-and-mortar” projects funded under the separate Save America Treasures program.

First Lady Michelle Obama is honorary chair of the Preserve America program. Since it began in 2003, the program has recognized 762 communities.

Others in Connecticut are Bridgeport, Colchester, Hebron, Ledyard, New Britain, New London, Norwalk, Simsbury, Suffield, Wethersfield and Windham.

For more information go to www.preserveamerica.gov.

Norwalk garden grows and grows

The Fodor Farm Community Garden in Norwalk has grown so popular since it opened last year that the city has decided to build a permanent pavilion at the site. The pavilion can be used for picnics but will also serve as a classroom for cooking and nutrition programs that support the essential purpose of the garden, which is to promote healthy eating.

Soon after it opened in April 2008, all 260 plots were reserved at a $5 fee. It gained an even higher profile in the summer when it was featured on the “Good Morning America” television show. The garden’s burst of popularity helped the city win a $149,500 open space grant to add 108 more plots, a greenhouse and the pavilion.

As of early June, all but one or two plots were taken, despite a higher $10 reservation fee, according to a Norwalk Hour report. The garden occupies about two acres of a nine acre property the city acquired with an open space grant in 1997. Recreation and Parks Director Michael Mocciae said the city is scheduled to receive another $100,000 grant to restore the main house on the farm property that will be used for education and a caretaker’s residence.
**Bridgeport truants get “No Excuses”**

Soon after school began this fall, Bridgeport Supt. John Ramos Jr. led a search for chronic truants with what he called the “No Excuses Campaign.” Patterned after a program in Houston, Tex., it sent about 50 volunteer educators and community leaders out on a Saturday to knock on the doors of homes of students already skipping school.

The volunteers wore “No Excuses” t-shirts and carried information packets outlining the message they wanted to convey to missing students or their parents. According to a Connecticut Post report, the much larger Houston program last year sent nearly 500 volunteers after 734 truants. They persuaded 64 students to return to school and discovered 164 had moved from the district. In Bridgeport, the volunteers including administrators, guidance counselors and teachers, targeted 45 students. Some were freshmen who hadn’t started school at all and others were seniors, whose records showed that with effort they could still graduate in June.

They told students their recent absences would be forgiven if they returned and that they would get extra help to make up missed work.

Selena Morgan, an assistant principal, said in a Bridgeport News report that educators sent a “powerful” message by going to the students’ homes. “It shows that we care,” she said, “and I think it will make a difference.”

**Towns help CCSU rewrite history**

Educators from more than a dozen Connecticut municipalities have joined with professors at Central Connecticut State University in a long-term project to create a new history curriculum for elementary and middle school students. The “American Voices” initiative is funded by a $965,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education and will pair grade 4 to 8 teachers with historians and language arts specialists on the CCSU faculty.

According to a posting on the CCSU website, they will form reading/study groups to develop lessons around themes, such as the Revolutionary War. During a summer institute they may also visit museums and historical sites to construct “artifact kits” for later classroom use. In yet another facet of the initiative, the collaborators will create a web-based “Historical Scene Investigation” archive that will contain primary documents students can use to research questions, such as why some Connecticut residents remained loyalists during the Revolution.

Among the participating schools districts are Bristol, Cromwell, East Hampton, Ellington, Marlborough, Meriden, West Hartford, and regional districts 4 and 10. Another institution partner is the Connecticut Historical Society Museum. The project is expected to last three years. CCSU history professor John Tully, who worked with school superintendents to develop the grant proposal, may be contacted for more information.
In Cheshire, science is elementary

Cheshire is teaching that science labs are not just to be found in high schools or junior highs. When school begins this fall, the district will have two elementary classrooms dedicated solely to science. In both instances the cost of retrofitting the classrooms was paid for by the Cheshire Education Foundation, a non-profit group that in January began a $275,000 fund raising campaign to put science classrooms in all four of the town’s elementary schools.

Providing a permanent space for science classes in elementary schools frees teachers and students from having to set up and tear down equipment for each experiment or lesson they do. The classrooms are used by fourth, fifth and sixth graders.

School fashions trend toward uniforms

Hartford schools have become the first in the state to require all students to wear uniform clothing, putting it at the leading edge of a fashion trend for urban systems.

In November, the Bridgeport board of education voted unanimously to require elementary school students to wear uniforms beginning in the next school year.

And in December, a board of education committee in East Hartford recommended adopting a uniform dress code for all students in kindergarten through high school.

Hartford’s code does not dictate the same dress for all students. Rather, according to a New York Times report, it allows individual schools to pick their own standard dress.

At the Law and Government Academy at Hartford High, for instance, boys must wear dress shirts and ties, while girls have a choice of black pants or skirts. Forbidden are low riding pants and sneakers.

At the Nursing Academy, students must wear bright blue scrubs bearing the school’s name. Large earrings and thick gold chains are not allowed.

The code adapted in Bridgeport, for pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, will require students to wear blue or tan pants or skirts. The color of tops – polo-style or dress shirt – may vary from school to school.

Students may also wear sweaters or sweatshirts, but hooded sweatshirts are forbidden as are jeans and multi-colored sneakers.

According to a Bridgeport News report, parents pushed for a dress code for more than a year.

U.S. pins Blue Ribbons on 3 schools

Prized “Blue Ribbon” titles from the U.S. Department of Education have been awarded to public schools in Westport, Ridgefield and Meriden. All told 264 public schools and 50 private schools nationwide earned the Blue Ribbons, which are based on standardized test performance, either for high scores or for improved scores.

The Connecticut public schools that won were Bedford Middle in Westport, East Ridge Middle in Ridgefield and Thomas Hooker Elementary in Meriden, according to a Connecticut Post report. Announced in September, the awards were to be presented in November in ceremonies in Washington, D.C. Winning schools get a plaque and flag recognizing their achievement.
Engineering enters new classrooms

An engineering program that gives new meaning to “shop class” and seen mostly in high schools is expanding its reach to Bridgeport middle schools and even a university.

Known as Project Lead the Way, it has been introduced at six middle schools in Bridgeport, including four newly opened ones that have rooms designed for its curriculum that emphasizes practical applications of math and science.

Project Lead the Way has the dual goals of making math and science more relevant to students and leading more of them toward engineering careers.

For example, students are not handed the plans and materials to build a bookshelf as they might have been in a traditional shop class. Rather, they are given a problem and design the solution using computer software similar to that used in industry.

Errol Lee, a teacher at the Winthrop School in Bridgeport, told the Connecticut Post that the program introduces students to concepts of model design, automation, robotics and reverse engineering.

In the beginning they are taught a lot of math, but eventually advanced students should be able to build small operating racing cars, he said.

Gregory Kane, technology consultant for the state Department of Education and Connecticut coordinator for Project Lead the Way, said Bridgeport is one of the few districts in the state to take it to the middle school level.

Meanwhile, nearby Fairfield University announced its engineering department is starting a pre-college academy using the Project Lead the Way curriculum for students from all three Bridgeport high schools as well as Bullard-Havens Technical High and five area Catholic high schools.

It will especially seek to attract females and minority students, two groups who are underrepresented in engineering. Supported by a $400,000 grant from the GE Foundation the academy will offer intensive Saturday and summer classes to as many as 50 Districts offering the program must agree to send teachers to be trained in its curriculum and to provide the necessary computers and software.

More information about Project Lead the Way, which operates in all 50 states, is at www.pltw.org.

Teens take finance 101

Hilda DeLucia, director of the Bethel teen center, recognizes that teens need to know more about managing their finances than just how to balance a check book.

So DeLucia had the center sponsor a five session money management class for teens offered through the National Endowment for Financial Education.

The class covered covering the pitfalls of credit card debt, good budgeting, investing practices, ways to keep money safe and even about insurance. According to the endowment's website, www.nefe.org, its free high school curriculum has reached more than 5 million students. A private, non-profit foundation, it has partnerships with state extension services and credit union associations.

In Bethel, about a dozen high school students attended the class, meeting one night a week at a local mortgage company's office.

During the lesson on “Good Debt, Bad Debt: Using Credit Wisely,” students were taught that mailing a payment to a credit card company before the due date won’t necessarily prevent a late charge. The check has to be received by the due date, not just dated. To be safe, students were advised to mail the check 10 days before the due date.

“I thought it would be helpful for kids to get an understanding of basic financial practices,” DeLucia said in a newspaper report. “If I had learned this at 14 or 15, my financial future might be different.
School recruiters favor local fair

Greenwich school officials think they have found an advantage by holding a local job fair to recruit teachers.

A local fair saves the expense of reserving space at out-of-town fairs, for one thing, district human resources director Ellen Flanagan said in a Greenwich Time report.

The cost of space at larger recruitment fairs can run to over $500. Plus, the district saves money on travel and related personnel costs.

But a more intangible advantage is that the town recruiting team doesn’t have to compete for attention as it would at a regional fair.

And because administrators from every school in the district can attend the local fair, they are in a position to decide on the spot whether to make an offer to a prized candidate.

The district first experimented with a local fair in 2008, inviting only minority applicants. But it was deemed so successful that the fair this year, in March, was opened to all candidates.

Greenwich’s focus on minorities has resulted in a staff more diverse than most in Fairfield County. As of this year, minorities made up 8.95 percent of staff compared to an area average of 3 percent.

The long term goal is to match the staff with the student population, which is 25 percent minorities.

Catapult throws squash, teaches physics

So how far can a replica of a medieval catapult throw a five pound pumpkin?

At least 150 yards, students at Newtown Middle School learned when one of their teachers constructed the device, a trebuchet, and brought it to the school for entertainment and multi-disciplinary education.

Lessons of math, physics, economics and history all are embodied in the trebuchet (as siege weapons, they were used to batter castles), teacher Marc Michaud told the Danbury News-Times.

He undertook its construction after the owner of a local farm approached another teacher about building a catapult that he planned to deploy to raise money for charity. In a variation on cow chip throwing contests, the trebuchet would throw surplus pumpkins instead.

Michaud eventually built a 700 pound machine that was transported to the middle school with a police escort.

Students came one class at a time to witness its operation, helping to load pumpkins onto its sling and pulling the pin that dropped a counterweight. Then they watched its articulated arm fling the Halloween squash.

The catapult owner, Steve Paproski, said he would likely use it for future fund raising events.

Hartford takes economy bus route

Needing to trim $4 million from its transportation budget, the Hartford school system has revamped its bus schedule and begun training parent volunteers to shepherd students to and from school on foot.

When school starts, children will be delivered in three arrival “tiers” at 7:25 a.m., 8:15 a.m. and 8:45 a.m. rather than two tiers as in the past.

The new schedule allows fewer buses to be used more efficiently, and also means fewer bus monitors will have to be paid, a school spokesman said in a Hartford Courant report.

The program for parent volunteers is Safe Routes to School, a federal program administered in Connecticut by the Department of Transportation.

Most maximum walking distances remain unchanged at a half mile for the youngest students, one mile for students in grades three through five, 1.5 miles for grades six through eight, and two miles for high school students.

Alexander Nardone, the system’s chief operating officer, said it took months to plan the new schedule and that the savings will be diverted to classrooms.
**Magnetic first: school opens with public safety focus**

An idea that germinated with a former Manchester mayor has grown into what is believed to be the first magnet school in the nation focused on police work and firefighting.

Located at temporary quarters in Enfield, the new Greater Hartford Public Safety Academy opened its doors this fall to about 100 middle schoolers, who began the year wearing uniforms of white shirts and khaki pants.

They can earn blue or yellow shirts signifying higher rank by demonstrating good behavior or writing essays about their commitment to the academy, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Each day starts with drills that may include calisthenics or policing school grounds. All classes, regardless of subject, emphasize discipline, self-confidence and team work.

The need for such a school was first suggested by former Manchester Mayor Steve Cassano, who saw the difficulty towns had in recruiting qualified police officers and firefighters.

He approached the Capitol Region Education Council with the idea and soon an advisory board was formed of municipal public safety leaders, including Hartford Police Chief Daryl Roberts and Fire Chief Charles Teale.

“We looked all over the country and found that nothing [like this] exists,” Cassano told the Courant. “We’re the first in the country.”

Hired to be the Academy’s principal is Bill Jaeger, who has master’s degrees from Trinity College and Harvard and who suspended work on a doctorate to take the job.

Students take regular academic classes with an overlay of public safety training. One recent session had Thompsonville firemen demonstrate the use of a rope and pulley rescue harness, followed by a talk on how firefighters use math and science.

Eventually the Academy will enroll sixth graders through 12th graders. Upper classmen may take college level courses and will graduate trained in CPR and other emergency skills.

The Academy also plans to convert to a year-round schedule to avoid summer idleness, according to a Journal Inquirer report. It will stay in Enfield for three years, until a permanent home is found.

The first class was dominated by boys from Hartford. But about 40 percent of the students came from smaller towns, including Bolton, East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Glastonbury, Manchester, South Windsor, Vernon, Wethersfield and Windsor Locks.

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**Westport writes its own algebra text**

Math teachers in Westport are attracting national attention with an online and streamlined algebra curriculum they wrote themselves.

The new curriculum gets rid of the thousand page texts traditionally used to teach algebra and addresses what many educators consider to be a defect of math education in the United States.

