April 2011

Dear CCM Member,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town & City Compendium – our 24th 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 & City, the bi-monthly newsletter-magazine of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM).

Connecticut Town & 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.

For further information on any article, contact Kevin Maloney at (203) 498-3000; or email kmaloney@ccm-ct.org.

Good Reading!

Sincerely,

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

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC AMENITIES</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td>4-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>8-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNANCE</td>
<td>14-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEALTH</td>
<td>18-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOUSING</td>
<td>21-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION</td>
<td>23-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC SAFETY</td>
<td>25-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC WORKS</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL &amp; INTERMUNICIPAL COOPERATION</td>
<td>32-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENIOR CITIZENS</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNOLOGY</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSPORTATION</td>
<td>37-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLUNTEERS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUTH</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORDER FORM</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CIVIC AMENITIES

Hartford mayor sees park maintenance as key

As one of his first acts, Hartford Mayor Pedro Segarra ordered a late summer spring cleaning for the city’s signature parks.

The initiative, dubbed Parks Week was introduced during the annual Dragon Boat Festival conducted by the Riverfront Recap- ture and culminated with a community volunteer clean-up day on Aug. 28.

In between, some 30 part-time workers Segarra found the funds to hire repaired fences, benches, and tennis and basketball courts, pruned shrubs, raked leaves, and carted away fallen trees limbs.

The clean-up targeted the city’s largest parks, Keney, Colt and Goodwin, as well as its downtown center piece, Bushnell.

Prompted by personal observations and comments made in a survey done for the city’s plan of conservation and development, Segarra decided the parks needed a week of TLC almost as soon as he was sworn in as mayor.

The clean-up was to be extended to city-owned cemeteries, such as Old North Cemetery, that Segarra regards as historical assets too important to neglect.

Parks Week was not confined to outdoor house-keeping. Ancillary activities included health screenings, recreational events, and extension of the summer pool season.

Simsbury lauded for devotion to heritage

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has made Simsbury the first Connecticut town to win designation as one of its “Dozen Distinctive Destinations.”

The honor is bestowed annually on communities around the country and recognizes their commitment to protecting their recreational and historical assets.

In Simsbury’s case, factors in its selection included its preserved downtown, its network of hiking and biking trails, fly fishing and kayaking opportunities on the Farmington River and top rated restaurants.

The campaign to win the Destination award was led by the town’s Main Street Partnership and supported by both local officials and the state’s congressional delegation.

On the National Trust website, www.preservationnation.org, people are invited to vote for the top destination. Simsbury created a video to show locally encouraging residents to vote for their town.

Ultimately the top 2010 vote getter was Marquette, Mich. Other New England towns named to the top dozen were Rockland, Maine and Provincetown, Mass.

Libraries expand after-hours service

Libraries in Manchester and Litchfield have added to the technology that allows them to stay open even when closed.

In Manchester, patrons can now subscribe to a DearReader service that automatically sends them a daily email containing an excerpt from a book that might appeal to them.

At the end of the week, the patron might have read enough to decide to check the book out of the library, or buy it. Then the process repeats with another book suggested by the patron’s declared reading preferences, such as historical fiction or mystery.

The idea, said Barbara Pettijohn, head of adult services at the Mary Cheney Library, is to introduce people to books they might not crack open and to enhance the library’s electronic reach.

At Litchfield’s Oliver Wolcott Library, patrons no longer have to go inside to borrow an actual book or DVD.

Instead they can make a selection from a lending machine that functions much like the Red Boxes for movie rentals that have proliferated at supermarkets and convenience stores.

The difference is that Litchfield’s OWL Box (for Oliver Wolcott Library) is free and activated by a valid library card. The choices available likely will be titles, whether book, audio book, or movie, in the highest demand.

Library Director Ann Marie White said the lending box will be especially useful to busy families who cannot get to the library during regular hours.

The box was purchased and will be maintained with $35,000 in grants received from the Praxair and Scherr-Thoss foundations.

The Praxair Foundation also recently gave a $30,000 grant to the Torrington Library to upgrade its online options. New features will be a Spanish language interface for its catalog and an RSS feed to notify patrons of new material.

Cemetery tour enlivens history

The guided tours New Britain recently organized at Fairview Cemetery re-introduced residents to historic figures buried there, such as the founder of the Stanley tool company, and raised funds for the restoration of the cemetery chapel.

Called “Timeless Tales of Fairview Cemetery,” it was patterned after similar programs that have proved popular in Philadelphia and Newport, R.I., according to a Hartford Courant report.

The tours in New Britain lasted 45 minutes and were limited to groups of 15, who paid $5 per person for reserved tickets.

On their way through the cemetery, they stopped at gravesites of the famous dead and heard their stories told by re-enactors.

The part of Frederick T. Stanley, the tool company founder, was played for instance by former Mayor William McNamara. Other “ghosts” making appearances included a Civil War soldier and a bank president who survived the sinking of the Titanic.

The Parks and Recreation department, the city veterans and cemetery commissions jointly planned the event, with research help from a Central Connecticut State University faculty member.

Connecticut Conference of Municipalities

Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments
Rescue mission targets old barns

Which Connecticut towns have the most old barns still standing?

First is Mansfield with 206, followed by Guilford with 154 and Newtown with 142.

Those numbers were compiled as part of a search and rescue project coordinated by the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.

It sends trains volunteers then sends them into the fields to document older barns by function type and construction style. The data they collect then becomes part of a statewide database that will help identify barns most worth saving.

The survey began last summer in the towns of Ashford, Chaplin, Eastford, Stafford, Union and Willington and will take several years to complete.

Meanwhile, towns continue to take their own steps to preserve their farming heritage.

Killingworth, for instance, recently completed a master plan to turn the 133-acre Parmalee Farm it bought in 2001 as its first major investment in open space into a cultural center.

One barn on the farm was in such poor condition it was condemned, but the $600,000 plan calls for restoration two barns still standing, one a post-and-beam structure and the other a half stone, half timber.

Some activities such as stone wall building and maple sugaring workshops already are being hosted at the farm. First Selectman Catherine lino said in a New Haven Register report the farm renovation was imagined as an “organically created community center.”

In North Branford, the town is using a $30,000 state farm viability grant to replace the roof on a dairy barn on a 100-acre farm it acquired in 2002.

Some milking equipment remains in the barn and the town hopes it can be preserved as working museum. The town will match the state grant.

The grant was pursued by the town’s Agricultural Commission, which also has worked with the Board of Education to build a greenhouse and start an agriculture program at the high school.

Library renews model jobs program

A Fairfield Public Library employment counseling program that succeeded almost too well has won an excellence in public service award from the Connecticut Library Association.

Called “Jobs 2009: A Special Series,” it attracted an average of 50 to 60 people a week, some from quite distant towns, when it began in January 2009.

Scheduled to run for 10 weeks only, it was repeated after a summer break and now is being renewed for 2010.

The program was planned by reference librarian Judy Sparzo and was nominated for the service award by First Selectman Kenneth Flatto.

During its first year, the program reached more than 2,000 people through 38 speaker programs and 70 group network meetings. It also generated 2,200 request for program podcasts.
Manchester plants memorial trees, starts college

The town of Manchester is offering its residents a way to mark significant family events that is also good for the local environment. For $250, residents can buy a tree that the town will then plant to memorialize an event, such as a birth, anniversary or graduation.

The service is arranged so that the $250 can be raised through as many as 10 individual donations, with $25 set as a minimum.

The tree warden selects the location and species of tree to be planted, and because of maintenance concerns, no plaques or other signage is placed on or near the trees.

But the town sends acknowledgement cards to donors once a tree is planted, giving the location and species. It also posts a public notice of the donation.

The tree planting program is coordinated by the town parks division and customer service center. The request form is on the town website.

The town is reaching out to families in another way by offering a financial education course through its new Neighborhood College.

The college itself was one of the recommendations included in a recently completed Children, Youth and Family Master Plan. Intended as an umbrella for various citizen education programs, the full college program will begin in the fall.

The first course, Financial Education 101, was to be conducted on Tuesday evenings, from early February to mid-April.

Dog parks are breeding fast

The summer of 2010 produced what seems to be an extra large litter of municipal dog parks.

New spaces for the unleashed either opened or were in advanced planning stages in a dozen towns and cities, including Stamford, Shelton, and New Milford in the western part of the state.

The central part of the state appears to have really gone to the dogs, with parks in Bristol, Enfield, Glastonbury, Manchester, Rocky Hill, Cromwell, Windsor, West Hartford, and Colchester.

The parks generally have the same pedigree: a citizen’s group organizes to raise funds for a park, and then negotiates with the town for a site.

Enfield’s recently approved park, for instance, will be built on land next to the transfer station. Like many parks, it will have separate areas for large and small dogs.

The Colchester park that opened in July with a ribbon cutting ceremony presided over by First Selectman Gregg Schuster was built on land that was once a town dump.

The town also allowed a “Dog Walk” fundraiser to be held at its recreational complex.

In Rocky Hill, the town even permitted one fund raising event to be held at a swimming pool. Dog owners paid $7 to let their pets take an after-hours dip.

In West Hartford, the Dog Park Coalition enlisted some 300 members. It collaborated with the town in choosing a proposed site: inside a park near the town center.
Alcohol screening passes test

Milford school officials like the results of a policy adopted two years ago that permitted them to use a Breathalyzer to test students for alcohol consumption.

Since testing was started in the fall of 2008, only one person has showed up at a school dance under the influence, and he was a 22-year-old college student, officials said in a New Haven Register report.

During the school day itself, a total of nine students had tested positive for alcohol at either Foran or Law high schools.

Law Principal Janet Garagliano said students had surprised school authorities by actually welcoming the testing at dances.

“They know they will be safe,” she said. “It totally changes the tone of events.”

The policy does not call testing at athletic events.

Alcohol testing also is being introduced in the Lyme-Old Lyme school district.

The policy permits testing during the school day or at school sponsored events if there is a reasonable suspicion the student has consumed alcohol.

The policy calls for two types instruments to be used. One is the Breathalyzer that can measure the alcohol content on someone’s breath. The other less familiar instrument is a passive alcohol sensor, or PAS, that gives a positive or negative reading.

A PAS can “sniff” ambient air for the presence of alcohol and does not need to be applied directly to an individual.

Boards post sex offender alerts

A new policy adopted by the Norwich Board of Education makes it easier for parents to learn about the presence of registered sex offenders.

It authorizes the school superintendent to post the name, address and photo of a convicted offender on the school’s website once notification is received from the state about the offender’s relocation.

Previously, the school website merely provided a link to the state Department of Public Safety website.

The new policy is in line with the recommendations of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education that school systems go a step beyond minimum notification requirements. As of last year, the state had to inform superintendents when a registered offender moved into their districts.

As of June, no new arrivals were listed on the Norwich website under the parent and guardian resources link.

Among other area towns, Waterford has a similar posting policy. A check of its website showed three names listed, each prefaced by a copy of the new state law, on the Department of Public Safety link under Family Info.

New Haven agrees on teacher ratings

The New Haven school administration and its teachers have reached agreement on a new evaluation system that is a key to the city’s nationally recognized attempt at sweeping educational reform.

Under the new system, teachers will be ranked on a scale of one to five in three different performance areas: how their students do on standardized tests, on their instructional skills and lesson planning, and on their professional values, such as collegiality and expectations for student learning.

Teachers also will be assigned an instructional manager, have a goal setting conference at the start of the school year and have at least two development conferences during the year. The manager is likely to be a principal or assistant principal.

The philosophy underlying the reform effort is that it must be pursued jointly by the administration and teachers rather than being dictated from the top down.

Thus, the committee that recommended the new evaluation system included six teacher and six administrators. It is to take effect in September.

Similar evaluation systems are being devised for administrators and central office staff.

Another condition of the teacher review system provides that outside peer counselors can be used to assure that the evaluation was done fairly. The system also spells out actions to be taken for teachers who receive low ratings.

Details are available under the documents section of the New Haven School Change Campaign section of the school system website.
New school lures with music, Chinese and longer day

A new East Hartford school for grades four to six designed to compete with regional magnet schools will require every student to study either Chinese or Spanish, and also to play a musical instrument.

In addition, the school day will run an hour longer than at other local schools, ending at 4 p.m.

The rigorous requirements, though, appear to be attractive to parents. As of June, the school had signed up more than 360 students.

The school to be known as the Academy for Fine and Performing Arts and World Languages will operate in the Sunset Ridge facility that previously housed an academy for sixth graders only.

Part of the impetus for the new arts and language themed school was to retain better performing students who might be tempted to leave the district for magnet schools as they get older.