“In America, we run through chapters like a speeding train,” John Dodig, principal of Westport’s Staples High School, said in a lengthy New York Times report. “Schools in Singapore and India spend more time on each topic and their kids do better. We’re boiling math down to essentials.”

The homegrown Westport curriculum covers about half the 90 concepts typically taught in a high school level algebra course, making for a deeper understanding of those topics that are covered. It also should dispel the need to devote the first weeks of a new school year to teaching students what they supposedly already learned.

Frank Corbo, the head of the Staples math department, said the district spent about $70,000 to develop the new curriculum.

About half went to pay the two dozen teachers who worked on it over the summer. The other half went to a Singapore web company, HeyMath!, that gives students round the clock access to lessons and tutorials, and enhances the material with animation and sound.

Corbo said the district also is saving at least $25,000 a year that it ordinarily would spend on textbooks.
Australian author visits school via Skype

Children’s book author Wendy Orr was in her home, on the opposite side of the globe in Victoria, Australia, when she visited fans at Bridgeport’s Burr Elementary School in late May.

Orr, the author of the popular “Nim’s Island,” was able to accomplish the fantastic feat because school specialists had hooked her up through Skype, the software program that permits free long distance voice and video transmission.

In fact, Orr’s virtual visit was in some ways more intimate than if she had come to the school in person. Instead of standing in front of a classroom or auditorium, she talked from her home office, where children could see her books and sleeping dog.

At one point, Orr disappeared from view when she bent down to pick up a page of notes for a sequel she is writing to “Nim’s Island.”

According to a Connecticut Post report, the idea for the Skype visit arose in conversations between parents and school staff after they agreed “Nim’s Island” was a great choice for a school wide event. The only obstacle was that it was unlikely Orr could come to Connecticut.

So school media specialist Dorna Persson and language arts specialist Gail Felberbaum set up the virtual visit. Besides using Skype, they projected Orr onto a Smartboard, a sort of digital blackboard.

Libraries surge in hard times

Libraries across the state are seeing more patrons walk through their doors, a consequence of the weak economy that, ironically, also is squeezing library budgets.

In relatively affluent West Hartford, library director Pat Holloway reported that one of the library’s newer, popular programs is a job coaching class taught by a volunteer.

Also drawing increased traffic is a recently created resource center for people learning English as a second language.

Overall attendance was up by more than 10,000 in the months of October and November, according to a West Hartford News report.

The same pattern was being repeated across the state, Tom Newman, data coordinator for the Connecticut State Library, said in a Connecticut Post report.

“This has happened before,” he said. “It shows that we’re an essential part of what government does for people and that when people need it the most they come to their libraries.”

The Post survey confirmed higher usage in Fairfield, Bridgeport and Stratford.

Fairfield reported circulation had increased 16 percent over the previous year. In Stratford it was up about 20 percent.

In Bridgeport, library director Scott Hughes said people seem to be attracted to programs that are either informative or fun, citing the library’s low cost college exam prep course and a Halloween event.

“It’s more affordable than going to Chuck E Cheese,” he said.
Mentors connect with e-mail

Programs that link business and professional people with public school students don’t require face-to-face contact anymore.

In Bridgeport and Stamford, mentors and pen pal volunteers are staying in touch with their young correspondents by e-mail.

The Bridgeport program, called Wi-mentor, began small in 2007-2008, then grew to more than 100 matches last year.

Most of the students are in high school and the mentors come from such institutions as St. Vincent’s Medical Center and the Pitney-Bowes company, according to a Bridgeport News report.

The program is coordinated by the local United Way and is affiliated with a national program, iMentor Interactive.

In Stamford, volunteers from GE Capital’s retail finance division used a service called Epals to counsel nearly 200 fourth and fifth graders at the K.T. Murphy Elementary School. It allows teachers to review the exchanges between mentors and students.

At the end of the school year, the volunteers and the students got together to replant a garden at the Cove Island playground, according to a Stamford Advocate report.

Schools go on a “rainbow” diet

“Eat all the colors of the rainbow.”

That was the nutritional advice that students at Norwich’s Uncas Elementary School got from an orchard operator during an assembly celebrating Connecticut Grown products.

Jean Palazzi of East Killingly brought along a variety of fruits and vegetables, including a giant blue hubbard squash.

She was invited through the Connecticut Agriculture in the Classroom program that encourages children to eat foods that are locally grown — and good for them.

It is promoted by the Connecticut Agricultural Education Foundation, www.ctaef.org, which provided Uncas students with books about produce and nutrition.

Uncas also was the recipient of a grant from the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program that provides a fresh snack each school day.

Principal Christie Gillully said one of the most memorable was green sugar snap peas.

“The kids tore them apart. Then counted the peas,” she said.

But another snack, a fresh peach, puzzled at least one student, who didn’t recognize it, since the student had only encountered sliced peaches in a can.
Bridgeport has embarked on a new, long-range environmental initiative intended to boost the city’s economy at the same time it makes it cleaner.

One of the first focuses will be to lure manufacturers of alternative energy technology, especially fuel cells, to abandoned “brownfield” industrial sites.

The city also will explore building solar or wind power generators, buying vehicles that run on hydrogen or electricity, and even using less-polluting “green” cleaning products in municipal buildings.

The initiative, christened B-Green 2020, was launched by Mayor Bill Finch who signed an executive order creating a 37 member Sustainability Community Advisory Committee, consisting of representatives from business, universities, non-profits and governmental organizations.

“We are going to wear this as a badge of honor and change the impression of Bridgeport,” Finch said at a press conference, according to a Bridgeport News report.

State Environmental Protection Commissioner Gina McCarthy, who was also present, said developing brownfields is the kind of smart land use practice that can push commercial or industrial growth back towards cities, where the infrastructure to support it already exists.

“Cities aren’t the problem, they are the solution,” McCarthy said, referring to so-called “smart growth” goals to encourage economic development while avoiding sprawl and traffic congestion.

“If we didn’t have cities, we’d have to create them so people could live near where they work and shop,” she said.

Finch has made environmentalism a hallmark of his political career. Before becoming mayor, he was co-chairman of the legislature’s Environment Committee.

While many municipalities promote recycling among their residents, Fairfield has gone a step further – demanding that bidders for town contracts adhere to recycling principles.

A newly adopted purchasing policy, aimed at reducing waste, urges businesses to submit bids on recycled paper, printed double-sided.

It also asks them to avoid packaging bid documents in plastic binders, and instead requires them to use snap clips, staples or elastic bands.

Purchasing Director Twig Holland said in a Minuteman newspaper report that the policy should relieve hopeful contractors from feeling they have to compete by submitting expensively presented bid proposals.

At the same time, it will reduce the volume of material the town needs to store in its archives.

The new policy applies to all products and services used by the town government and public school system.
Banned in Westport: plastic bags

Westport has passed an ordinance banning supermarkets and retail stores from handing out plastic shopping bags that is believed to be the first such prohibition in the eastern half of the country.

The Representative Town Meeting, Westport’s legislative body, approved the ordinance in September by a 29 to five vote.

The precedent-setting ordinance does not outlaw plastic bags entirely, but it does mean stores cannot provide them free at the check-out counter. It also imposes a $150 fine for non-compliance.

The ordinance, however, allows a six month transition period before the ban takes effect, during which an educational outreach program will be conducted. Once in place, the ban will be monitored by the Conservation Commission rather than police.

The ordinance was modeled after one in San Francisco. A national group, the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said the Westport ban appeared to be the first of its kind east of the Mississippi, according to local news reports.

Plastic bags are considered harmful to the environment because the commonly used kind are non-biodegradable, persisting in landfills for hundreds of years, polluting waterways, clogging sewers and creating litter.

The RTM members who promoted the ban – and worked for months to smooth its passage – said it was needed because voluntary recycling efforts have not been effective enough.

The expectation is that shoppers will bring reusable bags to carry their purchases home.

First Selectman Gordon Joseloff suggested supermarkets could give away reusable bags and offset the extra expense by having them printed with paid advertising.

He also said he hoped that if Westport succeeds with the ban other communities will follow its example.

Green Cup Challenge unites towns

A trio of Fairfield County neighbors – Wilton, Weston and Westport – conducted a friendly competition in January to see which is the most energy conscious.

Weston was declared the formal winner of the first Green Cup Challenge, because a greater proportion of its residents and business owners answered a survey about their energy use habits than in the other towns.

In fact though, all the towns won because organizers believe the contest succeeded in its goal of promoting sustainable environmental practices. Even the prize Green Cup trophy was itself constructed from recyclable plastic.

The idea for the challenge originated with the Wilton Energy Commission, which publicized it through schools in all three towns.

Ultimately, more than 2,000 residents and businesses completed the survey that was also accessible on a website, www.greencupnow.com.

Mitchell Reichgut, a commission member, said the first competition surpassed expectations and probably would be expanded next year.

Speakers at the Green Cup award ceremony, held at the Wilton Library, included local First Selectman Bill Brennan as well as Weston First Selectman Woody Bliss and representatives of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment, Northeast Utilities and Sterling Planet, a supplier of electricity generated from alternative sources.
Historic library shows age no barrier to LEED

The Pequot Library in Fairfield, is showing how even older, historic buildings can adapt to modern environmental standards.

Built in 1894, the library would seem immune to modification because of its carved wood and stone features. But appearances can be deceiving.

In an article on the greening of the library in its spring newsletter, Director Dan Snydacker explained how the library is embracing the LEED (Leadership in Environmental Engineering and Design) standards for the U.S. Green Building Council.

The heating and ventilating system is tuned to maximum efficiency and has a monitor for carbon dioxide emissions, the main greenhouse gas.

In addition, any new equipment acquired by the library, even a copying machine, will be Energy Star rated. Cleaning supplies will be made from recyclable materials, whenever possible.

The library also has stopped providing bottled water to staff or for volunteers during its famous book sale.

The book sale itself has been reformed according to environmental principles. Instead of being sent to the landfill, unsold books are sorted out. Some are given to nursing homes or community centers.

Others go to ProQuo Books, a recycling company that further culls unsold books, selling some in other markets and sending the rest to be recycled into newsprint or other paper products.

The library also is adding a “green page” to its website that provides links to environmental organizations.

Hartford experiments with recycling incentive

The inauguration of “single stream” recycling by the Connecticut Resource Recovery Authority has not ended Hartford’s search for the most cost effective way to get rid of trash.

The city also has been conducting a pilot program involving about 4,500 households that rewards them with retail store discounts based on the amount of trash they recycle.

The discounts in the form of coupons or accumulated points are redeemable at chains such as CVS pharmacies, Petco stores, Dick’s Sporting Goods and at many small retailers.

The city, meanwhile, is rewarded with $10 for every ton of recycled material and an additional $72 in savings from the avoided tipping fee.

According to a Hartford Courant report, the program run by RecycleBank, a New York-based company, appears to have boosted recyclable collections by an average of 10 tons per week after it began in May.

Participating households get containers implanted with radio frequency ID tags that permit them to be weighed at the point of collection.

Mayor Eddie Perez said Hartford faces a special challenge in promoting recycling because 75 percent of its residents live in rental units and are less attuned to recycling than homeowners.

The theory behind the rewards program, he said, is that it is a “good way to show the benefits of recycling to low income neighborhoods.”

The pilot program will last a year and will be closely monitored to determine how much of the increase in recyclable collections can be attributed to the incentives and how much to the single-stream process.

Hartford is one of 90 municipalities in 13 states testing the RecycleBank program. Others in Connecticut, according to the Courant, are the Gales Ferry section of Ledyard and the Mystic section of Stonington.

More information is available at www.recyclebank.com.
New Haven peers into energy future

New Haven is exploring forming an independent energy generating district.

The district would supply power to the River Street area of Fair Haven, where a $20 million redevelopment plan already is underway.

According to a New Haven Register report, the district, if approved, would be the first in the city and one of the first in the state.

Local energy districts were authorized by the state legislation in 2007 with the intent of allowing businesses and other entities to band together to generate or purchase power from alternative sources.

Ansonia and Stamford formed the first two districts, and both have engaged Pareto Energy of Washington, D.C. to help in planning.

Pareto’s website, www.paretoenergy.com, lists the U.S. Conference of Mayors as a partner in energy reform.

The New Haven proposal, developed by the City Plan Department, focuses on drawing power from wind turbines, fuel cells and even generators powered by Long Island Sound tides.

It is seeking a $130,000 grant from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund for a feasibility study of which sources make the most sense.

Karyn Gilvarg, executive director for the plan department, said a successful district would have the dual benefit of lowering energy costs for existing businesses and attracting new businesses.

Recycling bins make space for ads

Bridgeport is testing a third way to make recycling pay, beyond the money saved on disposal fees or earned from resale.

It will share revenue from advertisement space sold on large recycling bins managed by a private firm.

New York and Norwalk already have similar systems, according to a Bridgeport News report. In Bridgeport, the city will retain the right to determine where the bins may be placed and to approve all advertising.

The most likely locations are on city rights of way in commercial areas where trash tends to proliferate, as well as sidewalks and parks.

The containers, which are about 5.5 feet wide and 1.5 feet deep, accept paper and bottles.

Under its contract with a Florida-based company, Creative Outdoor Advertising, the city will receive 8 percent of ad revenue. Most ads are expected to be from local businesses.

The trash from the bins will be taken to the city transfer station.

A tree committee grows in Simsbury

The town of Simsbury has established a new committee, one devoted to celebrating and preserving its inheritance of trees.

The tree committee chairwoman, Diane Nash, said in a Hartford Courant report that part of its mission is to keep people from taking trees for granted.

“Whether it’s sycamores, hickories, cherry trees or maples, we have them. But they are what we see every day and go, ‘Oh,’ until one gets blown down or the power company wants to trim one.”

In general, the committee’s goal is to protect the town’s trophy trees and nurture the growth of new ones.

The committee has an extra incentive to be vigilant because the town is home to the Pinchot Sycamore, which is rated as the largest tree in Connecticut. At least two centuries old, the Pinchot’s trunk measures almost 24 feet around.

The tree is named after Gifford Pinchot, a Simsbury native who became the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service. It is located south of the town center, near Route 10.
Add Manchester, Torrington and Coventry to the growing ranks of municipalities switching to single-stream recycling.

The Manchester Board of Directors recently approved spending $1 million to buy the large containers required for the single-stream system that frees residents from having to separate glass, plastic and paper when they put their recyclables out for collection.

Public Works Directors Mark Carlino said he expected recycling tonnage to increase by about 70 percent -- which would translate into a $161,000 savings in disposal costs for the town, according to a Journal Inquirer report.

Meanwhile, in Torrington, the city council voted to award a trash collection contract that requires single stream collection to USA Hauling and Recycling Inc.

A company representative predicted Torrington would see a 41 percent increase in recycling, or 800 tons a year, if it did as well as Hartford, where single-stream was introduced last year.

According to a Register-Citizen report, the collection would be done bi-weekly. Public Works Director Jerry Rollett said that residents themselves had expressed interest in improving the recycling rate.

In Coventry, the town took the precaution of announcing that the recycling contractor was introducing new trucks especially configured for single-stream collection even though they look like regular garbage trucks at a glance.

"We don’t want to stir up residents thinking we’re throwing their recycling into a rubbish truck," Public Works Director Tim Webb said in a Journal-Inquirer report. “Everybody is going to single-stream recycling.”

Greenwich has created a new Coastal Resources Advisory Committee that for the first time gives the town a central authority to manage its 28 miles of shoreline.

Harbor Master Jonathan Asch, one of the members, said the committee’s first order of business will be to update water rules and regulations, some of which are almost 50 years old.

The committee also will develop a long term waterways management program and revise the schedule of mooring fees.

According to a Stamford Advocate newspaper report, the committee will comprise of nine voting members – all residents with boating backgrounds. They will be joined by five non-voting town officials, whose duties reflect the range of coastal concerns.

Besides Asch, they include the shellfish commissioner, a member of the conservation commission, an officer form the police department’s marine unit, and the Parks and Recreation Department’s superintendent of marine facilities.

Greenwich authorities oversee to one extent or another 650 public and private moorings and Asch said keeping them well organized is a vital function of the committee.

“In case of an emergency, marine police need to know who the boat belongs to,” he said, promising the committee would make sure moorings and mooring balls are clearly marked.
New London council shares manager search

The New London City Council has invited non-elected representatives of the community to help out in the search for a new city manager.

The unusual arrangement, intended to make the hiring process more open, creates a search committee of nine members.

Two seats will be reserved for Republican and Democrat councilmen. But the others will go to two representatives from the community-at-large, as well as one each to the local NAACP, the Latino community, the business community, the Neighbor Alliance and the city personnel office.

The expanded committee was proposed by Mayor Wade Hyslop and Councilman Kevin Cavanaugh, according to a New London Day report.

“We keep saying inclusion, inclusion. I wanted to make sure as many as possible were included,” Hyslop said.

The advisory committee was to review more than 40 applicants and recommend at least 10 to the council for further interviews.

None of the documents the committee sees will be allowed outside their meeting room and all will have the name of the applicant redacted.

The council retains the option of adding a candidate not recommended by the advisory committee to the list of those to be interviewed.

Unfunded mandate provokes new fees

West Hartford has created a new array of inspection fees in response to the state mandate requiring fire departments to do safety reviews of building plans, finished construction and many kinds of business operations.

The fees, which took effect July 1, will help the town recover most, if not all, of the costs associated with the mandate, according to a Hartford Courant report.

At a public hearing, Asst. Fire Chief Michael Sinsigalli said the new fee schedule was developed with the help of a CCM committee on which he sits.

All the West Hartford fees apply to services currently carried out by the fire marshal’s office which has an annual budget of about $406,000.

Sinsigalli said that if the fees had been in place in the previous fiscal year they would have generated $291,000 in additional revenue just for reviewing plans for new construction, addition and renovation projects. Inspection fees for finished construction would have generated another $20,000.

He also estimated revenue from occupancy and permit fees – which range from $10 for a parade float to $250 for a woodworking facility – would produce about $250,000.

Because the fees do not apply to single or two family dwellings, most homeowners will not pay extra charges.

Citizen surveys smooth development path

Town governments increasingly are seeking citizen input to anticipate and minimize conflict over economic development plans and capital projects.

A recent example can be found in Suffield, where residents are being asked how they feel about 19 types of industrial and retail development, as well as their preferences for the use of a vacant school and the future of the town library.

First Selectman Scott Lingenfelter said the survey was prompted partly by the defeat of a referendum for a new library building and resistance to a biodiesel fuel plant that would have added significantly to the town grand list.

“We want to be sure that what we’re doing is what the people want,” Lingenfelter told the Hartford Courant.


Meanwhile, Simsbury is conducting a survey with a similar goal of assessing residents’ feelings about development, especially in the town center. It has hired a consulting company to do the job.

In Granby, officials recently conducted a series of public workshops where they presented residents with a “wish list” of the types of projects they would like to see, according to another Courant report.

Finally, Stratford appears to have ended a decade-long search for the site of a new animal shelter after creating citizen ‘study circles” and polling residents on preferred locations.
GOVERNANCE

West Haven Tax Assessor Marie Gradoia has a way of taking her work on the road that pays dividends to the city

When she drives around town, she keeps her eyes peeled for cars with out-of-state license plates suspiciously parked in residential areas.

If they look too at home, Gradoia will send a letter to the address where the vehicle is parked asking for more information to determine whether it should be properly taxed in West Haven.

"Even on weekends and nights, if I see one I write it down," Gradoia said in a New Haven Register report. "It doesn't cost the city any money."

She began the extra effort to find wrongly registered vehicles last summer after hearing complaints from neighbors.

With the help of Deputy Assessor Doug Kidd, her office followed through on enough cases to add about $700,000 to the grand list, resulting in about $25,000 in extra revenue.

Initially, Gradoia paid an out-of-town assessor $7,000 to search for plates for two months.

If car owners who receive inquiry letters do not respond, the vehicle is automatically added to city tax rolls. The office, however, is willing to listen to reasonable excuses, such as if the car belongs to a visiting relative or is a rental car.

Gradoia was working on the problem of what to do about out-of-state cars parked near apartment buildings or multi-family houses where the address is uncertain. She said she may experiment with software that can look up a license plate number and match it with the owner.

Fixing parking tickets – collection, that is

Berlin and New Haven are refining their methods of making sure the parking tickets they issue get paid.

In Berlin police have stopped handing out local tickets and instead have begun issuing standard State of Connecticut citations.

According to a front page Hartford Courant report, Town Manager Denise McNair initiated the change after learning the town lacked a formal process for people who wanted to appeal a ticket.

She turned to Police Chief Paul Fitzgerald for advice and Fitzgerald, a former state trooper, recommended switching to the state citations many other local departments already use.

Even though the state processes the ticket, and state courts hear appeals, the towns still get the money from parking fines.

In New Haven, the city has created a new link on its website, www.cityofnewhaven.com, where drivers can check to see if they have overdue parking fines that put them at risk of having their cars towed.

The change coincides with a plan to stiffen the city’s five-year-old plate scanning enforcement program that searches for parking scofflaws.

Originally only cars which had more than $200 in overdue fines were subject to seizure. Lowering the threshold to $100, as proposed, makes a new pot of overdue fines worth almost $7 million available to the city.

More than half though, about $4.3 million, is from tickets more than five years old, meaning some of the scofflaws have moved, according to a New Haven Register report.

Nevertheless, City Controller Mark Pietrosimone estimated the lower threshold could yield an extra $300,000 to $500,000 a year in revenue.

Since the city introduced its Plate Hunter enforcement program in 2004, about 4,300 vehicles have been towed or immobilized. Last year, the city augmented the program by contracting with a wheel immobilizing firm.
Town and board share resource director

Waterford officials have decided that a single human resources director can serve both town hall and the school department.

The new shared position, agreed to in March, eliminates almost $70,000 in personnel costs. The new unified department will be led by town Human Resources Director Barbara Aube, a 14-year town employee.

Under the new arrangement, the Board of Education will contribute $35,000 for the shared service. When working on school matters, Aube will report to Supt. Randall Collins and when working on town matters will report to First Selectman Daniel Steward.

Steward said he believed Waterford is the first town in the area to have such shared services.

“We’re excited. We’ll have a full department [and] it gives our employees a better support system,” he said. “It’s a huge savings for the community.” Steward added. It’s “one of the things we can do together.”

The department is responsible for recruitment, labor relations and employee training among other functions.

Monroe preps for surgical absence

When a medical condition sidelines a municipality’s chief executive for an extended period, who takes over?

Monroe faced that question during the summer when First Selectman Thomas Buzi was informed he needed surgery to remove a cancerous growth and realized the town charter was silent on the issue of his replacement.

Buzi’s solution was to delegate one crucial aspect of his authority – the power to declare a state of emergency – to Police Chief John Salvatore.

Other of his day-to-day responsibilities were given to appropriate department heads.

State law allows a municipality’s chief executive to designate some other official to declare a state of emergency in the event of a disaster such as a hurricane or a disease outbreak.

For other duties, the town charter addresses absences beyond 90 days, but not those of shorter length. Buzi said the lack of a clear mechanism was not an urgent problem, but could be fixed in the next charter revision.

Buzi said he expected to be in the hospital about a week and be able to return to his office, at least part time, within two weeks.

A subsequent report said Buzi’s surgery was so successful he returned home early and his recovery was ahead of schedule.

West Hartford wants to be all it can be for veterans

Even though it already offers discounts and special services to military veterans, West Hartford has formed a veterans commission to make sure their needs are being met.

Among the eight members are Dr. Ken Colliton, who served in a mobile emergency room during the first Persian Gulf War, and Peggy Gray, the wife of a Vietnam vet and mother of a soldier disabled during the current Iraq War.

She told the Hartford Courant that the commission’s “long term goal is to create a bible of town, state and federal services” for veterans.

Colliton said the overlapping bureaucracies can be “mind-boggling” for vets. “We want to be a resource,” he said.

At home, the commission is charged with advising the town manager and town council on veterans’ needs and identifying gaps in services for veterans.

The town department of human and leisure services currently maintains a list of programs and discounted fees available to vets.

Council member Timothy Brennan, liaison to the commission, estimated there are between 3,000 and 4,000 veterans living in town.

Older vets may have lost touch with the support system, while newer vets from Iraq and Afghanistan may not know the services that are available to them.

Taxpayers in an increasing number of towns now charge it

East Hartford has joined an expanding list of towns that now allow residents to use their Visa, MasterCard or any other major credit card to pay their taxes.

For example, Westport, Redding, Newtown and Roxbury, among other municipalities, also allow property owners to use their credit cards to pay their taxes. Convenience fees typically range between 2.45% and 3.00%. Municipalities have partnered with companies such as Official Payments Corporation and Point & Pay in order to implement the change.

East Hartford Mayor Melody Currey said in a Hartford Courant report that the change is intended to make it easier for people to pay their bills and keep the town in step with the times, when buying and paying online has become common.

The town in the past has accepted credit card payments for some services, but not for major property tax bills. In conjunction with its new policy, the town also began passing on the 2.45 percent service charge to people who pay by credit card. Previously the town absorbed the cost that had grown to about $50,000 per year.

The service charge would add about $17 to a $700 tax bill. On the town’s official website a “pay taxes online” window links directly to the service that handles the payments.
Smoking ban asked for public street

Bristol is on the verge of becoming the first municipality in the state, and one of the few in the nation, to ban smoking on a public street.

The prospect arises from a request by Bristol Hospital to declare Newell Road, a short street that cuts through the hospital campus, a no smoking zone.

Like several other hospitals in the state, Bristol already has outlawed smoking on its grounds, even removing an outdoor shelter.

In response to the hospital’s request, the city has drafted a no smoking ordinance that potentially could be extended to streets near parks, schools and libraries, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Mayor Art Ward said the ban would be “part of the public awareness of the impact smoking has on the community.”

In Connecticut, Colchester recently declared some public recreation areas off limits to smokers.

In California, according to a front page New York Times report, the community of Belmont adopted what is believed to be the strictest anti-smoking law yet – banning smoking in privately occupied apartment buildings, not just public spaces.

Some California cities, such as El Cajon and Calabasas, already ban smoking on streets and sidewalks.

Colchester widens outdoor smoking ban

A vote by the Colchester Board of Selectmen gave official approval to a plan that eventually may lead to a smoking ban at all town parks.

For the time being, however, the ban applies only to the recreation complex off Old Hebron Road, where there are fields for baseball, football and soccer as well as tennis courts and a water playground.

Depending on its success there, the Parks and Recreation Commission proposed extending the outdoor ban to all town parks.