Now parents can choose between the arts and language academy and neighborhood elementary or middle schools, which also will have sixth grades.

The district’s supervisor for fine and performing arts, Emil Kopcha, was made principal of the new school. He expects academic and arts teachers will work together in some classes.

The school also expects to have collaborations with area arts institutions such as the Hartford Symphony and Hartford Stage Company.

Norwich school turns tables on texters

The Norwich Free Academy, which serves as the area’s public high school, employed a program this past summer that exploited students’ addiction to text-messaging.

Called “Learning Doesn’t Take a Vacation,” it delivered a text message each weekday on a different subject, mimicking a class schedule.

Monday’s message, for instance, conveyed a new vocabulary word; Tuesday was for science; Wednesday for math; Thursday for history; and Friday for cultural literacy.

The program was not compulsory, but some 300 students signed up to receive the messages and 40 more had parents who signed up for them.

James Landherr, the director of research and strategic planning who prepared the program, introduced it in May by noting that most teachers and principals are convinced cell phone use, including texting, has become the top distraction to education.

In addition to the brief text-messages, Landherr also sent longer weekly e-mails on topics such as the Great Lakes and the solar system.

Students who did not have computers at home to access email were urged to use their local libraries.

Besides Norwich, the privately endowed academy also takes public students from Bozrah, Canterbury, Franklin, Lisbon, Preston, Sprague, and Voluntown, as well as tuition students.

Norwich, Stamford reading programs bring students & parents together

At elementary schools in Norwich and Stamford educators are innovating with reading programs that put the accent on togetherness.

In Norwich, the Mohegan Elementary School started a “Raising Readers Parent and Student Club” that trained parents to read effectively to their children and nurture a mutual love for reading.

About half the 30 families who took part had children in the bilingual program for Chinese speakers, a consequence of the area’s workforce.

The weekly sessions ran from late January to early March and were judged successful enough to warrant repeating.

Topics covered included how stories can help children grow, literacy in the digital age, and services offered by libraries.

At four elementary schools in Stamford, classroom lessons were rearranged to emphasize what teachers called “active reading.”

Instead of reading silently to themselves, or listening to a teacher read, students read together in pairs or small groups, often taking turns to read aloud.

The technique is believed to promote fluency. Another goal was to achieve more consistency in the way reading is taught.

A 2008 study found more than 150 different language arts programs were being used in the city’s elementary schools. Children also often switched classrooms, depending on reading level.

The active reading approach was tried out with kindergarteners through second graders and was a first phase in a district-wide revamping of elementary literacy instruction.
The Greenwich Board of Education has adopted two new policies to ensure it knows what’s on the minds of students at Greenwich High.

First, the board created a permanent slot for a student representative to speak at its monthly meeting, just as it does for the teachers union and PTA council heads.

Second, it decided to send a board member and the school superintendent to meetings of the high school’s student government executive board. The executive board consists of class presidents, vice presidents, secretaries and treasurers. In the past, students could sign up to speak during the public comment period at school board meetings, but few ever did.

The school board rejected a proposal to add a student as a non-voting member, but said it might in the future.

The rising importance of China is being reflected in the expansion of Chinese language programs in Connecticut schools.

One of the most recent examples is in New Haven, where the district won a $1.3 million federal Foreign Language Assistant grant that mainly will be used to strengthen existing programs in Chinese language and culture.

The district plans to add level 3 courses at the three high schools and the four lower schools where Chinese is already taught and introduce classes in Chinese at two additional middle schools.

The grant also will support expansion of an Arabic language and culture program, already at two lower schools and two high schools, to a third high school and one more lower school.

By the fall of 2013, the district hopes to have eight full time teachers of Chinese and six of Arabic. Instruction in both languages began only in 2007.

New Haven partnered with Yale University and the state Department of Education to win the grant that runs over five years.

Chinese instruction also is being expanded to lower grades in Simsbury, where a new part time teacher was to be hired to complement a full time instructor already working at the high school.

The new teacher will be supported by a three year, $100,000 grant that the town qualified for as a member of the Confucius Classrooms Network, a program that seeks to promote ties between Asian nations and the U.S.

Simsbury is one of 20 original members of the network, each of which has a partnership with sister schools. Simsbury’s is in Jinan, China.

The network’s short term goal is to have 100 U.S. partners within the next three years.

At Hall High School in West Hartford, some 30 seniors are helping out in classrooms as teaching assistants.

The TA program, much more familiar at the college level, was inaugurated by math teacher and cross country coach Jeff Billing, who previously taught at Palo Alto High in California.

Billing said he had come to rely on TAs there and was encouraged to try a similar program at Hall by seniors on his running team.

The first three, since graduated, said they saw helping out in the classroom as a way to give back to the school and gain experience.

During the current school year, the program gained a name, the Senior Project Teacher Assistants Initiative, and expanded to 30 students.

They help out in subjects ranging from Chemistry to Chinese and acting to symphonic band. Most are former students of the teachers they partner with.

About a third of the TAs work in classes where a substantial number of students need extra help.

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Text features Berlin board as model

The Berlin Board of Education is one of 16 panels nationally profiled in a new book on model board practices published by Harvard Education Press.

Board President Gary Brochu, who was interviewed for the book, said the inclusion was “affirmation” of the work of fellow board members.

The book titled, “The Essential School Board Book: Better Governance in the Age of Accountability,” was written by Nancy Walser, a former member of the Cambridge, Ma., school board.

She examined 16 “high-functioning” school boards from across the country that in her judgment offered concrete examples of successful leadership. Among the others were boards in Boston, Norfolk, Va., and LaCrosse, Wis.

In the foreword, Prof. Richard Elmore wrote that the practices documented in the book “could form the basis for a reinvention of the role of local school boards in the new environment of public education.”

West Hartford sets “Facebook” standards

Student addiction to text messaging is not the only bane of social networking confronting school systems. There are also potentially embarrassing Facebook or Twitter postings by adults.

Now, the West Hartford Board of Education has adopted a standard for “public communications,” known as Policy 4080, for teachers and staff.

The policy carefully acknowledges First Amendment rights to speak on matters of public concern, but warns against “inappropriate content” and specifically identifies social media as a form of public communication.

The policy also labels as “unacceptable” any public communication that “interferes with the educational mission … breaks confidentiality obligations … or harms the goodwill and reputation” of the district.

While no punishment is specified, it is understood that some behaviors, such as public drunkenness, can result in dismissal.

The West Hartford Education Association, representing teachers, did not object to the policy since it preserves First Amendment rights and does not directly limit use of social media.

In Windsor, make-up class is digital

Windsor High school has inaugurated a program that allows students who fail a subject to take it again, without going back to the classroom.

The so-called Credit Recovery Program frees students from having to sit through an entire semester and instead work at their own pace on computer-based instructional programs.

The program at Windsor High uses software from PLATO learning for math, English, social studies and science that can be modified to mesh with the school’s own curriculum.

Windsor first tested an online program from a different vendor in summer school with about 40 students. This year it was expanded to include about 75 students.

In the long run, the online remedial lessons should boost the graduation rate by giving students more opportunities to make up lost credits.

Principal Russell Sills said about 8 percent of the school’s 1,373 students were a year or more behind in the credits needed to graduate.

Among other area schools, Hartford’s Bulkeley High also has a similar credit recovery program.
Neighbours leap into single-stream together

The city of Bristol and its smaller neighbour Plainville will share a $91,000 federal stimulus grant that allows them to buy the barrels they needed to embark on a joint single-stream recycling program.

The municipalities agreed to be partners last year, under the condition they could find the money for the approximately 1,700 of the larger type barrels required for single-stream recycling.

Now, a specially equipped truck Bristol already had purchased for its recycling program will also run into Plainville, making collection in each municipality every other week.

Plainville will reimburse Bristol for the cost of the service. But both are expected to benefit as the recycling rate rises. In Bristol, the rate for households that have already switched to single-stream has increased by as much as 80 percent.

The joint system does not require new workers or overtime. The partners have agreed to try it for at least five years, after which either can opt out.

Towns put damper on outdoor furnaces

At least 13 municipalities across the state have imposed bans on outdoor wood-burning furnaces in recent months.

Their action is prompted by concerns that the smoke from the furnaces poses a health hazard, or at least can be a nuisance to neighbors who do not particularly enjoy smoke drifting their way.

When West Hartford passed its ban in late July, it did so as a precaution since it had no record of anyone in town actually owning a furnace.

Hamden and North Haven followed suit in September, bringing the total number of towns with bans or proposed bans to 13.

They range from rural or semi-rural towns like Norfolk, Granby, Haddam, Hebron, and Tolland to more suburban towns like Cheshire, Portland, Ridgefield, South Windsor, and Woodbridge.

At the Hamden Planning and Zoning Commission meeting where the ban was passed, it got the support of the Quinnipiac Valley Health District and the American Lung Association as well as the Environment and Human Health Inc. advocacy group.

The furnaces are not stoves. They are boilers that heat water and can produce many times the smoke of a wood-burning stove.

They are regulated by the DEP, which considers them relatively safe, if they burn properly seasoned wood and are located at least 200 feet from a dwelling.

The DEP reports that it has received more than 1,100 complaints about the furnaces. It has a wood stove quick link in the air section of its website.

Cities showered with green job funds

Millions of federal dollars have been granted to Bridgeport and Hartford to grow green jobs labor force.

In Bridgeport, an estimated 700 individuals from the poorest neighborhoods will receive a basic introduction to the kinds of work available in core sectors of the so-called "green economy." Of those, some 500 will then get training for specific jobs in such fields as heating and air conditioning, landscaping, recycling, pollution remediation and waste water treatment.

As one of many partners in the program, the city pledged to convert a foreclosed home into a training site.

The money, $4 million, comes from the U.S. Labor Department’s Pathways Out of Poverty Initiative that is part of the federal stimulus program.

It complements Bridgeport’s own effort to use green technology and industry to revive the city economy.

A similar grant for $3.4 million went to Hartford to provide green job training for certain classes of people, including immigrants, racial minorities, veterans, at risk youth, the unemployed and those with criminal records.

It is estimated that 800 people will complete the training.

Hartford also is sharing in a second grant, totaling $4.7 million, for a green job training program that also will be conducted in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and two Michigan towns. It is being run by a New York based non-profit called STRIVE.
Colchester named first habitat community

Colchester has become the first municipality in Connecticut and the 36th in the nation to be designated a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

The honor, announced in February, recognizes the work of the town government, homeowners, businesses and non-profit groups to make Colchester more in harmony with the natural environment.

Residents for instance pledged to avoid using pesticides and fertilizers, planted gardens friendly to songbirds and learned to identify animal tracks.

Altogether, 110 Colchester residences, 14 parks and preserves, four schools, three businesses and a church were certified as “community habitats.”

While there are some 1,700 such habitats in Connecticut, Colchester is the first municipality to be so designated.

The Board of Selectmen supported the effort by a local habitat community group to win certification and the town parks and recreation department has pledged to carry on its work. The town website has a community habitat link.

In bestowing the certification, the Wildlife Federation noted the town’s many natural resources, including the Salmon River and Day Pond management area.

The National Wildlife Federation, with four million members, describes itself as nation’s largest conservation group and has the Connecticut Parks and Forest Association as an affiliate.

Darien library judged “most intriguing”

Darien’s new library has won a top design award from the Connecticut Green Building Council.

Among its winning features were the geothermal wells that both heat and cool the building and its location on the recovered brownfield site of a former gas station.

But the whole design approach also was praised, according to a Darien Times report. From the start it was planned under the premise that the initial construction costs should take a back seat to the building’s long term “lifecycle” costs.

The library took the top award in the institutional/public building category. The runner up was the Amistad Building at the Yale Medical Center.

The Connecticut Green Building Council is a chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council that promotes environmentally sound building standards.

The citation said the library was the first in New England to meet the LEED Gold standard. It noted the building blended traditional New England architecture with “excellent sustainable attributes” and that during construction 50 percent of waste was recycled.

According to an article in the Library Journal, the library trustees originally planned an expansion of the existing building. But when costs escalated, they chose to proceed with a new 54,000 sq. ft. standalone building that was to cost about $28 million, including land acquisition and remediation costs.

It was designed to last a century, with steel columns and concrete block walls, brick and aluminum-clad windows, and a slate roof.

Recycling reminders boost collection

Enfield and Windsor each have embraced clever public education campaigns to remind residents of the rules and rewards of recycling.

The Enfield campaign, begun in December in anticipation of a deluge of holiday trash, was built around the challenge, “Who do YOU recycle for?”

Fire Department personnel and Police Explorers went door-to-door distributing hanging cards that explained the benefits of recycling. At the same time, the campaign was promoted with signs attached to town vehicles.