It based its recommendation on the belief that parks should be areas that have positive influences on children, Parks and Recreation Director Jason Cohen said in a Norwich Bulletin report.

It rejected the idea of creating a “smoking zone” where smokers might have been visible to children.

A commission resolution also observed that a voluntary no smoking policy enforced by peer pressure had proved ineffective. It noted that “due to various incidents and interactions, it has become clear the policy must be official.”

The ban is considered formal town policy as opposed to a legal ordinance and therefore cannot be enforced by policing. Still, Cohen said it is an important first step toward eliminating smoking in outdoor public areas.

The original proposal was even stricter. It would have prohibited smoking outdoors at all town property, effectively closing the last refuge at work for town employees who smoke.

The town already had an outdoor smoking ban on school grounds.

City fights tooth decay

The City of New Britain’s health department has begun to practice preventive dental medicine, offering free fluoride treatments to children and youths between ages 1 and 18.

The treatment is about as painless as can be. A pleasant tasting fluoride varnish is painted onto a child’s teeth with a soft brush, according to a Hartford Courant report.

The staff not only provides the treatment, they counsel children and parents on the importance of regular dental care to long term health.

Truglio said tooth decay is five times more prevalent than asthma among children. It can lead to infections, which can cause pain resulting in loss of sleep, ability to concentrate and missed school.
GREENWICH tries texting to reach teens

The Greenwich Health Department joined a national campaign in April to warn teens about sexually transmitted diseases by exploiting their mania for sending text messages to one another.

In fact, according to a Stamford Advocate report, the entire campaign was promoted in alphabetical shorthand. It was called GYT09 (get yourself tested) for STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

Also, the MTV music channel, a campaign partner, offered teens sweepstakes tickets to its 2009 movie awards if they sent text messages asking for information about local testing for STDs.

The Greenwich Health Department promoted the campaign by holding a health fair at Greenwich High School. It let teens know they can get free, confidential testing on a walk-in basis two afternoons a week at Town Hall.

Health Director Caroline Calderone-Baisley said the idea behind the GYT campaign was to raise awareness about STDs and to make the choice to get tested empowering.

STD infections are more common than most people think. According to the Centers for Disease Control, another campaign partner, one in four teenage girls has at least one STD, such as chlamydia, which can lead to infertility, or HPV, the human papilloma virus associated with cervical cancer.

More information about the campaign is available at www.gyt09.org.

PEDOMETERS in style at Guilford town hall

Observe visitors to Guilford's town hall might be surprised to see a lot of employees walking around with pedometers strapped to their ankles.

The pedometers have come into fashion because of a new wellness program called Guilford FIT, for Feeling Invigorated Together.

Begun in February, it sets up a point system by which teams of four or six employees compete on exercise and diet, and where every step counts.

FIT was proposed by a wellness committee as a way to improve town employees’ health, reduce sick time and save on insurance costs, according to a New Haven Register report.

One of the participants, Selectman Cynthia Cartier, said the program costs the town nothing, since prizes for winning teams are being donated by local businesses.

The initial phase of the FIT challenge was to run for 10 weeks, but Cartier said it would continue with a “boot camp” later in the spring and a “beach yoga” program in summer.

NORWALK dental program opens wider

A Norwalk program that provides free or low cost dental care to children has been expanded to all schools after a successful test at the city’s two high schools.

Called Norwalk Smiles and operated by the Community Health Center, it reaches children who might otherwise rarely or never see a dentist.

It is free to children covered by Medicaid or the state’s HUSKY insurance program, and costs $30 for children with no insurance at all.

It provides cleaning, fluoride treatment and sealants that protect against decay-causing bacteria.

The eventual goal is to make x-ray and restorative care available in schools as well, program director Adele Gordon said in a Norwalk Hour report.

Hygienists working in the program use equipment personalized to make the experience less frightening for children. For example, the cleaning wand is called Tommy the Tickler and the suction tube is Vicky the Vacuum.
Schools go on a “rainbow” diet

“Eat all the colors of the rainbow.”

That was the nutritional advice that students at Norwich’s Uncas Elementary School got from an orchard operator during an assembly celebrating Connecticut Grown products.

Jean Palazzi of East Killingly brought along a variety of fruits and vegetables, including a giant blue hubbard squash.

She was invited through the Connecticut Agriculture in the Classroom program that encourages children to eat foods that are locally grown -- and good for them.

It is promoted by the Connecticut Agricultural Education Foundation, www.ctaef.org, which provided Uncas students with books about produce and nutrition.

Uncas also was the recipient of a grant from the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program that provides a fresh snack each school day.

Principal Christie Gillully said one of the most memorable was green sugar snap peas.

“The kids tore them apart. Then counted the peas,” she said.

But another snack, a fresh peach, puzzled at least one student, who didn’t recognize it, since the student had only encountered sliced peaches in a can.

Shoreline district puts dining data online

People dining out in towns served by the East Shore District Health Department can now get restaurant ratings on a public website.

The ratings though are not for cuisine or service; they are for the establishments’ performance on health inspections.

The new postings also cover larger grocery and convenience stores, school cafeterias and most facilities that sell hot food to the public in the towns of Branford, North Branford and East Haven.

Health Director Jim Monopoli said in a New Haven Register report that the program was being conducted in partnership with the dining establishments.

Besides an overall health inspection score, the data available online includes details about critical and non-critical deficiencies. It can be accessed at www.ESDHD.org, under the ‘environmental health’ tab.

A similar, even more public rating program started last year by the North Central Health District. It called for participating restaurants to post “cleanliness” report cards where they can be seen by patrons.

Stratford makes defibrillators standard

On Tuesday, March 17, Stratford’s emergency medical chief, Donna Best, set off a new kind of alarm in the town council chambers.

Instead of alerting occupants to the possibility of a fire, its piercing siren sound signaled that someone might have been stricken by a heart attack and that help was on the way in the form of a defibrillator.

The demonstration was part of a “ribbon-cutting” for the town hall defibrillator, the first of many that will be installed in all town buildings and schools as well as private health clubs and many large retail stores by July 1.

They are required under an ordinance, believed to be the first of its kind in Connecticut, that makes the defibrillators standard life-saving equipment and also requires many town employees to be trained in their use.

Mayor James Miron, who championed the ordinance, said it created a “cardiac safety net” for residents and visitors, according to a Connecticut Post report.

The retail stores covered by the ordinance must have at least 50 employees or an occupancy capacity of more than 250.

The installation ceremony in March was a town wide affair, with the honor of cutting the ribbon going to a seventh grader who raised $1,000 toward the purchase of defibrillators by selling bookmarks.
HEALTH

Stamford rids itself of bad fat

Restaurants in Stamford can no longer cook with those partially hydrogenated vegetable oils health experts so ardently warn are bad for us.

The city Board of Representatives approved a health ordinance banning the oils, better known as trans fats, from licensed food establishments, as well as school cafeterias, as of July 1.

The action was believed to be the first by a Connecticut municipality, according to a New York Times report.

National restaurant chains already have moved toward replacing the trans fats with healthier cooking oils. And the Connecticut State Senate passed a trans fat bill during the last General Assembly session.

Stamford Health and Social Services Director Dr. Johnnie Lee said the local ban should help educate the public about healthy eating habits and lower the risk of cardiovascular disease.

The new ordinance permits city health inspectors to impose fines of up to $90 or suspend the operating licenses of established food establishments found cooking with trans fats.

CDC project gets regional boost

Three regional health districts in eastern Connecticut have been selected to participate in a three year national project being conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The project known by its acronym ACHIEVE for Action Communities for Health, Innovation and Environmental Change will assess local conditions that can promote healthier lifestyles, or contribute to harmful ones.

One example might be to tour a city by bicycle to determine how “bike friendly” it is, as is being planned for New London, one of five communities served by the Ledge Light Health District.

The two other regional districts joining Ledge Light in the ACHIEVE project are the Mansfield-based Eastern Highlands serving 10 towns and the Brooklyn-based Northeast District Department of Health serving 12 towns.

Altogether 53 regional districts or communities nationwide are part of the project, which falls within the CDC’s Healthy Communities Program. In each a panel of residents and representatives of local organizations will be assembled to do the assessments.

The evaluation of conditions will be conducted by a panel of community representatives. In New London, the panel is expected to include elected officials and representatives of city departments such as parks and recreation and planning and development as well as educators, business owners, other health and human service professionals, people from universities and New London residents.

For more information on how your community can participate, go to www.achievecommunities.org.
The Stamford housing authority has gotten the Zoning Board’s okay to build an 85 unit mixed-income residential complex on the city west side to be called Palmer Square.

Private developers often are required to include subsidized units to win municipal approval, but in this case the authority itself inverted that pattern, deciding that 40 percent of the townhouse units will be rented at market rates.

The majority will go to families whose incomes are between 25 and 60 percent of the area median. In Stamford that means a range of $31,000 to $73,000 for a family of four.

The project, estimated at $24 million, is being done in collaboration with Stamford Hospital, which is expanding. Some of the units may house hospital workers.

Vincent Tufo, executive director of the authority, called Charter Oak Communities, answered fears of some area homeowners by assuring them that property values tend to rise around mixed use developments.

Tufo also said Palmer Square’s density will actually be 20 percent less than zoning allows and will not be an urban development squeezed into the residential neighborhood.

Of the 85 proposed units, 77 will be brand new and eight will be renovations of existing buildings.

The Trumbull Town Council and Planning and Zoning Commission have approved complementary regulations that extend new protection to the town’s historic structures.

The council’s action creates a demolition delay ordinance that requires property owners to meet with town officials before razing a building.

A review committee, appointed by the first selectman, will carry out the demolition delay ordinance. It will include a staff member from the Planning and Zoning Department and two residents familiar with architecture and town history.

They will meet with the applicant for a demolition permit to discuss whether a building can be saved in place, relocated or at least have its most important elements preserved.

According to a Connecticut Post report, the need for an ordinance became more pressing in April after an historic house that once served as a post office was razed without public notice.
Avon nourishes food pantry

The town of Avon has put its money where its mouths are, so to speak, by agreeing to pay for renovations at a food pantry run by a local church.

The $6,175 allocation, approved by the Town Council, will cover the cost of materials needed to expand storage space and build a separate entrance for pantry clients at the Church of Saint Ann, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Church members will provide the labor at no cost.

In seeking help from the town, the church said the renovations were needed partly because the number of people relying on the pantry had climbed over the past couple of years to 75 to 90 per month from 45 to 60 per month.

The pantry operates out of the church basement. The town maintains a link to the food pantry on its website.

Conard High collects church rent

West Hartford has agreed to rent space in Conard High School to a small Christian congregation for its Sunday services.

The congregation, the non-denominational Calvary Fellowship, will pay $870 a week, or about $45,000 a year, for space in the auditorium and cafeteria.

Both the church and the school administration described the rental agreement, unusual for its regularity, as a business arrangement, according to a Hartford Courant report.

“We're trying to be efficient with our use of buildings and our expense and revenue, and this will be a source of revenue,” Karen List, the new school superintendent said.

School Board Chairman Terry Schmitt said the recession had made the school system a reluctant landlord.

In the past, the school department has rented space to religious groups on an occasional basis, but the weekly deal with Calvary Fellowship is believed the first of its kind.

Calvary Fellowship had been meeting in a Jewish day school. At Conard, it will hold services in the auditorium and conduct Sunday school classes in a cordoned off section of the cafeteria.

Community pitches in for harbor police

Renovating the building Fairfield harbor police use at the town’s South Benson Marina was estimated to cost between $165,000 and $180,000.

But the town will have to pay only about $10,000 for an almost-new harbor building because local contractors and suppliers are donating so much free labor and materials for the marina.

While the building will get new plumbing and wiring, the main change will be the addition of a second story that should give harbor police a better view of the busy marina.

Chief David Peck said in a local news report that the expansion will open space on the first floor for boating safety classes and police interviews.

Before going ahead with the collaborative project, the department got approval from the town Ethics Commission. The department also is posting the names of donors on its website.

Public works crews also are helping on the project, making it a true “community building,” Peck said.

The building was originally a bait shop. Harbor police should be back in the renovated building by next summer.
Library gets down to business

The Farmington Library has converted space on its second floor into a resource center for local business owners. Besides a collection of business-oriented books and magazine, the center gives business people access to a specialized reference database as well as color printing and faxing equipment. The Farmington Chamber of Commerce donated $6,850 for the center and 50 of the chamber’s longest standing members were recognized at the grand opening in October. The library expects the business community will use the space for various types of programs as well as doing research and preparing reports.

Burlington finds sponsors for firefighting ATVs

Volunteer firefighters in Burlington will be able to get to remote brush fires quicker riding all-terrain vehicles purchased with the help of local businesses. The $7,000 ATVs are considered a great asset because Burlington has large areas of thick woods that regular firefighting vehicles cannot penetrate.

The department already has acquired one ATV, raising half the money itself through individual donations and getting the balance from the Farmington Savings Bank. The Burlington Chamber of Commerce has pledged $2,000 towards the purchase of a second ATV. The vehicles probably will see duty in Bristol and New Hartford, since the Burlington department is often called to assist on remotes fires in those towns, too.

This year has been very wet so far, diminishing the chance of brush fires. But the 2008 season was one of the worst in years, fire department spokesman Jeffrey Bond said in a Hartford Courant report.

Torrington enlists business in drug war

The city of Torrington has created a kind of better business seal of approval as an aid in the war on illegal drug use. Under the program, businesses will be allowed to post “Drug Free Business Zone” labels in their windows if they refrain from selling paraphernalia that can be adapted to drug use.

A task force of high school students helped the city identify stores that sell the love roses, according to a Register-Citizen report. Bingham said he informed Atty. Gen. Richard Blumenthal about the new program, in hopes it would be adopted by other municipalities.
FEMA grant pays volunteers’ tuition

The Old Saybrook fire department is trying a new tactic to attract new recruits and retain volunteers: offering $60,000 to subsidize their educations.

The money represents the bulk of an $82,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency grant and can be tapped for reimbursement of either college or trade school classes.

According to a New London Day report, the rationale behind the tuition subsidy is that it may compensate for a scarcity of affordable housing. Going to school may eventually lead volunteer firefighters into higher paying jobs, which in turn will allow them to continue to reside in town.

The money will be allotted in $15,000 increments over four years for firefighters who successfully apply for tuition reimbursement. Usually, reimbursement is paid only after a course is completed.

The remainder of the FEMA grant will be used to produce a 30-second recruitment commercial that will be shared by the 13 departments in the Valley Shore Mutual Aid Association.

The commercial will guide them to an informational website, www.joinyourfd.com.

The other departmental members are Chester, Clinton, Deep River, Durham, Essex, Guilford, Haddam, Killingworth, Madison, North Madison, Old Lyme and Westbrook.

Elected officials go to fire school

Firefighters from departments in Fairfield, Stratford and West Haven joined in October to give special training to the people who ultimately are their bosses.

The roster of those attending the program known as Fire Ops 101 included West Haven Mayor John Picard, Stratford Council Chairman Mike Herrick, and Fairfield Board of Finance Chairman Kevin Kiley and Fairfield Selectman Sherri Steeneck.

Leaders of local taxpayer organizations also attended the program, which was conducted at the Fairfield Regional Fire School.

Fire Ops 101 was created by the International Association of Firefighters to give elected officials and others a first-hand look at how a fire department operates on a daily basis.

Fairfield Fire Chief Richard Felner said in a local news report that the experience should help everyone who participated, firefighters and officials alike, do their jobs better.

New Haven imports firing range

The New Haven police have stopped firing practice at their outdoor training ground, at least temporarily, in favor of a rented trailer.

The self-contained unit, owned by a Massachusetts company, comes with features like computer controlled videos that confront officers with split-second “shoot, don’t shoot” scenarios, according to a New Haven Register report.

It also is sound-proofed, allowing Police Chief James Lewis to promise residents who had complained about the noise from gunfire at the outdoor range that they wouldn’t hear any sound emanating from the trailer.

The $30,000 cost of renting the trailer for three weeks will be paid out of funds from criminal assets forfeited to the department. If the budget allows, the department may rent the trailer several times a year.

As a long term replacement for the outdoor range, located off the Sherman Parkway and within earshot of four schools, the city is seeking federal funding for a $6 million indoor range to be shared by about 20 agencies.
PUBLIC SAFETY

Gunshot sensors give police 911 back-up

New Haven police soon will have a new remote peace-keeping tool: a network of audio sensors tuned to detect gunfire.

Technicians began installing the so-called ShotSpotter system in March on roof tops at strategic locations in high crime areas.

The individual sensors, each about the size of a coffee can, are positioned so that they can pinpoint the location of gunfire through acoustic triangulation. The location then appears on a dispatch screen within seconds.

Nor should the system be susceptible to false alarms, since the sensors can distinguish the sound of gunshots from a car backfire or fireworks. In network they can even detect the number of shooters and, if they are firing from a vehicle, the direction of their movement, according to a New Haven Register report.

The system also promises to solve a strategic riddle that has long stumped police, especially in high crime neighborhoods: If a gun is fired and no one reports it, what can police do?

In New Haven, the 450 confirmed gunfire incidents per year are thought to be a fraction of the actual total. Even if police get a 911 report, the caller may be several blocks away and unable to give an exact location.

Once the ShotSpotter system is operational, police will be able to speed to the scene of a gunfire incident, whether or not anyone calls it in -- and even if no one hears it.

Memorials rise for fallen protectors

In East Hartford and Middletown, new memorials have been erected in honor of public safety personnel who died in the line of duty.

The East Hartford memorial outside public safety headquarters consists of two panels hung on a column that is topped by a blue flame.

It was dedicated in November to former police chief Robert Kappenberg, who was killed while directing traffic in 1916; officer John Callahan, who was injured on motorcycle patrol in 1934 and later died of a heart attack; and officer Brian Aselton, who was shot to death in 1999 when he interrupted a home invasion.

Aselton’s brother John, who is on the Newington force, attended the dedication ceremony, according to a Hartford Courant report.

The Middletown memorial outside the Cross Street firehouse was dedicated in December to Capt. Joseph Pagano Jr. and Charles Rau, both of whom suffered fatal heart attacks returning from emergency runs; Pagano in 2006 and Rau in 1977.

Separate benches bearing their names and the number 5555, code for last alarm, are positioned next to a Maltese cross flanked by illuminated flags.

An inscription says the memorial is dedicated “to all Middletown firefighters, past, present and future, who give so willingly of their lives to protect the life and property of complete strangers.”
**Search dogs almost walk on water**

The tracking power of bloodhounds and other search dogs is legendary. But who knew they can track on water?

There are such dogs, as the Winchester Volunteer Fire Department saw when they witnessed a demonstration by TASK-9, a nonprofit organization of search dog handlers.

On Park Pond, on a day of high winds from Tropical Storm Hanna, a Siberian husky named Bear located a diver hidden under water in less than 10 minutes.

Bear was able to do what might seem impossible – given all the movie scenes where fugitives slosh through streams to elude the hounds – because people leave a “scent plume” in the air whether they are on water or land, handler Carol Ferrucci explained in a newspaper report.

On water, a dog in a boat will turn in the direction of the plume, essentially signaling the boat operator to follow his nose. As the scent grows stronger, the dog becomes more animated, signaling the boat to stop.

Several other dogs duplicated Bear’s feat during the Winchester demonstration.

TASK-9, which stands for Trailing and Air-scenting Search K-9s, has seven dog and handler teams that work with emergency responders across southern New England.

More information about the service is at www.task-9.org.

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**33 squads rise to SWAT Challenge**

The Connecticut SWAT Challenge, hosted by the West Hartford police department, has grown to be one of the largest such events in the country.

This year 33 tactical teams, including ones representing the Army and Air Force, competed in events involving marksmanship, rescue and physical endurance.

The overall winner was the Central Region Emergency Response Team made up of officers from Bristol, Plainville and Southington.

The competition took place over two days in September, at a firing range in Simsbury and Metropolitan District Commission land in Farmington, and was attended by nearly 1,000 law enforcement officers, about a third of whom were contestants.

The trial events were developed by West Hartford’s SWAT team, commanded by Lt. Donald Melanson. West Hartford first hosted the challenge four years ago and the town claims it is now the third largest in the country.

Many municipal departments sent squads to the challenge, Danbury, Fairfield, Greenwich, Guilford and Branford, Hamden, Hartford, Meriden, Middletown, New Canaan, Newington, Torrington and Waterbury.

The complete results can be seen on the website, www.ctswatchallenge.com.

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**Training trailer rolls into Fairfield**

Fairfield has acquired a new fire safety trailer that can be turned, for educational purposes, into a house on fire.

The trailer has three rooms, a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. But only the first two are rigged to simulate typical causes of house fires.

Among other features of the trailer is a door separating the kitchen and bedroom that can be heated, so that it feels warm to the touch. It can be used to teach children that in the case of fire they should not open a door that feels hot in seeking an escape route.

The Fairfield Fire Department took delivery of the trailer in May. It was purchased with a $36,675 grant from the state Contingency Needs Fund, which generally provides supplementary money for projects dedicated to the public good.

Asst. Fire Chief Chris Tracy said the trailer will be used to educate children and the elderly about fire hazards. The department had been trying to acquire such a trailer for almost a decade.
Police open lines to texted tips

Police departments in Connecticut’s five largest cities have a new crime fighting tool intended to tap into the explosive popularity of cell phone text messaging.

Called Text a Tip, it creates a new way for persons who have information about a crime to relay it to police without divulging their identity.

The hope is it will be particularly helpful in city neighborhoods where witnesses who come forward may fear retribution on the one hand or being ostracized as “snitches” on the other.

The State Police is spearheading the program, which assigns specific codes numbers to Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Stamford and Waterbury.

Police in those cities can receive a tip sent to a centralized computer system that conceals the texter’s identity, but still enables them to communicate.

According to a New York Times report, the system yielded 19 tips in the first few weeks after its launch. Police hope its use will grow as it is publicized through cards handed out in neighborhoods or notices posted in hospital emergency rooms.

Accessing the system is not as simple as dialing 911. To reach the central computer, the text tipster must punch in CRIMES (for 274637) on the cell phone keyboard, then enter the city code.

Magnetic first: school opens with public safety focus

An idea that germinated with a former Manchester mayor has grown into what is believed to be the first magnet school in the nation focused on police work and firefighting.

Located at temporary quarters in Enfield, the new Greater Hartford Public Safety Academy opened its doors this fall to about 100 middle schoolers, who began the year wearing uniforms of white shirts and khaki pants.

They can earn blue or yellow shirts signifying higher rank by demonstrating good behavior or writing essays about their commitment to the academy, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Each day starts with drills that may include calisthenics or policing school grounds. All classes, regardless of subject, emphasize discipline, self-confidence and team work.

The need for such a school was first suggested by former Manchester Mayor Steve Cassano, who saw the difficulty towns had in recruiting qualified police officers and firefighters.

He approached the Capitol Region Education Council with the idea and soon an advisory board was formed of municipal public safety leaders, including Hartford Police Chief Daryl Roberts and Fire Chief Charles Teale.

“We looked all over the country and found that nothing [like this] exists,” Cassano told the Courant. “We’re the first in the country.”

Hired to be the Academy’s principal is Bill Jaeger, who has master’s degrees from Trinity College and Harvard and who suspended work on a doctorate to take the job.

Students take regular academic classes with an overlay of public safety training. One recent session had Thompsonville firemen demonstrate the use of a rope and pulley rescue harness, followed by a talk on how firefighters use math and science.

Eventually the Academy will enroll sixth graders through 12th graders. Upper classmen may take college level courses and will graduate trained in CPR and other emergency skills.

The Academy also plans to convert to a year-round schedule to avoid summer idleness, according to a Journal Inquirer report. It will stay in Enfield for three years, until a permanent home is found.

The first class was dominated by boys from Hartford. But about 40 percent of the students came from smaller towns, including Bolton, East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Glastonbury, Manchester, South Windsor, Vernon, Wethersfield and Windsor Locks.
Town scores on ball field clay

Springtime brings baseball, and for many municipalities the need to refresh infields with new layers of clay.

This season Seymour officials found a way to save on field maintenance by dispatching public works department trucks to New Jersey to pick up about 30 tons of clay needed for 10 baseball and softball diamonds.

By doing so, the town avoided delivery charges of roughly $39 per ton. It also got the clay cheaper, expecting to pay about $75 per ton instead of $85.

According to a Connecticut Post report, the town estimated it would save nearly $2,000 on its order, not counting the cost of fuel and tolls for the 2 ½ hour trip to the vendor in Great Meadows, N.J.

But there would be no overtime costs, since public works drivers were expected to make the round trip in the course of a regular work day.

The company the town bought the clay from also supplies some major league baseball teams, including the New York Yankees and New York Mets.

Windsor looks for greenhouse gas revenue

Windsor is exploring cashing in on greenhouse gas credits it is reaping from the methane collection system at the town landfill.

The sale of the credits on the emerging market for so-called “carbon offsets” might bring the town as much as $50,000 a year, according to a report prepared by Public Works Director Brian Funk.

Markets for trading greenhouse gas credits barely existed a decade ago when Windsor installed its methane collection system. At the time, the main benefit of the system was that it reduced landfill odor and prevented underground explosions.

But now Windsor may qualify for credits because its landfill system, by trapping and burning methane instead of letting it seep into the atmosphere, effectively cuts its global warming impact by 96 percent.

The dilution is possible because methane pound for pound is 20 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide, the most common greenhouse gas.

Putting a value on the emissions is made possible by a new monitoring system at the landfill that can measure the gas volume in tons, which in turn can be given an exchange price.

The largest market for carbon credits is the one established in Europe as part of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gases. In the U.S., the credits are also traded on the Chicago Climate Exchange, where the price recently was about $1.50 a ton.

In either, companies or government entities that produce less greenhouse gases than regulations allow can sell their surplus to buyers whose emissions exceed allowed limits.

Given the fluctuation of credit prices, Windsor could make from a low of $18,000 to a high of about $50,000 a year by selling its methane credits, according to a Journal Inquirer report.

All of the money would be put back into a fund which pays for the mandatory monitoring of the site that will be for 30 years after its closure. At the current rate of dumping, the landfill is expected to close in 2012.

The town council approved the plan to sell the landfill credits at a meeting in March.

South Windsor fields Kellogg prize

A $15,000 prize from the Kellogg’s cereal company will help South Windsor pay for renovations to its high school athletic field.