The town public works department coordinated the campaign, according to a Hartford Courant report.

One of its aims was to let residents know that more kinds of waste can be recycled than they might think. Examples are paper towel rolls, wax containers and junk mail.

In Windsor, students from the Loomis Chaffee prep school conducted a survey and shot a video about recycling that were both posted on the town’s website.

Enita Jubrey, assistant to the town manager, said that the survey, which plumbed public awareness of recycling, drew 400 responses in a matter of days.

In one of the video segments, the students filmed town and school officials sorting through a bag full of trash as a public test to see if they knew what was recyclable and what was not.

A third awareness program was employed by two more rural towns – Salisbury and Sharon – which share a transfer station.

They select a “Recyclable of the Month” to remind residents what can be recycled and where to leave it at the transfer station.

In November, the recyclable was boxboard, the material used in cereal boxes and beer and soda cartons.
Hamden turns fine into savings

A $34,000 fine that Hamden owed the state Department of Environmental Protection instead is being used to pay for a school energy efficiency project.

The town was able to convert the fine into a benefit by taking advantage of a DEP rule that allows fines for minor violations to be put toward a “Supplemental Environmental Project.”

Such projects must be new, rather than ones already under way. In Hamden’s case, a consent agreement reached with DEP allowed the fine to be put towards a $100,000 energy upgrade at the Ridge Hill Elementary School that involved installing more efficient lighting, occupation sensors, and more sensitive system controls.

The fine itself stemmed from a finding that the town had failed to file required reports on storm water run-off at the transfer station and two public works garages.

Because such administrative oversights are considered less serious than willful misconduct, the associated fines are eligible for supplemental projects.

Mayor Scott Jackson said the consent order would not interfere with the town’s plan to hire a private company to operate the transfer station.

Land prices favor green deals

The recession-lowered real estate prices have made it a buyer’s market for municipalities interested in adding to their open space holdings.

One of the biggest deals was done in Guilford, where the town spent $11.4 million to buy 624 acres of tidal marshes and meadows that extend for about two miles along the East River.

The land was considered especially precious because it completes one of the largest projects in the state's coastal management program.

The state Department of Environmental Protection said it had been thrilled to work with Guilford on the deal. The DEP contributed $3 million to the purchase price, from a grant won from the federal National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The deal was one of several that found municipalities or land trusts were taking advantage of lower prices to snap up land that had previously been out of reach.

In Madison, for example, the Trust for Public Land spent $9.7 million to acquire a 42-acre site that at one time was destined to be a 127-unit housing development. Now it will be preserved as a buffer to the beaches of Hammonasset State Park.

In Salem, the $240,000 Land Trust purchase of a 63-acre saw mill site also went through after the owner was unable to find a private buyer at a higher price.

David Bingham, a Salem resident and vice chairman of the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters, said the deals were reminiscent of the Great Depression, when the state acquired much of its park land.

Other towns noted in the survey were Glastonbury, New Hartford, Suffield, Wethersfield and Windsor Locks either for approving bond issues or closing deals.

Town farm thriving in Woodbridge

A farm that is essentially a public enterprise appears to be yielding a bumper crop of edible produce and intangible benefits for the town of Woodbridge and its neighbors.

The 58-acre Massaro Farm, deeded to the town in 2008, is overseen by a non-profit board that hired a resident farmer to manage it and secured $350,000 in federal and state agricultural grants to improve it.

The farm sells most of its crops through the Community Supported Agriculture model, in which people buy shares at the start of the growing season. This year the farm sold out its shares, attracting 125 subscribers at $400 each. As a result, the program will be expanded next year.

Crops grown included lettuce, carrots, radishes, beets, and peas early in the season followed by tomatoes, broccoli, squash, peppers, and onions.

The farm sometimes relies on volunteers for labor and has collaborated on programs with the local garden club, Yale’s Peabody Museum, and the Connecticut Bee Keepers Association.

The grants have helped pay for renovations to the farm’s old dairy barn and for the resident farmer’s salary.

At a tri-town Earth Day celebration, that also involved Bethany and Orange, the farm was described as a “sustainable agricultural learning center,” demonstrating the benefits of both renewable energy and organic food.

The farm’s history and programs are described on its website, massarofarm.org.
Madison saves airport from development

Instead of a 127-unit housing development, Madison residents are likely to see sports fields, walking trails and a bird watching station occupy the site of the former Griswold Airport.

The site’s future was secured when voters approved spending $9 million to buy and maintain its 42 acres, keeping most of it as open space.

The Trust for Public Land also will contribute $1.7 million to the $9.5 million purchase price.

The airport property has nearly 500 feet of frontage on the Hammonasset River, and also shares a 400-acre tidal marsh with Hammonasset Beach State Park.

The marsh is considered precious as a spawning area for fish and a sanctuary for migrating birds, and also performs a cleansing function for Long Island Sound.

An architect’s proposed plans for the airport preserves 60 percent as open space and uses most of the rest for various kinds of passive recreation.

A developer had bought the airport in early 2007, but encountered opposition from residents and environmental groups.

The Hartford Courant has reported that the saved airport now should be eligible for stewardship funding through the Long Island Sound Futures Fund. The fund is administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Granby, Stonington join towns that favor pay-to-throw

Granby and Stonington recently joined a growing number of Connecticut towns and cities that use a “pay-as-you-throw” trash disposal program. Altogether, there are more than 30 Connecticut municipalities with some type of “pay-as-you-throw” system.

In Granby, which began a new collection system for this fiscal year, residents get a 95-gallon recycling barrel along with a 65-gallon trash barrel, reversing the usual order in which recycling bins are smaller than trash containers.

If residents fill up the trash bin, they must buy overflow bags for $2 each.

Recycling coordinator Sally Crasper said the public feedback on the new system had been overwhelmingly positive. She added that the recycling rate was up about 30 percent and projected annual savings of about $50,000.

In Stonington, recycling coordinator John Phetteplace said the town was able to lower its tipping fee costs by about $140,000 a year because of its pay-as-you-throw program.

Stonington was a pioneer in adapting the system in 1992. After a six month trial, residents voted to make it permanent.

Most of those in Connecticut sell bags that residents use to take their own trash to the local transfer station. Among the other towns identified were Putnam, Mansfield and Coventry.

Connecticut municipalities have been much quicker to embrace single stream recycling. One of the latest is New Haven, which in November approved a contract to distribute 96-gallon recycling barrels equipped with radio frequency identification “chip” readers, according to a New Haven Independent report.

The system permits the recyclables to be weighed as they are dumped into the collection truck and enables households that exceed certain goals to earn points towards rewards, such as grocery store discounts.

Rob Smuts, chief administration officer for the city, said the average household could save up to $20 a month on groceries. People can keep track of their points on a website maintained by the contractor, RecycleBank.

Deer population is costly for CT towns

The deer overpopulation in Fairfield County costs municipalities between $2 million and $17 million a year, either directly or indirectly, according to a new study.

Done by a pair of researchers at New York Medical College, the study is unusual in that it focused on the economic impact of deer, rather than methods of population control or the tick-borne disease in which deer are implicated.

For 23 Fairfield County municipalities, the researchers came up with costs in four categories: damage to the environment or landscape, damage to motor vehicles, the cost of tick-control, and the cost of treating tick-borne Lyme disease.

Fairfield had the highest total cost at nearly $17 million, followed by Greenwich at $15.1 million, and Danbury at $14.1 million.

On a per capita basis though, the towns with the highest costs were Sherman at $524 per resident, Easton at $520, and New Fairfield at $474.

For every town the largest single cost was for environmental or landscape damage to private and public property.

The authors of the study were Peter Arno and Deborah Viola who did it on commission for the Fairfield County Municipal Deer Alliance, the Connecticut Audubon Society, and the Connecticut Coalition to End Lyme Disease.

The study was based on state and federal data. But as surprising as some of the findings may seem, the study did not count costs for which data was lacking.

For instance, it did not consider the cost of tick repellent for pets, the cost of spraying fields, or the cost of picking up deer carcasses from roadways.
In Stamford the streetlights are being replaced and in Norwich they are being turned off for the sake of efficiency and the environment.

The long-term Stamford project involves spending nearly $3 million to retrofit the 9,700 streetlights with brighter, more durable LED (light-emitting diode) fixtures.

Nancy Pipicelli, the city’s energy/utility manager, said in an Advocate newspaper report that the switch could eventually yield $416,000 savings annually.

The first phase covering 1,300 streetlights will be paid for using $400,000 from a $1.2 million U.S. Energy Dept. stimulus grant, one of the few awarded directly to a Connecticut municipality.

Other portions of the grant will pay for new lighting at 13 school gyms and to build a charging station downtown for electronic vehicles.

In Norwich, the path to streetlight savings is more straightforward: the city is planning to simply turn off about a quarter of its streetlights.

The deactivation process under a Smart Street Lighting Program was to be managed by the municipal utility and to take several months.

City Manager Alan Bergren said that the program is similar to one pursued in other communities, including Santa Rosa, Ca.

Besides saving money (an estimated $60,000 a year for Norwich), shutting off lights also reduces greenhouse gases and light pollution. The latter is a particular concern in the densely populated Northeast.

The local utility coordinated the shut off schedule with police to assure safety was not compromised. Also blue decals were used to identify deactivated lamp posts so they wouldn’t be reported broken.

As another precaution, the city also posted a map showing which lights were to be shut off as well as a list be address on its website.

Elsewhere in Connecticut, Bristol was studying a plan to shut off about a third of its streetlights and West Hartford was preparing to test four different types of more efficient lights.

In Sprague (pop. 3,000) the 50-year-old town hall in Baltic village, may soon have a roof covered with solar panels.

The town already has received a federal stimulus grant worth almost $70,000 to defray the $250,000 cost of the project, and more is being sought from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund.

The panel installation should be able to generate about 36,000 kilowatt hours per year and cut the $1,300 a month town hall utility bill in half.
Let 10,000 trees grow in Elm City

A collaboration between the city of New Haven and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies is well on its way to achieving a goal of planting 10,000 new trees in the space of five years.

The initiative is multi-faceted. Begun mainly with neighborhood volunteers, it expanded this year to include 50 students from the Common Ground High School, teaching them skills that may translate into green economy jobs.

They were joined by a small contingent of men with minor criminal or substance abuse records.

Overall the goal for the year was to plant 1,000 trees in public spaces and another 1,000 on private property, including residences and businesses.

It grew out of the Community Greenspace program that was started by the forestry school’s Urban Resources Institute and essentially took over the city’s tree planting program several years ago.

Community Greenspace engaged neighborhood volunteers as stewards to water and watch over newly planted trees. The result was a 92 percent seedling survival rate, compared to an average 60 percent for professionals.

Early in the purely volunteer stages, administrators also became aware that New Haven was slowly losing its tree cover. While it was planting 200 new trees a year, it was cutting down about 500, either because they were dead, diseased, or posed a danger.

Tolland eases anxiety over barrels

After Tolland switched to single-stream recycling last summer, some homeowners began to worry about who would bear the cost if their new containers went missing.

The Town Council listened and in response adopted Town Manager Steven Werbner’s recommendation that they town would replace the containers at no cost as long as homeowners filed a police report.

When the new system started, homeowners got their first container free, and the waste contractor assumed responsibility for containers damaged during collection.

Despite residents’ fears, the theft of containers has not been a problem, according to a Hartford Courant report.

In January, West Hartford joined the stream of municipalities switching to single-stream recycling.

Officials estimated that by reducing the amount of trash the town pays $63 a ton to dispose of now, single-stream will save the town an additional $100,000 annually.

West Hartford already is a regional recycling leader in one regard, the Courant reported. Among municipalities using the Connecticut Resource Recovery Authority, West Hartford received the largest amount - $30,459 – in the latest round of $5 a ton rebate payments.
Barkhamsted restores development panel

Barkhamsted has created a new seven-member Economic Development Commission, replacing a panel that had become dormant years ago.

The new panel is needed to implement the town’s recently adopted economic development strategy that includes promoting the town to tourists as well as businesses, and trying to attract new businesses compatible with the town character.

First Selectman Don Stein said that Rt. 44, the state highway that runs through town, and Riverton village, once home to the Hitchcock furniture company, will be particular focuses of the new commission.

Members are to be appointed for five year terms, except initially when terms will be staggered to avoid the entire panel having to be replaced at one time.

The commission was given its own page on the town website, www.barkhamsted.us.

The original panel was formed in the early 1980s, but gradually ceased to function as a formal town board.

Bridgeport revival counts on the arts

Bridgeport has created an Arts and Cultural Council that it hopes will make the arts, and the institutions that nurture them, an integral element of the city’s economic development.

First proposed in 2007 by a steering committee, the council only began to take shape in the last year and reached fruition with the appointment of an executive director in late May.

The part time position pays $30,000 and was filled by Kenneth Kahn, who for a decade headed the Greater Hartford Arts Council, which was considered the largest independent arts council in New England.

Part of Kahn’s job will be to develop a marketing strategy for key institutions such as the Barnum Museum, the Klein Memorial Auditorium, and two downtown theaters.

For offices, he was given donated space in the Housatonic Community College building. The Housatonic College Foundation is one of the council’s funding partners, along with the city and the Fairfield County Community Foundation.

In Salem, one survey fits all

After Salem’s conservation and development commission began planning a citizen survey in preparation for a new 10 year plan, other town boards decided they ought to get in some questions too.

The result is a more comprehensive 65 question survey that will also serve the town economic development commission and the vision committee, and save money.

The survey will cost about $1,300, mainly to cover the expense of mailing notices that the survey is being conducted to all registered voters and taxpayers.

Included with the notice was a personal identification number that is they key to responding to the survey online.

The town posted the survey on its website in November and hoped to get 400 responses to the survey by the start of 2010.

In nearby East Lyme, town officials also were planning for the future, the very distant future.

The town hired Peter Miniutti, an associate professor in the University of Connecticut Landscape Architecture department to devise a 20 year plan for the use and maintenance of its buildings.

A vision committee made up of more than 30 residents will work with Miniutti on the plan. Generally such plans extend out five years.

Voters give Bridgeport library one mil for operating budget

One of the more unusual referendums in the last election occurred in Bridgeport, where voters approved supporting the library system with revenue equivalent to one mil in taxes.

The 65 to 35 percent vote means the library budget will increase to about $6.9 million from $4.8 million in the next fiscal year, based on current figures.

But it is still to be determined whether the library system would be asked to begin paying for some costs now born by the city, such as utilities.

The single mil dedicated to library services was permitted by charter, but not implemented. Proponents of the referendum argued the library system had suffered more than other city services from budget cutbacks.

Library Board President James O’Donnell said in a Bridgeport News report that the percentage of the city budget spent on the library had fallen by almost 50 percent since 1985.

The top priorities for the extra money, if realized, are improving children’s services, upgrading computer offerings and rebuilding two full service branch libraries.

The actual vote on the referendum question - “dedicate one mill of taxes to the library system?” - was 2,683 to 1,455.
East Lyme pursues farm aid

The East Lyme Economic Development Commission has formed a five-member subcommittee to promote agriculture and businesses related to agriculture in town.

The action, in July, accomplishes much the same purpose as would a full agricultural commission, an idea that was considered but rejected by the Board of Selectmen.

First Selectman Paul Formica endorsed the subcommittee idea though. It will pursue grants and promote local farms with organized tours and a map.

One of the new ag committee’s first acts was to set up a display booth at the annual Celebrate East Lyme Festival, where it gave away “No farms, no food” bumper stickers for a donation.

It also arranged for a steer and a sheep to be paraded during the festival to promote the town’s first Open Farm Day. Four different farms were to be featured in the event, including one where children could take pony rides and another that would offer hayrides, lemonade and cookies.

The idea for a local agriculture board was first proposed late last year and went through several permutations. At one stage, it was suggested that it be a subcommittee of the Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources.

Greenwich makes call on cell towers

Greenwich has created a nine-member committee that it hopes will give the town more control over the placement of cell phone towers.

The action by the Board of Selectmen follows a drawn out controversy over an 80-foot tower in the form of a flag pole initially approved for construction near an elementary school. Concerns about potential health hazards eventually led to its cancellation and a taller tower being built on town land elsewhere.

Generally, the Federal Telecommunications Act denies municipalities much say on cell towers in regards to environmental effects, and placement decisions are made by the Connecticut Siting Council.

Nevertheless, the 166-member Greenwich Representative Town Meeting passed a non-binding resolution in March discouraging the erection of cell towers within 1,500 feet of a school.

The Board of Selectmen followed up in April by establishing a Cellular Communication Infrastructure Task Force that is composed of several RTM members as well as representatives of the police, school and town planning departments.

The task force is charged with gathering information important to the town’s interests, such as identifying current and future carriers and areas of weak coverage.

Cell towers can be a source of revenue, too. The town will collect $2,500 a month rent on the lease it eventually negotiated with T-Mobile. It also will get 20 percent of any income T-Mobile makes from sub-leasing space on its tower to other carriers.

Enfield launches blight patrol

The town of Enfield has decided to become more proactive in eliminating blight.

Instead of waiting for complaints, it approved hiring a part-time inspector who will patrol the town, searching for blighted or unsightly properties, such as those that are boarded up or have piles of trash.

The inspector, who was expected to be on the job by autumn, will be paid $15,000 a year for a projected 19-hour work week. He or she will report to Community Development Director Peter Bryanton.

Bryanton said one of the inspector’s focuses will be scrap metal and auto repair businesses run out of homes.

The inspector also will follow up on complaints and help find ways to improve the existing property maintenance ordinance.

Blight inspectors are common in larger communities. Enfield’s job posting said the applicant should have a bachelor’s degree and five years relevant experience or an associate degree and seven years experience.
Westport panel defines decorum

Maybe it doesn’t match Emily Post, but a new policy adopted by the Westport Planning and Zoning Commission attempts to define what is proper decorum for a public meeting.

The policy is mostly intended to prevent people from waving placards or wearing demonstrative clothing, such as message-bearing t-shirts.

The signs and clothing are considered as potentially disruptive as the loud applause or jeering that traditionally have been viewed as unacceptable.

The Westport policy follows a series of hearings on exceptionally controversial issues where competition escalated between advocates and opponents.

The longest running hearing concerned construction of a new YMCA in a residential area. Then came proposals for a new community garden and a residence for the homeless.

Ron Corwin, Planning and Zoning chairman, said in a news report that the standards for behavior at a public meeting should be similar to those in a courtroom. Demonstrations can take place outside the chamber, but not inside.

Among the policy’s rules is one that specifically prohibits “demonstrations of support or opposition such as applause for or jeering of speakers.”

Another prohibits “displays of any kind on any surface including but not limited to clothing and signs.”

In a news article on the policy, John W. Bradley Jr., president of the Connecticut Association of Municipal Attorneys, was quoted as saying the policy appeared to be a first for a planning board and probably was a “step forward.”

Milford renovates land use agencies

Milford has created a single land use agency that incorporates the functions of its building, planning and zoning, and inland-wetlands departments.

The change is intended to streamline the permitting and inspection process and was described by Mayor James Richetelli in a Connecticut Post report as the most sweeping reorganization of municipal departments in half a century.

The new agency will be called the Department of Permitting and Land Use and will require hiring a new director.

The department also creates the new position of customer service representative, who will guide applicants through the permitting process.

Several existing positions, such as that of sewer administrator, which was vacant, were eliminated.

In creating the new department, the Board of Aldermen adopted nearly all the recommendations of a team assigned to review a consultant’s report on the way city offices functioned.

Included among them was even a physical reconfiguration of the Parsons Government Center, to eliminate partitions and create an “intake center” for the new department.

Monroe speeds home improvement

In Monroe, homeowners who want to make small scale improvements, such as adding a deck or a pool, no longer have to go through the same approval process required for larger projects.

Instead, the homeowners or their contractor can file a single application at the building department that then is reviewed by each of the necessary authorities in the town’s reorganized Land Use Group.

The unified application requires more information up front, but in the end should speed the approval process, especially if the project requires planning and zoning review.

Town Engineer Scott Schatzlein said the land use group takes over once the application is filled out. Reviewers assess it using a standardized check list, so all the questions they may have can be answered in a single re-submission.

Elsewhere, the City of Milford, which earlier reorganized its land use functions, has hired the new permitting and land use department’s first full time director.

She is Jocelyn Mathiasen, who previously was special projects coordinator for the Capitol Region Council of Governments. Before that she oversaw creation of a new land use department in Bellevue, Wash.

South Windsor adopts “Hollywood” rules

Anticipating that it will soon be home to a major movie studio, South Windsor has adopted an ordinance regulating film production in town.

The ordinance applies not only to motion pictures, but also to commercials and television shows shot on public or private property.

It establishes a fee schedule for services a production company may need, such as for traffic control during a shoot.

It also stipulates what kind of detail production crews must provide when applying for a filming permit, including whether they intend to use live animals or pyrotechnics.

The town council passed the ordinance in February with the expectation an entity known as Connecticut Studios would break ground for major facility sometime this year.

One of Connecticut Studios’ partners is Pacifica Ventures, the producer of such recent movies as “The Book of Eli” and television shows as “Breaking Bad.”

Among the fees adopted was $60 for a blasting permit, $50 for pyrotechnics and special effects, and $25 for a large tent. The ordinance was written to exempt non-profit organizations from some of the fees.
Hamden rezones with SmartCode

Hamden has become the first municipality in New England to revise its zoning regulations according to a SmartCode, a planning concept that embraces principles generally captured under the smart growth rubric.

The regulations, that were to take effect in January, incorporate so-called “form-based” zoning, which addresses how a building impacts public space, with more traditional zoning that addresses a building’s use.

One condensed description of SmartCode goals on the town website speaks of creating public spaces with a sense of enclosure that amount to “outdoor rooms,” mixing residential and businesses uses, and making neighborhoods walkable.

The new regulations are the culmination of years of work that at one stage involved a four-day community “charrette,” where residents were asked for their input on what the town should look like.

Architect Robert Orr of New Haven who led the charrette said he believed Hamden was the first municipality in New England to adopt SmartCode zoning. He credited town planner Leslie Creane and assistant planner Dan Kops for promoting the revision.

A New Register report on the new regulations said they should provide better environmental controls and lessen controversy.

The SmartCode also is intended to resolve conflict between a municipality’s need for economic development and livable neighborhoods.

Manchester makes cost sharing formal

The Manchester town government and school district already share some 40 services, but now they have gone even further in the effort to save money and operate more efficiently.

The town Board of Directors and the Board of Education have agreed to create a permanent joint committee to find more ways to consolidate services.

Among the areas likely to get a closer look are custodial work, information technology, payroll, and grounds and facility maintenance.

The two halves of local government already share fleet maintenance, equipment storage and purchasing of fuel and electricity.

Mayor Louis Spadaccini said that savings from local sharing probably are reaching its limits and that more may be found through regional sharing.

Payroll, one of the local areas that might be examined, may resist consolidation because the difference in number of employees and bargaining units.

School Board Chairwoman Margaret Hackett said the new committee likely would formed once work was finished on the budget for the coming fiscal year. The scope of its powers remained to be determined.

Colchester takes delinquents to court

The Colchester Board of Selectmen has given Tax Collector Tricia Coblentz the option of taking delinquent property owners to small claims court.

Coblentz said in a Norwich Bulletin report that the ability to sue was a new tool for her office. In the past, the town had used a state marshal to collect back taxes.

Now, it has retained the Rhode Island-based Rossi Law Offices as a collection agent. Under the terms of the agreement, it can keep 15 percent of the amount it recovers.

The new policy, however, stipulates that no one will be sued without first being offered a payment plan. It also requires the collection agency to do research to determine whether it makes economic sense to file a suit.

Meanwhile, West Haven has become the latest municipality to adopt a license plate scanning system to track down owners of motor vehicles who owe back taxes.

The city is contracting with a company, VioAlert, to conduct the street searches. In addition to what they owe, residents caught with unpaid taxes must pay $175 to have immobilizing boots removed from their cars.

As of earlier this year, West Haven was owed more than $3 million in back car taxes, just for the 2006 to 2008 grand lists.
Amity stages first disability fair

Amity Regional High School – serving Orange, Woodbridge, and Bethany – hosted its first ever informational fair in January for an often neglected group: students with conditions such as autism and attention deficit disorder who are about to leave school.

Planned by the Amity counseling staff, the “Living with Disabilities” fair was open to people from any community and drew an array of exhibitors.

Among them was a co-sponsoring agency, the Orange Special Education PTA, the state Department of Social Services and the Woodbridge Youth Services department.

Amity School psychologist Linda DeCesare said that for many parents the search for specialized colleges or other programs for youths with condition’s like autism can be “uncharted waters.”

One of the events at the fair was to be a panel discussion of young adults with disabilities describing programs that helped them succeed.

Food ratings get new service

Darien and Stamford are joining the trend to make the results of restaurant inspections more visible to the dining public.

In Darien, the health department began enforcing a policy that requires restaurants to post their ratings in plain sight in simple graphic fashion.