Residents and town officials who worked on the town’s submission to the “Frosted Flakes, Plant A Seed Contest” said the high school field is used for more than 1,300 games, practices and gym classes each year.

The renovation involves creating two separate fields out of the current multi-use field, allowing the fields to be used in rotation and protecting both from excessive wear.

South Windsor was one of 30 winners nationally, according to a Hartford Courant report.

The town’s submission can be seen on the Frosted Flakes website. The contest promotes the building and preservation of athletic fields.
Hydrogen station comes to Hamden

Hamden is due to become the first municipality in the state to host a hydrogen fueling station.

The station, to be built behind the town public works garage, will provide fuel for a Greater New Haven Transit District vehicle dedicated to transporting elderly and disabled residents, at least at first.

Scott Jackson, chief administrator for the mayor’s office, said in a local news report that the station makes it more likely the town will acquire hydrogen powered vehicles for its own use.

The town is building the concrete slab for the station as well as the necessary water and electrical connections. A hydrogen station needs both because it works by using electricity to convert water into hydrogen and oxygen.

As an extra environmental measure, the station will derive 20 percent of its power from solar panels, thus effectively reducing greenhouse gas emissions from traditional generating sources.

The town is getting a $250,000 grant to help cover its portion of the project. The overall $1.5 million cost, for the station and the special vehicle, is being paid for by a research and development grant awarded to the transit district.

The town, the district, the state and the Federal Transit Administration Agency are all partners in the project, along with the fuel station designer, Avalence LLC of Milford.

The project, known as Hyride, is described on the transit district website, www.gnhtd.org.

Middletown saves with fill give-away

Middletown’s water and sewer department expects to save money on disposal costs by giving away for use as fill debris excavated from two of its construction projects.

According to a Hartford Courant report, city residents or business owners who want the fill must inform the Planning and Zoning Department about how they intend to use it, and also sign a waiver exempting the city from any damages related to the use.

The oversight policy is needed because the city wants to assure the fill isn’t dumped in protected wetlands or areas that contain utility installations.

James Sipperly, the city’s environmental resource specialist, said giving away the fill will save money on transportation and disposal costs.

The fill will comprise dirt, sand, broken concrete and other clean material. It will be good for leveling off hilly areas or filling in old swimming pools, Sipperly suggested.

Old Saybrook goes for rustic road look

The Old Saybook public works department is experimenting with a kind of water-based, chip seal pavement that makes roads look like country lanes.

Similar to a mixture used by the National Park Service in some historic locations and also in colonial Williamsburg, Va., its use was suggested by First Selectman Michael Pace who thought rustic pavement would enhance the village feel of Old Saybrook, a town with a history as old as Williamsburg’s.

After the rustic pavement was applied to a stretch of Old Post Road last summer, officials hailed it as a panacea for a variety of transportation ills, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Besides giving the road the historic look Pace admired, it is considered more environmentally friendly, and cheaper to boot.

The cost, Public Works Director Larry Bonin said, is about $1.60 per square foot compared to $6 for asphalt paving, with about equal durability.

Besides asphalt, some towns have used chip seal with an oil-based binder for years. But the water-based method used in Williamsburg and Old Saybrook eliminates oil run-off and also allows the natural color of the paving stone to show.

Bonin visited six Connecticut quarries to find the shade suitable for Old Saybrook.

“We wanted it to look old-fashioned, not cheap,” Pace said.
Accident team deployed for seven towns

Seven Connecticut towns have created a Regional Accident Reconstruction Team that employs new technology and establishes a new benchmark for cooperation among police departments.

The technology includes a so-called “Crash Zone” software program and a portable “Total Station” that enables officers at the scene to enter data about an accident and recreate it digitally.

Such equipment, combined with the specially trained officers assigned to the squad, should enable police to more quickly finish their investigations and reopen roadways.

Previously, officers would make scale drawings by hand and keep a road shut down for several hours in the case of a serious accident. Typically a month or more would pass before their final report was ready.

Enfield Police Chief Carl Sferrazza said in a Journal Inquirer report that the new accident team takes regional law enforcement cooperation to a new level.

In the past, towns have joined together for speed limit enforcement and drunk driving checkpoints, but not for something as regular as accident investigation.

The departments participating on the team are East Windsor, Enfield, Manchester, South Windsor, Coventry, Glastonbury and Vernon.

Sferrazza said the departments gain eligibility for extra grants because of their cooperation. His department, for instance, got a $40,000 reimbursement for overtime costs associated with traffic control from the state Department of Transportation.

Eightmile River towns win “scenic” status

Years of teamwork by the towns of Lyme, Salem and East Haddam have been rewarded with the Eightmile River they share being declared one of the nation’s wild and scenic rivers.

The federal designation opens the tap to annual funding from the National Park Service for management of the 40,000-acre Eightmile watershed. It also puts it off limits to construction projects such as dams.

Just as importantly it gives the river towns and allied conservation groups new leverage in winning funding from a wide variety of sources.

Protecting the Eightmile was considered vital because its placid waters drain an area largely spared development in an otherwise densely populated state.

The watershed has only 87 people per square mile, compared to the state average of 700, according to a Hartford Courant report. It also is home to 155 rare or endangered animal and plant species.

Among them are the bald eagle, the frosted elfin butterfly and the winged monkey flower.

The towns began working toward the wild and scenic mantle a decade ago and could not have won it without documenting the river’s ecological value and their own commitment to saving it.

Each eventually held separate votes declaring their desire for the protection. Also each had to agree on a mutual protection plan that prohibits most development within 100 feet of larger streams in the watershed and 50 feet of smaller streams.

Land trusts and conservancy groups joined the towns in the long preservation campaign, as did state officials and congressmen.


Valley TEAM expands mission

The TEAM Inc. anti-poverty agency has adopted a new three year action plan to widen the scope of its activities in the towns it serves in south central Connecticut.

One hallmark of the plan is to encourage greater cooperation between member towns and local organizations, according to a Connecticut Post report.

For example, they might join together to apply for matching dollars from the federal Food Stamp and Employment Program, which provides extra services to food stamp recipients.

The TEAM acronym, which stands for training, education and manpower, defines its mission. Chief executive officer Richard Knoll said the agency hopes to add staff and gain more citizen involvement to accomplish its new goals.

A new main focus will be meeting the goal set by the state’s Child Poverty and Prevention Council to reduce the child poverty rate in the area by 50 percent by 2014.

Some towns served by TEAM have relatively high child poverty rates, especially in the lower Naugatuck Valley. In Derby, for instance, where TEAM has its offices, 43 percent of school children qualify for free or reduced price lunches.

Other towns in the TEAM area are Ansonia, Seymour, Shelton, Oxford, Beacon Falls, Milford, Orange, Bethany and Woodbridge.
Watershed pact stresses local action

After two years of work, a network of southeastern Connecticut towns has drafted a watershed protection plan that is itself a kind of watershed event.

Encouraged by the state Department of Health and other state agencies, the plan is expected to become a model for the more than 125 communities around the state that get drinking water from shared watersheds.

The chief stakeholders in the southeastern Connecticut plan include the town and city of Groton, the towns of Ledyard, Preston, Montville, Waterford, the Mohegan Tribal Nation and Groton Utilities, the area’s main water supplier.

The 191-page plan outlines what needs to be done to protect the shared watershed, while leaving it to member towns to do what is necessary within their own borders.

“We want to control our destinies ourselves,” Al Dion of Groton Utilities, the designated project manager, said in a New London Day report.

The plan calls upon towns to use the latest storm water management practices in new developments and to retrofit existing developments when the occasion makes it possible.

It also suggests building regional treatment systems and even delves into recommended street-sweeping schedules for areas nearest the water supply.

The towns’ 15.6 square mile watershed contains five separate reservoirs and two large wells.

The plan, which still requires approval by each member town, is an outgrowth of “pilot” legislation passed in 2006 to better protect drinking water supplies, which now are deemed to be threatened by sabotage, not just pollution.

According to a statement on the project’s website, www.dwqmp.org, the plan follows “smart growth” principals to safeguard human, environmental and economic health and to preserve the watershed’s natural beauty. It also incorporates “watershed security, which has become critically important.”

Ribbon-cutting celebrates sharing

The importance of regional cooperation was demonstrated recently when the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials staged a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the acquisition of two new street sweepers and a catch basin cleaner.

The machinery was purchased with a $700,000 grant from the state Regional Performance Incentive Program and will be used by the newly created Litchfield Hills Public Works Equipment Cooperative.

One of the sweepers will be garaged in Harwinton and the other in Hartland. The catch basin cleaner will be based in Torrington.

Under the cooperative agreement, the host towns will pay a reduced fee when they use the equipment. The regular rental fee is $55 per hour for the basin cleaner and $50 per hour for the street sweepers.

The rental fee represents about a 20 percent savings over private rates and also includes a capital payment towards replacing the equipment, said Rick Lynn, planning director for the council.

Goshen First Selectman Robert Valentine, who is also president of the council of elected officials, offered his town as an example of the benefit of equipment sharing.

The town couldn’t justify buying a street sweeper of its own and was forced to hire a private contractor when it needed one.

The other towns belonging to the 10-member cooperative are Colebrook, Morris, New Hartford, Norfolk, Warren and Washington.

Route 6 neighbors hit road together

Since Route 6 is their common commercial corridor, the towns of Andover, Bolton and Columbia have decided to work together on plans for its future.

They jointly sought and won Small Town Economic Assistance grants worth $65,000 for the towns to pay for a consultant’s study of how each town can best use the highway.

The study will compliment the work of the economic development council, which they already have formed, along with another neighbor, Coventry.

Andover First Selectman Robert Burbank said in a Willimantic Chronicle report that their common goal is developing Route 6 in a way that is beneficial to all the towns, while allowing each to maintain its own character.
Senior citizens in 10 northern Connecticut towns who have relied in the past on dial-a-ride transportation now can travel further than ever because of an agreement with a new private car service.

The service charges $4 for a pick-up and $1 per mile thereafter. There is also an annual membership fee of $40 for a single person and $60 for a couple.

Offered by the Independent Transport Network of North Central Connecticut, it has the advantage of being available on call and willing to take seniors on trips outside town limits.

"It goes beyond what towns can offer with dial-a-ride," Enfield senior center director Susan Lather said in a Hartford Courant report.

One specific benefit of the service’s wider operating range is that it will enable seniors to reach major medical centers in Hartford and Springfield, Mass.

The service also allows seniors who want to make several stops on a single trip the option of reserving a car for $12.50 an hour with no mileage fee charged.

The Volunteer Center serving Western Connecticut will administer the program. To be eligible, a senior must be at least 65 and have an income of no more than $52,500 if single, or $59,200 if married.

The kinds of work seniors are expected to do include acting as translators, helping out as library assistants and volunteering in parks.

In the first year, the number of slots will be limited to about 90.

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On-call service enlarges dial-a-ride

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The service, which is affiliated with a national ride program that originated in Maine, has a website, www.itnnorthcentralct.org.

The 10 Connecticut towns using it are Enfield, Windsor, East Windsor, South Windsor, Windsor Locks, Granby, East Granby, Bloomfield, Somers and Suffield.

Rewarding seniors who volunteer

Danbury has found a new way to extend tax relief to its senior citizens.

It will give a property tax credit of up to $600 to those who devote 100 hours of volunteer service to local organizations.

Danbury is believed to be the first municipality in the state to introduce the program, called Seniors Add Valuable Experience (SAVE), according to a News-Times report.

Mayor Mark Boughton said the program has the dual benefits of allowing the city “to cash in on the talent of seniors and at the same time give them a property tax credit.”

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Australian author visits school via Skype

Children’s book author Wendy Orr was in her home, on the opposite side of the globe in Victoria, Australia, when she visited fans at Bridgeport’s Burr Elementary School in late May.

Orr, the author of the popular “Nim’s Island,” was able to accomplish the fantastic feat because school specialists had hooked her up through Skype, the software program that permits free long distance voice and video transmission.

In fact, Orr’s virtual visit was in some ways more intimate than if she had come to the school in person. Instead of standing in front of a classroom or auditorium, she talked from her home office, where children could see her books and sleeping dog.

At one point, Orr disappeared from view when she bent down to pick up a page of notes for a sequel she is writing to “Nim’s Island.”

According to a Connecticut Post report, the idea for the Skype visit arose in conversations between parents and school staff after they agreed “Nim’s Island” was a great choice for a school wide event. The only obstacle was that it was unlikely Orr could come to Connecticut.

So school media specialist Dorna Persson and language arts specialist Gail Felberbaum set up the virtual visit. Besides using Skype, they projected Orr onto a Smartboard, a sort of digital blackboard.

Emergency upgrade yields citizen dividend

Many municipalities broadcast town meetings on community cable channels, but East Lyme has found a new way to reach the stay-at-home-public.

For the first time, a board of selectmen’s meeting was transmitted in March using the town’s recently upgraded emergency radio system.

Its wireless technology allows Town Hall to plug analog video into a network, connect to the dispatch center and then relay it live.

The upgrade cost $1.3 million, but the use of the system to broadcast meetings represents a milestone for increased public involvement in town affairs, First Selectman Paul Formica said in a New London Day report.

He said he hopes the town will become even more interactive, by streaming news conferences on its website or having residents call into meetings.