Good, fair and poor ratings were to be represented by three, two or one plates and to be displayed with more detailed state inspection reports.

Health Director David Knauf said that the policy was not meant to be punitive, but to promote “good” ratings.

Restaurants that get “poor” ratings can pay a $250 fee to get re-inspected. The policy applies to about 80 restaurants that serve hot food to consumers on site.

In Stamford, the ratings, represented by three beaming faces wearing chef’s hats, are being posted on the health department’s website.

In Norwalk, which adopted a similar online system in 2005, poor ratings declined 19 percent in a year.

Groton lends oars to disabled

The Groton Parks and Recreation Department this summer launched a rowing program designed for people with disabilities, and especially for wounded veterans.

Under the so-called adaptive rowing program, parks and rec staff were to team with an occupational therapist to evaluate each participant and train them to master the tricky technique of climbing into and out of a rowing shell or kayak.

Part of the program’s funding comes from a $12,000 grant for wounded veterans from the National Recreation and Parks Association.

Groton program supervisor Eileen Cicchese said that the hope is that participants will become comfortable enough with their rowing skills that they continue to exercise on their own.

In effect, the program attempts to teach participants a new sport that also doubles as a form of therapy.

The NRPA is a Virginia-based non-profit that was founded in 1965 by the merger of five national organizations dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation opportunities.

Greenwich officials take CPR to heart

In the rare event that someone suffers a heart attack in Greenwich Town Hall, they may find themselves saved by Town Clerk Carmella Budkins or Tax Collector Tod Laudonia.

They were two of the town officials who recently became certified in CPR after taking a class arranged by newly elected Selectman Drew Marsualla, who is also a paramedic for Greenwich Emergency Medical Services.

The class was conducted in Town Hall itself, complete with manikins to practice chest compression and rescue breathing techniques.

Marzullo himself modeled someone who had passed out to demonstrate the proper way to check if someone was unresponsive and needed resuscitation.

Among others attending the class were First Selectman Peter Tesei and Selectman David Theis.

Marzullo said they should not worry too much about injuring someone while applying CPR because they are protected by Good Samaritan laws. He also advised aiding an unresponsive person even if they were found carrying some sort of “do not resuscitate” document.

Marzullo was working with Tesei to devise an overall emergency response plan for Town Hall.

The building already has several wall-mounted defibrillator units that trigger a 911 call when removed. The class was briefed in their use, too.
Groton, Ledyard share prevention grants

Programs in Groton and Ledyard aimed at deterring underage drinking each have won sizeable grants from the federal Substance Abuse and Medical Health Services Administration.

Both programs focus not just on youths – educating them about the damage alcohol can do to the body – but also on parents, to discourage them from allowing teens to drink at parties in the home.

The message is “parents who host lose the most,” the coordinator of the Ledyard Safe Teens Coalition, Kerensa Mansfield said.

The Ledyard Coalition and its neighbor, the Groton Adolescent Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition (GASP), each received grants worth $320,000 that will fund their programs for four more years.

The programs are administered by the regional Ledge Light Health District, and the funding came through the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Both programs employ a variety of techniques to reach as many people as possible, including coordinating events with high school athletic games and staging town hall style meetings.

City hospitals stub out smoking

Numerous Connecticut hospitals, supported by their host municipalities, have recently worked to create “smoke free” campuses.

The Hospital of Saint Raphael in New Haven, the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, Hartford Hospital, Saint Mary’s Hospital, Waterbury Hospital and Danbury Hospital all created smoke free campuses.

In most cities ordinances also were passed that banned smoking on public sidewalks running through the campuses.

In New Haven, the ordinance for Saint Raphael’s was the second approved by the Board of Aldermen. Earlier it had passed one for the Yale-New Haven Hospital campus.

Hartford also banned smoking on sidewalks in the vicinity of its hospitals. According to the Connecticut Hospital Association, the smoke free movement was an outgrowth of the late Mayor Mike Peter’s “Healthy Hartford” program.

A map of hospitals that have created smoke free zones or are planning to do so can be seen on the CHA website. Search the Connecticut Hospital Smoke Free Campus Initiative.

Schools fight obesity through marathon -- in stages

A running program for elementary and middle school-age children aimed at combating obesity and promoting exercise has raced across the state.

In the program, known as Kidsmarathon, children follow an eight week running regimen, gradually adding enough distance during recess or after school to complete a full 26 mile marathon.

They celebrate by running the final mile at regional events. This year one as scheduled for May 22 at Southington High School and another for June 5 at Norwich Free Academy.

The program, promoted by the Connecticut Association of Schools, was introduced last year at 23 schools across the state. The state departments of Education and Agriculture are among its partners.

The training guide for the program was created by Rod Dixon, a former Olympic runner and winner of the 1983 New York City Marathon.

Newtown chambers get surround sound

The council chamber in Newtown’s new government center comes equipped with a state-of-the-art sound system for the hard-of-hearing.

The so-called inductive loop system is especially designed to clarify sound for people with hearing aids or cochlear implants that can be too sensitive to ambient noise.

The system employs a wire that circles the chamber, transmitting an audio signal that can be heard by anyone wearing an FM receiver headset.

It exceeds any requirements of the American with Disabilities Act and a resident who is an advocate for the hearing-impaired said she understood no other municipality has anything comparable.

Last year Newtown moved its main government offices to a building on the former campus of Fairfield Hills State Hospital.

The sound system was switched on earlier this year and tested by four residents with hearing problems.

First Selectman Patricia Llorda described the new system as an incredible resource and said the town would like to create partnerships to share the space with community groups that work with the hearing impaired.
Middletown kids buy locally grown

Middletown service organizations recently collaborated on a program that encouraged children to eat their fruits and vegetables and supported local agriculture at the same time.

Children attending a downtown arts and science camp were given wooden coins worth $10 each Friday that they could use to buy fresh produce from farmers whose stands were set up nearby.

The children, mostly from low-income families, could then bring the produce home and the farmers could redeem the wooden coins for real money at the offices of the North End Action Team.

NEAT was just one of the partners needed to make the program work. The Community Health Center funded the program with a $2,000 grant and the campers got free lunches at the Salvation Army where they learned recipes incorporating fruits and vegetables before going off to the market with their wooden coins.

About 60 children participated in the program that was first introduced in 2009. One measure of its success is that the number of vendors at the Friday farmers market grew from two to about a dozen.

Teams train to cope with mentally ill

Police departments in Manchester and Greenwich have organized crisis intervention teams to be deployed in situations where people with mental illness put themselves or others in danger.

Officers work with mental health professionals to learn to recognize the symptoms of mental illness and how to interact with mentally ill people and their families.

The training is organized by the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement (CABLE), a non-profit that receives funding from the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

The CABLE program is modeled after one begun by the Memphis, Tenn. police department and was first adopted in Connecticut by the New London department in 2000.

Louise Pyers, the founder, estimates about 1,000 officers have received the training since then. The cableweb.org website says one purpose of the training is to prevent suicide by copy.

In Ansonia, similar training sessions for the general public were sponsored by the Valley Substance Abuse Control Council.

The training followed a format developed in Australia and promoted here by Mental Health First Aid USA.

The evocation of first aid is deliberate, recognizing that mental illness is so common that someone ought to be just as prepared to help a person having a panic attack as a heart attack.
**Old Saybrook leads with HOPE project**

Old Saybrook voters have okayed an affordable housing development that promises to be the first built under the state’s HOMEConnecticut Initiative.

The 16 townhouse style units to be built by the non-profit HOPE Partnership will also be the first in Old Saybrook with any age restrictions.

Currently, the town has affordable housing only for senior citizens, and a founding goal of the HOPE Partnership was to provide housing for residents with limited incomes who serve as volunteers, or grew up in town and want to remain there.

The Old Saybrook vote in February to lease a 5.4 acre site on Ferry Lane for 75 years at $1 a year was widely watched.

David Fink, policy director for the Partnership for Strong Communities, which runs the HOMEConnecticut program, called Old Saybrook a “trail blazer”.

The HOPE (Housing for People Everywhere) Partnership began in 2003 as a collaboration of church groups and expanded to include town officials and businesses.

The inclusion of the entire community in the early planning stages is believed to have avoided the controversy that often stalls affordable housing projects.

Ultimately, three entities – HOPE, the town and the area United Way – joined together to promote the project.

It will have one, two and three bedroom units designated for people whose incomes are 60 percent or less of Old Saybrook’s $97,000 median household income.

A ball field to be maintained by the town also is part of the project, as is a 50 percent tax break.

The HOPE Partnership already is planning to offer help to other towns and has had discussions with Essex, Chester and Westbrook.

The HOMEConnecticut initiative, which took effect in 2007, rewards towns that pursue affordable housing with various monetary incentives. James Finley, CCM’s executive director and CEO, is on the initiative’s steering committee.

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**Stamford eases income limits**

The Stamford Zoning Board has revamped the eligibility limits for affordable housing to include a broader spectrum of incomes and also to stimulate construction of more units for poorer families.

The new regulations create three tiers of eligibility, ranging from 25 percent to 80 percent of the area’s median income. Previously, eligibility had been restricted to roughly 50 percent of median income.

The new formula effectively rewards developers for serving poorer families by counting each unit built for a family in the 25 percent range as 1.7 units of affordable housing.

On the other hand, units offered to families in the 60 percent median income range count as 0.75 units and units for higher income families as 0.4 units.

Robin Stein, the city’s land use bureau chief, said that the fine tuning broadened affordability options that were limited by the previous 50 percent target.

It arrived at because it was seen as a compromise between developers, who might have balked at building units for lower income families, and housing need.

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**Lyme aids LEED project**

The town of Lyme has helped the area Habitat for Humanity chapter build the organization’s first LEED certified house in Connecticut.

The house, a 1,280 sq. ft., three-bedroom Cape, sits on a 1.2 acre lot owned by the Lyme Compact, a local group that promotes affordable housing and is led by First Selectman Ralph Eno.

Under the arrangement with Habitat, the Lyme Compact is leasing the land to the owner at a nominal rate.

Among the features of the house that help it meet LEED standards are double-layer insulation, low flow plumbing fixtures, Energy Star appliances, and natural wood flooring.

The Lyme Compact has the difficult mission of providing affordable housing in a wealthy, rural town that has fewer than 1,000 dwellings altogether. The newest Habitat house brings the total of affordable houses in town to nine.

Habitat put the cost of the house at $135,000, about a third more than average. It is in the Hadlyme section, near a country store and the road leading to the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry landing.

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**City gets resident curator for park buildings**

The Smith-Curtiss House in Osborn- dale State Park in Derby has been chosen as the first historic home to be restored and kept open under a Resident Curator program.

Administered by the Department of Environmental Protection, the program is intended to prevent vacant historic buildings in state parks from decay and vandalism by appointing curators who would assume responsibility for the buildings and occasionally open them to the public.

Altogether the DEP has identified houses or other buildings in 20 state parks for inclusion in the program that is modeled after similar ones in Massachusetts, Delaware, and Maryland.

But the Smith-Curtiss House is the first for which occupancy proposals are being sought. Dating from roughly 1840, it became part of a 350-acre dairy farm owned by Frances Osborne Kellogg, a businesswoman who supported environmental causes. She deeded the property to the state before her death in 1956.

Slated to be next in line for a proposal is the Worthen House, located in Granby inside Enders State Forest.

The curators, or curator organizations, are not required to occupy the houses full time, but could ask to do so as part of their proposals.

Information about the program is on the DEP website under “resident curator.”
New London entices homebuyers

The federal tax credit for homebuyers may have expired, but in New London they still can get a break worth as much as $5,000.

The subsidy is available under a “New Home, New London” program approved by the city council and intended to boost the number of owner-occupied houses. Currently they make up about 38 percent of the housing stock.

A sliding scale of eligibility sets maximum income limits at about $68,000 for a single person household and about $128,000 for a family of eight.

Depending on income, buyers may get up to $5,000 in the form of a deferred loan that will be forgiven if they stay in the property for five years.

The city is devoting $100,000 from the Housing Community Development fund to the program. No more than 40 percent will be used for single family houses. The rest is reserved for two, three, and four unit houses.

The city hopes to enlist local lenders as partners in providing financing.

In a second housing effort, the city was considering giving senior citizens burdened by high property taxes an extra $200 tax credit as an incentive to stay in their homes.

Last ‘project’ vanishes from Hartford

Nelton Court, the last of Hartford’s old barracks-style public housing projects, is going, going, gone.

Demolition of the project’s remaining 120 units began this spring, to be replaced by 80 individually accessible apartments, similar to those at the already reconstructed Dutch Point project.

Built mostly in the post-war period, “the projects” became a pejorative associated with crime, drug use and poverty. Among the largest in Hartford were Bellevue Square, Charter Oak Terrace and Stowe Village, which was a close neighbor of Nelton Court.

A more recent trend in Hartford is the direct involvement of philanthropic institutions in subsidized housing. Examples are the Billings Forge complex near the state Capitol and at the renovated Hollander building at the edge of downtown.

Both were praised as successes at a recent forum on neighborhood preservation hosted by the Partnership for Strong Communities advocacy group.

Clinton starts rent panel, rehab fund

The town of Clinton has launched a pair of new housing aid programs, one for tenants and the other for homeowners.

Tenants can now bring complaints about their landlords to a Fair Rent Commission that heard its first case in December.

It concerned flooding at a mobile home park, and was almost expected. According to a New Haven Register report the commission was created primarily to resolve disputes in the town’s mobile home communities.

Tax collector Melanie Yanus led the effort to create the commission.

Clinton also has qualified for the first time for a Small Cities Community Development Grant that it will use to create a lending pool homeowners can tap for certain improvement projects, such as new roofs.

The grant for $300,000 required town officials to complete more than 200 pages of documentary material and attend training seminars, according to a Register report.

Griswold opens itself to UConn class

Landscape architecture students from the University of Connecticut signed on to spend part of the spring semester in Jewett City, Griswold’s downtown borough, studying ways to make it more attractive. Their exercise was to begin with a public brainstorming session in March and culminate with a catalog of suggested improvements.

First Selectman Philip Anthony said he expected the collaboration would produce a wide range of ideas, from street lamps to parking to flower pots. A particular focus may be on several old industrial buildings, including the Slater Mill complex.

The class project emerged from a meeting between the Economic Development Commission and Paula Stahl, an educator at UConn’s Green Valley Institute, and John Simone, executive director of the Connecticut Main Street Center.

Stahl and UConn associate professor John Alexopoulos were to work with the dozen or so students.
PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION

Bristol clears field for museum

Visitors to the Imagine Nation Children’s Museum in downtown Bristol will find parking both easier and safer thanks to a city gift.

It will spend about $350,000 in federal stimulus funds to transform an overgrown field next to the museum into a parking lot that will be open to museum goers, as well as nearby businesses and school administration offices.

The cost includes decontaminating the 1.3 acre site. Once improved, it will have room for 50 to 75 cars, with space left over for school buses.

Museum officials also expect the new lot to improve safety as well as attract more visitors.

The non-profit museum, a subsidiary of the Boys and Girls Club and Family Center of Bristol, caters to children and often is a field trip destination. But currently, school buses block traffic when they stop to drop off or pick up children.

Visitors who drive themselves often must park a block or more away and cross busy streets to reach the museum.

In a second partnership, a team of residents and merchants collaborated on a two-year study aimed at stemming blight in the city’s west end.

One of its main recommendations was for the city to work with owners of idle properties, such as a former supermarket and car dealership, to find new uses. The full report was posted on the city’s website.

Arts high school goes pro

New Haven’s new Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School is adding some professional show business partners to its cast.

The Board of Education announced in March that the Connecticut Association for the Performing Arts (CAPA) – the same group that manages the Shubert Theater – would manage the 350-seat high school theater.

Its duties entail handling the box office and technical stage functions as well as booking outside shows or groups that may want to use the theater. Student productions will remain under school administration, however. CAPA was expected to be paid $7,000 a month until June, and $4,800 a month thereafter.

The Shubert already has close ties with the high school, which is almost next door. It handled ticketing for some school events and was planning an internship program for students.

The school board also invited the owner of an elite instrument shop to occupy space on the ground floor of the high school – making it perhaps the first school-based retail site in the state.

The shop owner, Charles Magby, is known for his collection of rare violins, cellos and violas, and to string musicians worldwide, the Register reported.

Magby expects to offer master classes at the high school. He originally opened his shop in New Haven in 1976, but later moved to Guilford. He said the Yale School of Music already had been urging his return.

The Cooperative Arts high school, which cost $70 million and opened in January 2009, is considered the flagship of New Haven’s $1.45 billion school construction program.

Fairfield U. fetes city scholars

Fairfield University has entered into a new collaboration with Bridgeport Schools to reward students who do well on standardized tests.

The program, dubbed Bridgeport’s Brightest, began in January when hundreds of elementary and high school students were recognized during half time at a Fairfield basketball game at the Harbor Yard Arena.

The students were those who had scored at a “scholar” level on the state’s Connecticut Mastery Test and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

Later, students who make the honor roll at their individual schools were to get free admission to a subsequent Fairfield basketball game.

The Fairfield squad has a strong local following. School Supt. John Ramos said in a Bridgeport News report that the program allows the city to showcase its talent.

The collaboration is just the latest between the university and city schools.

During the current school year, Fairfield faculty are working with 30 middle and high school science teachers to devise classroom techniques that raise scientific literacy.

The Teaching Quality Partnership program began in the summer with a two week workshop and was funded by a $100,000 grant from the state Department of Education.

A similar grant went to Sacred Heart University to work with 32 elementary school teachers from Bridgeport, Fairfield, Monroe, Norwalk, Trumbull and Waterbury.

Altogether eight such grants were awarded throughout the state.
**Willington library spawns land deal**

More than 500 acres of mostly forested land in Mansfield and Willington will be preserved as a result of a complicated transaction requiring the cooperation of both towns, the University of Connecticut, and two nature foundations.

Key to the acquisition was 96 acres in Willington given to the town years ago to raise funds for the town’s first freestanding public library.

In 2005, the Connecticut Forest & Park Association bought the parcel for $250,000, and then conveyed the land to UConn. That, in turn, allowed the parcel to be linked with two other preserved tracts totaling about 435 acres.

One result of the deal is that some three miles of the Nipmuck trail, which is part of the Forest & Park Association’s statewide blue-blazed network, will be newly protected.

Eric Hammerling, the association’s executive director, said it represented the longest single trail easement ever gained by the association.

Another party cooperating in the various sales, conveyances, and easements was the Norcross Wildlife Foundation.

Meanwhile, Willington has built its new library on a parcel fronting Rt. 74 near the town center. Most of the cost was covered by a $3 million bond issue.

**Libraries adapt as business consultants**

In hard times more and more people are using libraries as job and business research centers and librarians are responding by recasting their roles.

One example is Jennifer Keohane who, in a Hartford Courant report on the trend, described herself as a “personal information shopper” at the Simsbury Public Library.

Keohane’s actual title is business outreach librarian, a position she’s held for a decade. Demand for her services, mainly as an employment consultant, has grown heavily.

She will review resumes and even show people how to create a PowerPoint presentation.

Other libraries noted by the Courant for their enhanced workshops and guidance were in Hartford, Fairfield, Middletown, Greenwich and Westport.

In Westport, two librarians who often work with jobseekers call themselves “information aggregators,” according to a separate Westport News report.

The library even encourages people to make one-on-one appointments with the staff counselors.

It also conducts seminars for job seekers that are funded by a local man and emphasize the practical, such as preparing for a telephone interview or using social network sites to develop job leads.

**Insurer pledges pothole help**

The insurance company known as The Hartford has come to the aid of its home city with a pothole repair program.

It created a website for the program, www.hartfordauto.com/potholepatrol, where it posted photos of problem potholes and invited drivers to vote on which ones looked most hazardous and in need of repair.

The company’s 12,000 local employees, most of whom drive to work, got first chance to vote for the worst pothole. The company then allocated $8,000 for actual repair to be done by city crews.

For the company, the pothole patrol is a way to provide a community service by making streets safer to drive and consequently also less likely to cause damage that can result in a policy claim.

The Hartford arranged similar patrols in other cities where it has large offices, including Aurora and Evanston, Ill. and Tucson and Phoenix, Ariz.

Visitors to the website also could submit pothole “horror” stories, get driving tips on how to avoid potholes, and learn pothole facts, such as that combined with other roadway hazards cause about $4.8 billion on damage annually. They could also ask for an insurance quote.

**Job board joins town and gown**

Manchester Community College and its host town have reached an agreement to widen access to the school’s job listings.

No longer will the board be limited to students and alumni. Instead it will be open at no charge to any job seeker, either directly or through a link on the town’s economic development website.

In announcing the union, officials said the likely increases in job postings and resumes will benefit the town’s overall economic health as well as the college and local job seekers and employers.

The college job board is affiliated with the College Central Network and has statewide reach.

The municipal link at townofmanchester.org/planning/jobBoard instructs visitors on how to register for the service. The town maintains a separate heading on its home page for municipal job openings.
**PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Cameras come included with assault kits**

Investigation kits designed to aid police in sexual assault and domestic abuse cases are now standard equipment in dozens of municipal departments. Each kit contains all the forms required for such cases, an information packet for victims, and perhaps most importantly, a digital camera and printer.

The ability to take photographs on the scene means police can better document injuries and thus provide evidence that may later assist in court prosecutions.

The kits were distributed as part of an initiative by the Office of the Chief State’s Attorney and were created in collaboration with the Connecticut Coalition against Domestic Violence and the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services.

A $100,000 U.S. Justice Department grant helped pay for the kits, 400 of which went to 27 local departments and resident trooper offices early this year.

Ken Edwards, an investigator in the Domestic Violence Unit of the Chief State’s Attorney office, said in news reports he expects 35 more departments to get kits by this summer.

The number of kits allocated to a department is roughly proportionate to population. Norwalk, Norwich and Ansonia were among a handful of departments that got the kits earlier under a pilot program.

**Grocery gift cards buy back guns**

In a program that almost literally exchanges guns for butter, Bridgeport gave away supermarket gift certificates to residents who turned in firearms.

The certificates were redeemable at Stop & Shop stores and came in amounts of $50, mostly for handguns, and $100 for shotguns and rifles. But one resident who turned in an almost new shotgun got $150.

The Bridgeport Housing Authority sponsored the program with $5,000 and conducted it in cooperation with the police department.

Altogether 12 guns were collected on the first day of the program, qualifying for $850 in certificates.

But the city intended to keep the program open until the initial allotment of cards ran out. It also appealed to local businesses to make donations to extend the life of the program.

Mayor Bill Finch said the program is needed if only to prevent weapons a homeowner may have stored away from being stolen. All the weapons turned in are destroyed.

**Guilford police ask ‘How are we doing?’**

Every three years, the Guilford police ask residents to let them know how good a job they think of the department is doing.

The exercise invites criticism, but that hasn’t deterred the department from seeking even more responses by putting its latest survey online.

The survey, which was expected to take about 10 minutes to complete, asks 21 questions, including whether calls were answered promptly and whether officers were professional and courteous.

Chief Thomas Terrible said that one of his main interests was learning whether residents felt that police faithfully followed up on their complaints.

Besides encouraging more responses, the online survey also was expected to cost less than surveys done by mail or by department personnel calling residents directly.

The survey was posted on the police section of the town website. The previous survey, with response totals, is also posted on the website.
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

**Public Safety**

**Madison, West Haven plan citizen academies**

Inspired by their embrace in other municipalities, the Madison police department and the West Haven fire department are planning to open their own citizen training academies.

In Madison, Chief Robert Nolan said the academy should give a more realistic and appreciative idea of what police really do than what citizens might get from television dramas.

Expected to begin in January, according to the town website, the academy is to be conducted in weekly sessions of two to three hours each spread out over 10 weeks.

Nolan said that he has believed in the efficacy of citizen academies since his involvement in starting one in Hamden, where he previously served.

In West Haven, three district fire departments inaugurated a 13 week academy that was to include hands on experience with a fire hose and witnessing a mock extrication from a wrecked vehicle. It will also offer participants the chance to be certified in CPR and to use defibrillators.

The academy was established after pilot classes conducted earlier in the year were deemed a success. Firefighters who volunteer their time as teachers will lead academy classes, according to a Register report.

The three-hour classes were scheduled to run on Thursday evenings, ending Dec. 10.

**New K-9 recruits report for duty**

The ranks of police dogs grew in January as several municipalities added new canine cops or moved to establish new units.

One was Stratford where Mayor John Harkins used the occasion of a memorial service for Zak, a veteran dog who died, to announce that police would acquire two new dogs – one to replace Zak and another to bring the total canine squad to three, giving police one unit per shift.

The memorial service for Zak, who served for six years and died prematurely of complications from a tumor, showed how much respect a police dog can command in a community. A parade preceded the service, which was attended by representatives of 44 K-9 teams from across the state and even New York, according to a Connecticut Post report.

A town away in Trumbull, First Selectman Timothy Herbst ordered the department to create a canine unit in response to incidents at Trumbull High and the Westfield Mall.