Police cruisers flash LEDs

The recent surge in gasoline prices appears to be speeding the conversion of police cruiser strobe lights to more efficient LED lights.

Since they require about half the power of strobe lights, LEDs (or light emitting diodes) drain a cruiser’s battery much more slowly. That means the cruiser’s engine doesn’t have to be kept running to keep the lights flashing.

The economy is a particular advantage for cruisers parked for long periods at road construction sites or on traffic direction duty.

Newington is one of the latest departments to convert to the LED lights, which rival the old strobes in brightness.

Chief Richard Mulhall told the Hartford Courant that the conversion of the fleet was accelerated by high gasoline prices.

“We sought an alternative, which ended up being environmentally friendly,” he said.
School buses get video guard

New Canaan school buses now come equipped with surveillance cameras, not for the students inside, but for the traffic outside.

The digital exterior cameras make it easier for drivers to report motorists who pass a bus picking up or discharging students, despite its blinking lights and extended stop sign, district transportation director Roy Walder said in a local news report.

Because the cameras record digitally, the driver can simply push a button to note a car rolling past. Previously the driver had to catch the license plate number and file a written report of the violation.

Now Walder can review the video and forward the pertinent copy to police for a follow up investigation if deemed necessary.

In the first two weeks after the cameras went into operation last year, there were 12 reportable incidents compared to two in the previous six months.

The district made the cameras a requirement when it put out a bid for new buses. To install them separately on the existing fleet would have been too expensive.

Walder said he expects the cameras to become standard equipment as other communities replace their fleets. The fine for passing a stopped bus can be $460.

Salem expands remote meeting options

Salem’s experiment with opening town meetings to residents who can’t make it to town hall has gone global.

During a test in February, a Salem man on a merchant vessel in the Indian Ocean was able to watch and participate in a Board of Selectmen’s meeting streamed over the internet.

The further reach represents an expansion of a move toward “virtual” town meetings promoted by former First Selectman Peter Sielman.

The system allows residents to watch a town meeting on their community TV channel and participate by sending email messages over the internet.

The goal was to expand the number of people participating in town government. But the first approach was limited by the number of cable subscribers in town. According to a New London Day report, only 60 percent had cable.

So town leaders worked with the help of Selectman Robyn McKenney and a high school computer whiz, William Spang, to stream the meetings over an internet video service called Mogulus.

It was Spang’s father, James, a merchant marine, who reported connecting with the selectmen’s meeting on the far side of the world. He said the video came through clearly, but the audio was sometimes broken up.

Once the glitches are worked out, the system’s main value will be allowing residents away at college or in the armed services to participate in town government.

Police open lines to texted tips

Police departments in Connecticut’s five largest cities have a new crime fighting tool intended to tap into the explosive popularity of cell phone text messaging.

Called Text a Tip, it creates a new way for persons who have information about a crime to relay it to police without divulging their identity.

The hope is it will be particularly helpful in city neighborhoods where witnesses who come forward may fear retribution on the one hand or being ostracized as “snitches” on the other.

The State Police is spearheading the program, which assigns specific codes numbers to Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, Stamford and Waterbury.

Police in those cities can receive a tip sent to a centralized computer system that conceals the texter’s identity, but still enables them to communicate.

According to a New York Times report, the system yielded 19 tips in the first few weeks after its launch. Police hope its use will grow as it is publicized through cards handed out in neighborhoods or notices posted in hospital emergency rooms.

Accessing the system is not as simple as dialing 911. To reach the central computer, the text tipster must punch in CRIMES (for 274637) on the cell phone keyboard, then enter the city code.
The Westport Public Library is connecting with patrons in a new digital way: creating a Facebook page for its long deceased founder, Morris K. Jesup.

The idea emerged from conversations about ways to enhance the library’s web presence between Peter Propp, a library supporter with a marketing background, and Library Director Maxine Bleiweis.

Propp suggested creating an online character to embody the spirit of the library, and the candidate settled on was Jesup.

Jesup was a banker and important supporter of the American Museum of Natural History who in 1908 donated the land and funding for the original Westport Library building. It since has relocated to a much larger building nearby, on a green also named after Jesup.

In one of his first Facebook postings, Jesup commented on the wisdom of his investment, noting how the library has grown and changed in the last 100 years beyond a place to borrow books. He remarked on the cafe in the lobby and talkative children rushing to story hours.

The postings, of course, are ghost written by staff in Jesup’s name. His Facebook page went up in May. By the beginning of August he had 175 friends.

The online capacity also allows local residents to catch up on town meetings they missed.

The Courant reported that other towns that share the Comcast cable service with Simsbury are making plans to offer web programming. They include West Hartford, Windsor and Bloomfield.

Simsbury Community Television, or SCTV, received a $55,000 grant from Ensign-Bickford Industries to support an on-going modernization project that includes live video as a key component. The videos can be seen at www.simsburytv.org.

Simsbury’s community television station has joined its much bigger commercial brethren by making its programming available for viewing online.

Station manager Karen Handville told the Hartford Courant she believes the town’s was the first in the area, and perhaps the state, to link its programs to a website.

The innovation, which began in March, is particularly significant because it means people who live outside Simsbury can watch programs of regional importance, such as debates between legislative candidates. Simsbury shares the 8th Senatorial district with 10 other towns.

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The state Department of Public Utilities Control has sided with Bridgeport, Stamford and Danbury in their fight to gain control over so-called VRAD boxes that AT&T has been mounting on telephone poles around the state.

Ruling in a case that began in 2007, the DPUC issued a draft decision ordering AT&T to do a better job of notifying nearby property owners — including municipalities — about the placement of the boxes and gaining their consent.

The decision requires AT&T to form a working group to resolve disputes over the boxes with municipalities and also creates the possibility AT&T might be required to relocate some boxes.

At least 1,850 VRADs, short for video relay access device, had been installed in 67 communities as of early last year. They transmit signals for AT&T’s new U-Verse system that integrates telephone, internet and video services.

The trouble is the metal boxes, or cabinets, can be the size of a small refrigerator and weigh 1,000 pounds. Mounted low on telephone poles, they can pose a hazard, the cities believe.

In March 2007, about a year after AT&T began putting up the boxes, Bridgeport, Stamford and Danbury sent a joint letter to DPUC requesting an emergency hearing regarding the siting of the boxes and safety concerns.

Subsequently, Atty. Gen. Richard Blumenthal’s office has joined the cities’ side, as has the Office of Consumer Counsel.

In a brief filed in late June, the attorney general’s office cited testimony about the boxes’ potential hazard from public works administrators in all three of the original complaining cities.

They said the boxes can obstruct the vision of motorists and their protrusion onto sidewalks poses a risk to unwary pedestrians and bicyclists. By making passage difficult they may also violate the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In addition, the brief presented evidence from other states that some VRAD boxes had caught fire and that a certain type of battery used in some boxes had exploded.

DPUC in its draft decision dated Sept. 29 also ordered AT&T to report safety issues associated with VRAD boxes in Connecticut or any other state.

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The icon linking to Jesup can be found on the library homepage at www.westportlibrary.org.
Greenwich trains camera on traffic flow

The cameras Greenwich has been mounting at some of its busiest intersections are for surveillance, but not the criminal kind.

Rather, the new cameras are replacements for the traditional wire-sensing systems, concealed under the pavement, that monitor traffic flow and control signal lights.

The old “loop detectors” are more prone to damage and tougher to recalibrate than the cameras, town traffic engineer Garo Garabedian said in a Greenwich Time report.

“With a camera you can just go in there and program it,” he said. “It’s more productive. It’s more efficient.”

Minibus fills gap in Guilford

A new minibus bought with a state grant will bring a measure of needed public transportation to Guilford.

The bus, able to carry 12 passengers and two wheelchairs, will be put into service for the Guilford Housing Authority.

It should improve the quality of residents’ lives by giving them greater freedom of movement. Unlike some public ride services, the Guilford bus will take residents to social engagements, not just to medical appointments or grocery stores.

Even residents who own cars have found themselves immobilized because they can’t afford the money for gas, Authority Director Betsy Sterzel said in a local news report.

State Sen. Ed Meyer, who helped secure the $55,000 grant for the bus, said it is especially needed because of the “major vacuum” in public transportation along the shoreline.

The bus is a 2008 Ford model that is being purchased for $47,300 through a state-sponsored program that allows significant manufacturer discounts.

The balance of the grant will be used to pay for drivers and insurance.

No coin? No problem with meter debit card

The West Hartford Parking Authority has begun issuing debit cards that free motorists from scrounging for coins to feed town meters.

The empty cards, called Parcxmart, cost $1 each and function like a MetroCard. Using cash or their regular credit or debit cards, motorists can fill them in amounts up to $500. The minimum purchase is $10.

Parking operations manager John Phillips said in a Hartford Courant report that the cards eventually will be adopted for town lots and garages. Initially, the cards were good for all 450 street parking meters.

Both systems register vehicular movement, but the cameras can see a long line of cars backed up in a left turn lane, for example, and cause the traffic light to stay green longer.

The town had installed cameras at nine locations as of early fall and had plans to add up to 10 more.

They became so common, town officials had to reassure residents concerns about privacy that the cameras would not be used for law enforcement purposes, such as catching drivers who run red lights.

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Bridgeport and New Haven also use Parcxmart cards, according to the Courant. In West Hartford, some businesses have agreed to both sell the cards and accept them as payment for purchases.
Commuter rail en route to I-91 corridor

Plans to bring true commuter rail service to the New Haven – Springfield corridor picked up steam as summer ended when Gov. M. Jodi Rell and Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick filed a joint application for nearly $1 billion in federal money.

If their quest is succeeds, existing rail depots in Wallingford, Meriden, Berlin, Windsor and Windsor Locks will be rebuilt and new stations constructed in North Haven, Newington and Enfield.

The plan is not just theoretical. “It is the most important initiative we have. We are going to bring it to the finish line,” state Transportation Commissioner Joseph Marie vowed in a Hartford Courant report.

The current estimate is that the improvements needed for the commuter line would take five years to complete and cost $880 million, with annual subsidies needed once trains start running.

But the DOT sees the I-91 line as being almost as busy as the Metro-North line between New Haven and Manhattan that carries about 58,000 riders on weekdays.

It would start with 16 trains a day going in each direction, running every 30 minutes during morning and afternoon rush hours.

Currently, six or seven Amtrak trains make weekday runs along the I-91 corridor, but they mostly carry long haul passengers and the times are not convenient to commuters. The trip can also take an hour, longer than an ordinary car commute.

The money being sought is from $8 billion the federal government has allotted for building high speed rail systems nationwide. In congested, compact areas like the Northeast, they could replace short-hop airline routes.

Commuters wouldn’t ride the high speed trains. But according to the Courant report, their slower trains would share the infrastructure built for the high speed system.

The work required includes restoring a second track between New Haven and Springfield, installing a new signal system, rebuilding grade crossings and the rusting viaduct into Hartford’s Union Station.

“We have long been committed to increasing service to and from New London,” she said. “We still have some negotiating to do with Amtrak and the Connecticut Marine Trades Association so that we can coordinate the operation of the three movable rail bridges that accommodate rail and marine traffic. However, I know the DOT and our Department of Environmental Protection are working with the interested parties and we hope to reach a deal soon so service can commence in December of this year.”

Shore Line East (SLE) would also get a boost under the plan. Currently it has stations in Branford, Guilford, Madison, Clinton, Westbrook, Old Saybrook and New London. Currently, there is one evening New London round-trip SLE train. (There are also Amtrak trains in and out of New London each day). The plan envisions two or three additional New London trains each weekday morning and three additional trains each weekday evening by the end of 2009. Additional weekend service is also anticipated.

“Governor Rell has kept this effort moving forward and I am pleased that all parties have reached this point,” DOT Commissioner Joseph F. Marie said. “Commuters in Southeastern Connecticut have requested expanded service, and we listened. We will continue to work with all interested stakeholders to get this service in place by the end of 2009 and bring even greater service frequency to New London in the future.”
TRANSPORTATION

New Haven teaches “Street Smarts”

The city of New Haven has moved to the forefront of a roadway safety movement that began with community groups with a public education campaign it is calling “Street Smarts.”

The campaign is aimed at the three groups that share space on city streets: pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers.

Its goal, according to a New Haven Register report, is to develop a professional quality safety curriculum that delivers a consistent message, as well as to unify local groups already campaigning for safer roads.

Many belong to a Safe Streets Coalition, which became active after two pedestrians, a fifth grader and a Yale medical student, were killed in accidents earlier this year.

More than 100 organizations have endorsed its goal of promoting “livable, walk-able and economically viable streets” in the city.

Despite the deaths, New Haven already is a leader in that regard. Surveys have shown about 14 percent of residents walk to work, more than in any other New England city. Another 31 percent bike, carpool or take public transportation.

The police department under new Chief James Lewis is doing its part by making traffic enforcement a priority. After Lewis took over in July, police began issuing about 35 percent more traffic tickets than they had in the same period the year before.

Old Saybrook registers golf carts

Responding to a change in state law, Old Saybrook has adopted a procedure for registering golf carts so that they can be driven on public roads.

The fee is $25 for an owner’s first cart, $20 for the second and $15 for a third. That a household might have two or three carts is not so surprising in Old Saybrook, a shoreline town where they are the preferred summer vehicle of beach cottage owners.