At the high school, police had had to call on state police unit to investigate a bomb scare. At the mall, the Bridgeport unit was called for help to calm rowdy teens who converged on the mall after Christmas, according to a Post report.

In New Haven, the police department revived a canine patrol unit that was disbanded in the 1990s.

The first dog to join was Xander, a 5-year-old Dutch shepherd trained to detain a criminal suspect by barking alone and to bite only under certain circumstances, according to a New Haven Register report.

The “bark and hold” method is popular on the West Coast than in Connecticut, where dogs are trained to “bite and hold.”

Assistant Police Chief Kenneth Gillespie said he expects two more dogs will join Xander by the end of the year. He said they will be introduced at schools and other community forums.

The department already has four police dogs, but they are used exclusively either for sniffing out drugs or explosives.
Police chase away “ghost” alarms

New Haven, following the successful practice of other municipalities, is the latest community to adopt an ordinance that permits to levy fines in response to false burglar alarms.

The fines, which amount to a bill for the unnecessary police work, are intended to discourage alarms users, mainly businesses, from being lackadaisical about accidental triggering of the systems.

Cumulatively, police waste thousands of hours “chasing ghosts” of false alarms, according to a New Haven Register report. In fact, police estimate more than 90 percent of the 10,000 to 12,000 alarms it responds to in a typical year are false.

The new ordinance requires anyone with an alarm system to register with the department, at no charge. New software will be used to track alarms and automatically send warning letters and bills, if warranted.

There is no fine for the first false alarm, but fines escalate as alarms increase.

The ordinance also requires alarm monitoring companies to make two attempts on different phone numbers to contact the property owner before calling police.

Shot sensor learns New Haven sound

When New Haven police began using a gunshot sensing system last fall, they expected its accuracy would improve as it adjusted to the sounds of the city itself and it has.

For instance, the system, unique in Connecticut, can now recognize the sound of a makeshift cannon fired at high school football games and the sound of a nail gun as opposed to a real gun.

After a month’s experience with the so-called ShotSpotter system, police have judged it an apparent success.

It led them to the parking lot of a fast food outlet where they found a shell casing before the victim showed up at hospital emergency room and to a crime scene where the haze of gunpowder still was in the air.

Lt. Robert Muller said the accuracy of the system improves as police help it adjust to the “acoustical landscape” of the particular city where it is deployed.

So far New Haven is the only city in Connecticut with the system, but Bridgeport sent observers to New Haven’s demonstration at its police academy.

In use in about 50 agencies around the country, the ShotSpotter identifies sounds resembling gunfire through monitors that triangulate the location.

It is programmed to distinguish some sounds, like firecrackers or construction noise from gunfire, but can be taught to recognize other similar sounds, like the football cannon.

In the first month, the system detected 447 incidents, identifying 45 as gunfire. So far New Haven police have judged it an apparent success.

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In the first month, the system detected 447 incidents, identifying 45 as gunfire. Of that number 32 were determined to be episodes of illegal fire and the rest were attributed to the police firing range.

The system initially has been deployed in a 1.5 mile crime corridor and police had not decided whether to expand it.

Norwalk fire dept. trains retailers on crowd control

The Norwalk Fire Department coordinated a safety training program this past fall to help retailers prepare for a potentially dangerous annual crush of holiday shoppers.

The incentive, said deputy emergency management director Michele DeLuca, was to avoid the kind of incident that occurred last year at a Long Island Wal-Mart, where a store employee was trampled to death by shoppers eager to enter the store on Black Friday.

The Norwalk program included presentations on crowd control by the fire department and a briefing on emergency communications.

The police department joined in with advice on traffic control and crime prevention, while the health department discussed ways to prevent the spread of the swine flu and other communicable diseases.

Stores sending representatives to the two-hour workshop included local branches of Wal-Mart, Costco, P.C. Richard and Son, Shop Rite and Old Navy, according to a Connecticut Post report.

An assistant manager from P.C. Richard who attended the workshop said he expected 500 people to be lined up at the electronics store by at 5 a.m. on Black Friday.

Middletown patrol rolls to T3 beat

Middletown police have a new patrol vehicle that takes the footwork out of walking a beat.

Called a T3, it resembles a chariot – or a Segway – in that the driver stands on a platform behind a belt-high shield.

The T3, however, rides on three wheels, not two, and is equipped with a full set of LED lights, both emergency and headlamp, and a siren. It also has a removable, rechargeable battery, which means the vehicle can be kept going from one shift to the next.

The T3 can go up to 25 miles per hour, has a carrying capacity of 450 pounds, and costs about 10 cents a day to operate.

The department bought the $12,000 T3 with money from a $58,000 federal stimulus justice assistant grant.

Deployed in April, it is being used mainly on what usually were walking beats. But police also expected to use it at events that draw large crowds, such as summer festivals, where they can take advantage of the T3’s maneuverability.
PUBLIC SAFETY

Windsor lures volunteers with new benefit

Volunteer firefighters in Windsor are now eligible for retirement pay under a new policy approved by the town council.

The benefit, due to take effect in September 2011, is modest, ranging from $50 to $400 a month, depending on the length of service. The hope is that the added benefit, which rewards long service, will help the department retain personnel as well as attract new recruits.

Volunteers will not be able to collect the benefit unless they serve a minimum of 10 years. Also contributions are capped after 40 years. Current volunteers will be able to count up to five years of past service toward the benefit.

Another limiting factor is that volunteers must respond to at least 25 percent of emergency calls to receive the benefit in that year. Volunteers already are eligible for a property tax abatement worth $1,000 and an hourly stipend to cover the costs for uniforms and other expenses.

The first four years of the program are being funded by a $291,000 federal grant, after which the town expects to assume full cost.

Chief Bill Lewis said he expects about two-thirds of the department’s 112 members to qualify for the benefit.

West Haven innovates with mug shots and Segways

The willingness of West Haven police to embrace change has been highlighted by a national award from IBM and the introduction of Segway scooters to new neighborhood patrols.

The IBM award – the first given to a government agency – recognizes a program that the department developed with IBM’s help for fast photo sharing.

It allows photos of crime suspects or missing persons to be transmitted instantaneously to computers in cruisers and other department vehicles.

In one case, the quick access to a mug shot database led to the arrest of a robbery suspect whose name police managed to learn. The system also tracks the movement of police vehicles and permits citizens to file reports via the internet.

The two new Segways will be assigned to community resource officers operating out of a pair of newly created neighborhood substations.

The department’s goal is to resurrect the concept of the foot patrolman who had close contact with people on the street. In addition to the highly maneuverable Segways, the community officers also will ride bicycles and carry hand-held devices that allow them to remotely check motor vehicle and arrest warrant records.

The substations are not in new buildings. Both occupy donated space; one in a fire house and the other in a fitness center.
Connecticut Conference of Municipalities
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

**Stratford strays get a treat**

A campaign that began a decade ago has been rewarded with the town’s decision to build a new $2.4 million animal shelter.

The 7,500 sq. ft. shelter will have space for 30 dog kennels and 40 cat cages, a major expansion compared to the space for only 14 dogs and just nine cats in the current 50-year-old shelter.

But the new shelter will be kinder to people, too. It will have a lobby and separate rooms for introducing pets to prospective owners and for meetings of staff and volunteers.

Space in the old building is so cramped volunteers often conducted their meetings outside under a tent.

Other advantages of the new building are an observation room where people can view pets without disturbing them, a space to quarantine sick animals, and space for puppies and kittens that is separate from adult animals.

One of the obstacles to building a new shelter was finding an alternative to the current site on Frog Pond Road. The public was involved in finding the new site, on Beacon Point Road. Also, initial bids for the project were rejected as too high.

**Potholes get citrus fix**

During the last pothole season, West Hartford residents with acute senses of smell might have detected the faint odor of orange coming from their repaired roadways.

The explanation? The town public works department experimented with a kind of cold patch that incorporates recycled orange rind as a binding agent.

Public Works Director John Phillips said the department discovered the product, called EZ Street, while searching for a substitute for the traditional petroleum-based cold patch.

A change was needed to comply with the new state regulations limiting the use of petroleum patch because its evaporation has been found to contribute to ozone pollution.

West Hartford applied about 50 tons of the citrus patch, costing $119 a ton, during peak pothole season in late winter.

Like all cold patch, it was a temporary fix, filling in until warmer weather in May, when state regulations permit application of hot asphalt.

Phillips said the citrus smell is so faint it is detectable only from close range. But it is so pleasant he doubted people would mind if it were stronger.

**Sun shines on sidewalk trash cans**

No matter how regular the pick-up, sidewalk trash cans tend to overflow in shopping areas on busy nights and weekends.

That is a messy problem that some municipalities, including West Hartford and Greenwich, are hoping to prevent with the introduction of a new kind of trash can that is solar-powered.

The cans adopted by the Connecticut towns are really mail-boxed sized trash compactors called the BigBelly that can swallow five times as much trash as a typical sidewalk barrel.

West Hartford recently installed three of the units, costing $4,250 each, in its Blue Back Square shopping area.

Town Manager Ronald Van Winkle said the compactors were bought with surplus money from the town parking fund and in the long run should produce savings by reducing overtime labor costs.

Greenwich also is reported to have deployed the BigBelly, which have been embraced by larger cities. Philadelphia bought a batch of 500 in 2009.

A Public Work Magazine article about Philadelphia’s experience is posted on the website of the manufacturer, BigBelly Solar of Newton, Mass. The website also describes the can’s use in parks and on college campuses.

**Residents see how plow drivers work**

In Simsbury and Norwich this winter snow plow drivers weren’t as lonely as they used to be.

The Simsbury drivers occasionally got company through a town program that taps into a common fantasy: it allowed residents to ride shotgun on a plow truck during storms.

The ride-along program run by the public works department was open to residents age 18 or older, according to a Hartford Courant report.

Candidates applied on the town’s website and were notified to get ready to ride two or three days before a forecast storm. Rides typically lasted three hours.

In Norwich, the public works department installed new computers in 12 trucks that contained GPS systems and software to regulate the amount of salt being spread on roads.

Public Works Director Joseph Loyacano said in a Norwich Bulletin report that the city uses treated salt that costs about $20 more a ton than untreated salt, but sticks to the road surface longer and so saves money.
Donations put collar on kennel costs

Rural Killingly and urban West Haven have upgraded their dog shelters without spending a dime of taxpayer money.

In Killingly, unionized construction workers and a masonry contractor donated the labor and materials needed to nearly double the capacity of the regional shelter from 12 kennels to 20.

The contractor said it was their way of expressing appreciation for the town’s decision to make a recent high school construction project a union job.

The kennel, opened in 2004, is the home base for the Northeastern Council of Governments animal services program that averages nearly 2,000 adoptions or returns to owners a year.

Future expansion plans include a wash and laundry room and a room dedicated to adoptions. Besides Killingly, other towns participating in the program are Brooklyn, Canterbury, Pomfret, Sterling, and Woodstock.

In West Haven, the shelter was virtually rebuilt, with 22 new stainless steel kennels for the dogs and new office space for the staff.

The city raised $130,000 in donations to cover the cost of the project. The cost was kept lower than it might have been because a member of the building oversight committee helped out as project manager.

Grant helps Granby save 1890 library

A 120-year-old library in Granby that is on the National Register of Historic Places will stay open because of a $125,000 grant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

The money will cover most of the cost of reinforcing the main floor of the Frederick H. Cossitt Library, which is now sagging from age and the weight of books, and of reconstructing a ground floor children’s entrance.

Some other costs of the project will be paid for by the town and through fundraising.

The two-story wooden library is considered unusual and worth saving because it is an extremely well preserved example of Queen Anne architecture and because its original construction was spearheaded by George Godard, who later served nearly four decades as state librarian and was known as “Preservation Godard” for his record in saving state documents.

The building is named after a Granby native, who became a successful businessman in New York City and Memphis and bequeathed $10,000 for its construction.

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224,000 leaf bags equals $500,000 savings

When West Hartford eliminated its leaf vacuuming program last fall in favor of bagging, it was sure to save $500,000. The question was how many bags of leaves would town crews have to collect?

The original estimate of 400,000 or more proved much too high. When the 10-week collection ended in mid-December, crews had picked up 224,262 bags of leaves from the curbside.

Public Works Director John Phillips said residents opting to mulch leaves or have them carted away by private contractors accounted for the difference.

The town rented packer trucks with a 25-yard capacity for the collection and manned them with town crews. The collection was so efficient crews were able to keep up with regular tasks, like catch-basin repair, and used little overtime.
New de-icer gets winter test

North Haven and East Hampton were among towns that tried out a new de-icer on roads this winter that they expected would spare them spreading as much sand as in winters past.