Old Saybrook had permitted golf cart use, with restrictions, until a year ago when the state banned them from public roads, according to a New Haven Register report.

In response, the General Assembly passed legislation that allows towns to decide whether or not to permit the carts on local roads. The legislation limits their speed to 25 miles per hour, bans their use at night and requires the operator to have a regular driver’s license.

Old Saybrook Deputy Police Chief Michael Spera estimated there are about 500 carts in town. To go on roads, the carts must be re-registered annually.

Other shoreline towns, such as Clinton and East Lyme, were considering adopting their own golf cart policies, according to newspaper reports.
Smart Cars join Stratford fleet

Many municipalities are adding hybrid vehicles such as the Toyota Prius and Ford Escape to their fleets in pursuit of fuel economy, but Stratford appears to be the first to adopt the extra-small Smart Car.

It has leased five of the cars for use by the assessor’s office, the health department and the engineering department.

They are powered by conventional internal combustion engines, but they can get over 40 miles per gallon because of their small size – they are slightly over eight feet long. They are replacing older, heavier vehicles that got lower mileage and were beginning to need costly repairs.

Town officials said they believe Stratford is the first municipality in the nation to adopt the Smart Car and the acquisition was considered such a novelty that they staged a special event to introduce them.

Mayor James Miron drove one up to the entrance of town hall and said the car was so small he could have driven it inside -- if not for the front steps.

Smart Cars have been popular in Europe for years, as much for their ability to squeeze into tight parking spaces as their fuel economy. But they were not available here until early 2008.

According to a Connecticut Post report, the town is paying $76,325 to lease all five of the cars for five years, and has the option to buy them for $1 at the end of the lease.

On-call service enlarges dial-a-ride

Senior citizens in 10 northern Connecticut towns who have relied in the past on dial-a-ride transportation now can travel further than ever because of an agreement with a new private car service.

The service charges $4 for a pick-up and $1 per mile thereafter. There is also an annual membership fee of $40 for a single person and $60 for a couple.

Offered by the Independent Transport Network of North Central Connecticut, it has the advantage of being available on call and willing to take seniors on trips outside town limits.

“It goes beyond what towns can offer with dial-a-ride,” Enfield senior center director Susan Lather said in a Hartford Courant report.

One specific benefit of the service’s wider operating range is that it will enable seniors to reach major medical centers in Hartford and Springfield, Mass.

The service also allows seniors who want to make several stops on a single trip the option of reserving a car for $12.50 an hour with no mileage fee charged.

The service, which is affiliated with a national ride program that originated in Maine, has a website, www.itnnorthcentralct.org.

The 10 Connecticut towns using it are Enfield, Windsor, East Windsor, South Windsor, Windsor Locks, Granby, East Granby, Bloomfield, Somers and Suffield.
Muralists give alley a makeover

What once was a pock-marked alleyway in downtown Manchester now looks more like a storybook streetscape because of work coordinated by the Manchester Art Association.

Three of its artists painted a wall-sized mural in the alley, making it appear to be bordered by a wrought-iron fence and shrubbery evocative of a street from another time and place.

The alley had been exposed as the result of construction of a condominium complex that connects with the downtown Cheney Block building.

Christiane O’Brien, vice president of the Art Association, said the volunteer artists used materials salvaged from previous projects to create their trompe l’œil (trick of the eye) mural with no budget.

Prior to starting the actual piece itself, they researched downtown’s architectural history and photographed Main Street so they could capture elements in the mural.

The mural itself was painted on plywood and assembled piece by piece.

The Downtown Special Services District, which is responsible for 134 properties, also was involved in the project, helping to coordinate the work with the condominium owners, according to a Journal Inquirer report.

Mentors connect with e-mail

Programs that link business and professional people with public school students don’t require face-to-face contact anymore.

In Bridgeport and Stamford, mentors and pen pal volunteers are staying in touch with their young correspondents by e-mail.

The Bridgeport program, called Wi-mentor, began small in 2007-2008, then grew to more than 100 matches last year.

Most of the students are in high school and the mentors come from such institutions as St. Vincent’s Medical Center and the Pitney-Bowes company, according to a Bridgeport News report.

The program is coordinated by the local United Way and is affiliated with a national program, iMentor Interactive.

In Stamford, volunteers from GE Capital’s retail finance division used a service called Epals to counsel nearly 200 fourth and fifth graders at the K.T. Murphy Elementary School. It allows teachers to review the exchanges between mentors and students.

At the end of the school year, the volunteers and the students got together to replant a garden at the Cove Island playground, according to a Stamford Advocate report.

FEMA grant pays volunteers’ tuition

The Old Saybrook fire department is trying a new tactic to attract new recruits and retain volunteers: offering $60,000 to subsidize their educations.

The money represents the bulk of an $82,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency grant and can be tapped for reimbursement of either college or trade school classes.

According to a New London Day report, the rationale behind the tuition subsidy is that it may compensate for a scarcity of affordable housing. Going to school may eventually lead volunteer firefighters into higher paying jobs, which in turn will allow them to continue to reside in town.

The money will be allotted in $15,000 increments over four years for firefighters who successfully apply for tuition reimbursement. Usually, reimbursement is paid only after a course is completed.

The remaining of the FEMA grant will be used to produce a 30-second recruitment commercial that will be shared by the 13 departments in the Valley Shore Mutual Aid Association.

The commercial will guide them to an informational website, www.joinyourfd.com.

The other departmental members are Chester, Clinton, Deep River, Durham, Essex, Guilford, Haddam, Killingworth, Madison, North Madison, Old Lyme and Westbrook.
VOLUNTEERS

Police reach new heights as fund raisers

The 26-member Woodbridge police department gave some extra lift to the fund raising they did this year for the Special Olympics.

They positioned a motorized hoist at the intersection of Amity Road and Lucy Street, where an officer was raised above traffic to “heighten” awareness for the Olympics. Meanwhile in the street below, other volunteers collected donations.

Police Chief Eugene Marcucci credited Sgt. James Sullivan, a union vice president, with coming up with the new wrinkle, according to a New Haven Register report.

The department has long supported the Olympics as have other departments, but this was the first year it employed a “Cop-on-Top” theme.

Debbie Horne, director of development for the Southwest Region Chapter of the Connecticut Special Olympics, said “Cop-on-Top” is relatively new to the state.

The Woodbridge police had a $1,000 goal, but the “hoist” technique brought in more than three times that amount, $3,273, according to Sgt. Brian McCarthy.

Huggable moose ride with police

Children traumatized by witnessing domestic arguments may find some comfort in stuffed toy animals a fraternal organization has donated to police departments in Bridgeport, Fairfield and Stratford. The animals – huggable moose – will be carried in cruisers so they will be available for officers to hand out on emergency calls where they encounter distressed children.

The animals were donated by the Loyal Order of Moose, one of the nation’s older fraternal organizations. Founded in 1888, it has a family focus and a chapter in Stratford.

Sgt. James Perez of the Fairfield department said police will try to draw a child away from a traumatic scene, offering them a toy.

Altogether, the Moose delivered more than a hundred of their stuffed mascots to the three departments.

Rewarding seniors who volunteer

Danbury has found a new way to extend tax relief to its senior citizens.

It will give a property tax credit of up to $600 to those who devote 100 hours of volunteer service to local organizations.

Danbury is believed to be the first municipality in the state to introduce the program, called Seniors Add Valuable Experience (SAVE), according to a News-Times report.

Mayor Mark Boughton said the program has the dual benefits of allowing the city “to cash in on the talent of seniors and at the same time give them a property tax credit.”

The Volunteer Center serving Western Connecticut will administer the program. To be eligible, a senior must be at least 65 and have an income of no more than $52,500 if single, or $59,200 if married.

The kinds of work seniors are expected to do include acting as translators, helping out as library assistants and volunteering in parks.

In the first year, the number of slots will be limited to about 90.
“Pedals for Progress” arrives at Wilton High

The Spanish Honor Society at Wilton High School this year sponsored a bike collection to benefit Pedals for Progress, a non-profit organization that reconditions the bikes and distributes them internationally.

Society adviser Ana Zobler said junior Jessica Co-Reyes spearheaded the drive that has dual benefits.

First it recycles the bikes, preventing them from ending up in a landfill. Second, the cycles provide a reliable form of transportation for the poor in developing countries.


For the collection drive, any bike may be donated as long as it is rust free. A $10 donation is also required to cover shipping costs. But the donation and the value of the bike is tax deductible.

Co-Reyes said in a Norwalk Hour report that the group hopes to repeat the collection drive next year.

This year’s drive on June 7 yielded 64 bikes, according to the Pedals for Progress website.

Teens take wheel of safe driving program

Bristol’s two high schools are the first in New England to host a teen-age safe driving program promoted by a research institute at Texas A&M University.

Called “Teens in the Driver Seat,” it relies on peer group dynamics to teach young drivers about the hazards they may create for themselves or underestimate.

Driving while impaired from drugs or alcohol is an obvious one. But so are chatting with passengers and, more recently, text messaging on cell phones.

Student leaders of the program will recruit a circle of friends to work with, who in turn will widen the circle to their friends.

Among their ideas, according to a Hartford Courant report, is distributing candy to drivers as they leave the student parking lot at the end of the day. Those wearing seat belts will get Lifesavers. Those who aren’t buckled up or are gunning their engines would get Dum Dums.

The program model comes from the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M and is supported by funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Connecticut was eligible for the program because it averages about 50 fatal accidents a year involving teen drivers.

The program website is www.t-driver.com.
School survey measures students drawn to risk

A consultant’s study of school aged youth commissioned by the Manchester Board of Education did more than identify the problems they face and the support services they might need. The study, covering 671 students in grades six through 12, produced data that identified groups most likely to be drawn to high risk behavior, such as drug use, and most likely to benefit from intervention.

The data was drawn from 40-point questionnaires designed to gauge the students’ perceptions about whether they possessed “external assets,” such as feeling safe at home or at school, and “internal assets,” such feelings of self-worth.

In reporting the survey results to the board, the consultant Richard Goll, explained that national data from this type of developmental asset survey shows students who report having the fewest assets also tend to engage in more high risk behavior.

Over the past 16 years, asset data has been gathered from some 2 million youths around the country. It also shows that students report fewer assets as they age.

According to a Journal Inquirer report, Goll recommended that the town focus on the large group of students – about 75 percent of survey takers - who reported having between 11 and 30 assets.

He warned though against reading the data too literally and comparing the local results with national averages. Rather, he said the town should decide for itself which action is most important.

His survey, required in a year-long contract, was done as part of the town Children, Youth and Families Master Plan project.

Seven different committees, whose membership includes high school students, were to analyze the data and make recommendations for needed action. Their reports are due in late spring or early summer.

Teens take finance 101

Hilda DeLucia, director of the Bethel teen center, recognizes that teens need to know more about managing their finances than just how to balance a check book.

So DeLucia had the center sponsor a five session money management class for teens offered through the National Endowment for Financial Education.

The class covered covering the pitfalls of credit card debt, good budgeting, investing practices, ways to keep money safe and even about insurance.

According to the endowment’s website, www.nefe.org, its free high school curriculum has reached more than 5 million students. A private, non-profit foundation, it has partnerships with state extension services and credit union associations.

In Bethel, about a dozen high school students attended the class, meeting one night a week at a local mortgage company’s office.

During the lesson on “Good Debt, Bad Debt: Using Credit Wisely,” students were taught that mailing a payment to a credit card company before the due date won’t necessarily prevent a late charge. The check has to be received by the due date, not just dated.

To be safe, students were advised to mail the check 10 days before the due date.

“I thought it would be helpful for kids to get an understanding of basic financial practices,” DeLucia said in a newspaper report. “If I had learned this at 14 or 15, my financial future might be different.”

Greenwich tries texting to reach teens

The Greenwich Health Department joined a national campaign in April to warn teens about sexually transmitted diseases by exploiting their mania for sending text messages to one another.

In fact, according to a Stamford Advocate report, the entire campaign was promoted in alphabetical shorthand. It was called itself GYT09 (get yourself tested) for STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

Also, the MTV music channel, a campaign partner, offered teens sweepstakes tickets to its 2009 movie awards if they sent text messages asking for information about local testing for STDs.

The Greenwich Health Department promoted the campaign by holding a health fair at Greenwich High School. It let teens know they can get free, confidential testing on a walk-in basis two afternoons a week at Town Hall.

Health Director Caroline Calderone-Baisley said the idea behind the GYT campaign was to raise awareness about STDs and to make the choice to get tested empowering.

STD infections are more common than most people think. According to the Centers for Disease Control, another campaign partner, one in four teenage girls has at least one STD, such as chlamydia, which can lead to infertility, or HPV, the human papilloma virus associated with cervical cancer.

More information about the campaign is available at www.gyt09.org.
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The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) is Connecticut’s statewide association of towns and cities. CCM represents municipalities at the General Assembly, before the state executive branch and regulatory agencies, and in the courts. CCM provides member towns and cities with a wide array of other services, including management assistance, individualized inquiry service, assistance in municipal labor relations, technical assistance and training, policy development, research and analysis, publications, information programs, and service programs such as workers’ compensation and liability-automobile-property insurance, risk management, and energy cost-containment. Federal representation is provided by CCM in conjunction with the National League of Cities. CCM was founded in 1966.

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