North Haven First Selectman Michael Freda said that the de-icer, called ClearLane, contains a pre-wetting agent that sticks better to roads than dry salt, so is less likely to swept away by wind or traffic.

At the same time, it was expected to save sweeping costs, once the storm passed. Public works director Lynn Sadosky said she expected town crews would spread about 200 tons of sand this winter compared to 3,000 last winter.

Sadosky said residents needed to know about the new de-icer, which is light green in color, so they wouldn’t think the town had failed to treat the roads.

East Hampton published information about the de-icer on its website for the same reason.

It said the de-icer contains about 4 percent magnesium chloride, a wetting agent, that has several advantages: it lowers the effective working temperatures of the salt, reduces bounce and scatter keeping more salt on the road, and finally inhibits corrosion.

Both towns paid around $86 a ton for the de-icer, a Cargill product.

Town hall relocates to hospital campus

The scenic campus of the former Fairfield Hills State Hospital is now the site of Newtown’s new government center.

The formal ribbon cutting ceremony was conducted on Nov. 21, but town departments began their move from several different locations a month earlier.

The offices are now under one roof in a building known as Bridgeport Hall that once functioned as the hospital’s food service center. The relocation follows a town vote to acquire a specially equipped truck for its single-stream program.

Vernon makes hay with mulch

This past spring, the Vernon public works department inaugurated a delivery service designed to cash in on the demand for garden mulch.

Beginning in April, it offered to deliver mulch, at a cost of $60 for four cubic yards, to homeowners’ driveways.

Residents were required to pay in advance and also to sign a hold harmless agreement that freed the town from any liability claim that might arise from a delivery mishap.

The town continued a policy of supplying mulch free to residents who come to the transfer station to pick up a load.

The mulch is made from trees and brush brought to the transfer station for disposal. The delivery service was expected to show a small profit.

In another form of recycling, Vernon also acquired a specially equipped truck for its single-stream program.

The truck has a remote-control arm that can lift and dump the larger single-stream barrels. The labor saving device also should reduce the chance of injury, since the truck driver can operate it from inside the cab.

The new barrels themselves come in two sizes and have lids, lessening chances litter will be left behind from the pick up.

New London ‘big fix’ plan speeds ahead

In 2007, the New London City Council approved a $10 million bond package to carry out the city’s first long range improvement program that encompassed everything from road and park repair to a new scale at the transfer station.

Now the first phase of what might be called a “big fix” project has been completed, and it shows the benefits of a comprehensive approach, city officials said.

As of mid-November the work accomplished included two miles of improvements to 11 streets, painting and re-carpeting of the senior center and the replacement of 70 old vehicles with 50 new ones.

Keith Chapman, special assistant to the city manager, said the costs will be analyzed over the winter and used to set goals for the 2010 construction season.

Altogether, the plan calls for the city to spend about $4 million on road and sidewalk improvements, $2 million on parks and roughly similar amounts on vehicle replacement and upgrades at the transfer station and public works yard.

One of the additions to the rebuilt transfer station will be a 60-foot deck scale that should allow it to act as a regional facility and produce income for the city.

At the city’s fueling station new tanks are being installed that will be monitored by a computer system that keeps track of vehicle mileage, time of refueling and type of fuel used and other relevant data.

Plans for upgrades to 12 different city park and recreation areas include installation of five new playscapes.
REGIONAL & INTERMUNICIPAL COOPERATION

AGvocate program keeps on growing

Four more towns have become AGvocates, members of an eastern Connecticut alliance intended to nurture local agriculture.

The new members are Eastford, Hampton, Windham and Woodstock. They join the original six - Ashford, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Franklin, Sterling and Thompson – which began collaborating last year, supported by a $46,000 state agriculture viability grant.

Jennifer Kaufman, AGvocate program director, said 10 of the 25 communities in Connecticut’s Last Green Valley Heritage Corridor are now AGvocate towns.

The AGvocate (Advocacy for Local Agriculture) program is intended help towns strengthen farm-friendly regulations and generally improve the long-term viability of their agricultural businesses. Kaufman, as director, acts as a circuit rider providing technical assistance.

Member towns also are expected to share their experience, helping each other develop individual action plans to support local agriculture.

The town of Brooklyn, for instance, has created an agriculture commission since joining the program and also arranged for a new farmer’s market to begin this summer.

The AGvocate program recently received a second grant, in the amount of $50,000, that will keep it going through June 2011 and enabled it to add more towns.

Kaufman can be contacted at AGvocate@yahoo.com.

Eight towns unify permitting

Eight towns have joined together to issue and track routine building permits through a centralized website.

The initiative, one of the results of state regional incentive funding made available in 2008, should make municipal operations more efficient at the same time it saves contractors time and money.

Expected to be up and running by March, it will allow contractors to apply for and receive permits without visiting a town hall for smaller jobs such as installing new siding or windows, according to a Hartford Courant report.

The eight towns participating, which are members of the Capitol Region Council of Governments, are Bolton, Coventry, Glastonbury, East Hartford, Manchester, Newington, Simsbury and Wethersfield.

Manchester General Manager Scott Stanley said he and other municipal officials, including the building department staff and information specialists, worked for months to develop the system.

The initial costs to the towns vary depending on their size, but each is expected to save in the long haul.

In Glastonbury, Town Manager Richard Johnson estimated annual maintenance would be between $6,500 and $8,700 over the first five years.

Presently contractors must go to building departments in person to fill out forms. Then a clerk must verify the contractor is licensed and insured before entering the information into a file that may be digitized or not.

Under the online program, permitting and verification will be automated. Also applicants as well as residents will be able to check the status of the permits online as well as request inspections for completed work.

According to a CRCOG press release, the program uses software provided by Massachusetts-based ViewPoint Engineering Inc., which was chosen through a competitive process.

Once the system is in place, other towns will be able to join for $28,000 to $49,000, depending on the community’s size, Jocelyn Mathiasen, CRCOG special projects coordinator, said.

Altogether the CRCOG has 31 municipal members.

Windham towns power up CL&P mower

The Windham County towns of Ashford, Eastford, Union, and Woodstock are cutting down roadside weeds and brush with a shared $113,000 mowing machine they got almost for free.

Under an arrangement with the Connecticut Light & Power company, they are leasing the mower, a John Deere 6330 with a 22-foot extension cutter, at a nominal rate in exchange for mowing under CL&P power lines.

Each town pays $300 annually for maintenance and at the end of the five year lease CL&P has agreed to sell it for $1 and replace it with a new machine.

The program is modeled after one CL&P started in Massachusetts. It spares CL&P the expense of hiring a contractor to do its mowing and gives the towns a mower they can use on all their roads.

As the host town, Woodstock will be able to buy the mower at the end of the lease.
Truck fire tests emergency partners

When a tanker truck loaded with flammable methanol caught fire on I-95 in Fairfield, it was a true test of regional emergency response cooperation, not just another drill.

At least four other municipalities came to Fairfield’s aid, according to a Connecticut Post report.

The Danbury and New Haven fire departments sent extra foam trailers should the fire threaten to spread, while Bridgeport and Westport departments provided back up for regular Fairfield calls that occurred during the hours-long highway emergency.

It began around 4 a.m. on Nov. 9 when the driver of the tanker noticed flames shooting from the rear of his rig. It was carrying 6,800 gallons of liquid also known as wood alcohol.

The potential for an explosion caused the entire highway to be shut down and houses near exit 19 to be evacuated.

Asst. Fire Chief Scott Bisson said the burning truck posed the type of “worst case scenario” firefighters train for.

Responding quickly they cooled the truck’s tank and contained the fire that probably started in the truck’s brakes.

Nevertheless some lanes of the highway remained closed for hours, causing traffic to be diverted onto local roads.

Also assisting in the emergency were the State Police and crews from the state departments of transportation and public works.

Some of the residents evacuated from nearby homes found shelter at the Fairfield Ludlowe High cafeteria.

The fire units from Bridgeport and Westport helped out on 11 other emergency calls that occurred during the incident.

Capital region unites to talk trash

The Hartford area has a new trash authority, and it is not to be confused with the Connecticut Resource Recovery Authority, the quasi-public agency that operates the regional trash-to-energy plant and recycling center.

Instead, the recently formed Central Connecticut Solid Waste Authority will negotiate waste disposal contracts with CRRA or private competitors.

Mayor Melody Currey of East Hartford, the 20th town to join the authority, said the municipal partners hope their union will not just result in lower disposal fees, but also in more control over how solid waste is handled.

Currey, the current CCM president, also chairs the Capitol Region Council of Governments, which is providing staff for the new authority.

The idea for the union grew out of a $50,000 CRCOG study that identified several private agencies willing to compete with CRRA.

Other municipal members are Hartford, Manchester, Enfield, Windsor Locks, Avon, Bloomfield, Bolton, Canton, East Granby, Granby, Farmington, Glastonbury, Simsbury, South Windsor, Tolland, and Wethersfield.

The members are expected to pay $15,000 to $20,000 for the authority’s legal fees and staffing. Most have contracts with CRRA due to expire in 2012.

Town trio chases joint police force

After nine months of study, a committee of officials from Montville, Preston and Ledyard has decided the potential benefits of a unified police force are worth continued pursuit.

The Tri-Town Public Safety Study Committee recommended the towns invite the International Association of Chief of Police to conduct a consensus forum to see how the forces might be combined and whether to proceed with a full-blown feasibility study.

The committee saw many advantages to joining forces, including more funding opportunities and improvements in training, recruitment and management.

But there were also obstacles: one of them simply physical. Montville is on the west side of the Thames River and Preston and Ledyard are on the east. An accident on the Mohegan Pequot Bridge could prevent personnel on one side of the river from reaching the scene of an emergency on the other.

How the towns would share liability in the event of a lawsuit, and where the headquarters would be located are other questions.

Presently Montville and Ledyard each have forces of about 20 officers overseen by a resident state trooper. Preston, with a much smaller population, has only two troopers, but would need a larger force once the former Norwich State Hospital site is developed.

The tri-town committee included a mix of town officers and public safety personnel. State Rep. Tom Reynolds of Ledyard acted as facilitator.

He said the committee was not required to make any recommendations, but was unanimous in agreeing a regional force “holds potential and merits further dialogue and professional study.”
Unity multiplies in N.E. Corner

In Connecticut’s mostly rural Northeast Corner property revaluation and economic development will soon be shared endeavors, instead of being conducted individually.

The joint revaluation is being pursued by the 12 member towns to the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments that have agreed to hire a single contractor to do their appraisals.

“We are going forward and reviewing a recommended vendor,” said Council Executive Director John Filchak.

The towns expect to save around $750,000 collectively if the plan becomes a reality. It was developed by a committee of assessors and first selectmen.

Each town is expected to pay a base fee and then an additional fee per parcel, which will be adjusted according to the size of the base fee.

For economic development, the Northeastern Connecticut towns will join with the nine member towns of the Windham Council of Governments and Sprague to form a single region.

The change should make them eligible for funding from the federal Economic Development Administration and required state approval.

Historically, Connecticut has ranked last in qualifying for federal economic development funds, Filchak said.

The district is the culmination of a 10-year process that led first to adoption of a shared economic development strategy.

A similar regional economic development district is being pursued by 15 Naugatuck Valley municipalities in addition to Cheshire, Watertown and Newtown. The plan was outlined in May at a forum hosted by the Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Brownfield coalition counts 21 members

Councils of government representing 21 municipalities in the eastern part of the state have joined with the state Department of Economic and Community Development to form the Eastern Connecticut Brownfield Coalition.

As announced by Gov. M. Jodi Rell, the coalition’s initial goal will be to pursue $1 million in brownfield assessment funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The two councils of government, for the Windham Region and Northeastern Connecticut, cover an area that shares the two major rivers, the Quinebaug and the Willimantic, and a similar industrial past.

DECD Commissioner Joan McDonald said that her department already has worked with area towns on projects such as the Willimantic Whitewater Park and the Plainfield Village Center.

The member towns in the coalition are Ashford, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Chaplin, Columbia, Coventry, Eastford, Hampton, Killingly, Lebanon, Mansfield, Plainfield, Pomfret, Putnam, Scotland, Sterling, Thompson, Union, Willington, Windham and Woodstock.
The National Council on Aging has recognized the senior centers in East Lyme, Groton and Waterford for a fall prevention program they jointly organized.

An eight week course about the risk of falling called a “Matter of Balance” was at the core of the program, but the centers went beyond merely offering the course.

They offered health screenings by the region’s Visiting Nurse Association and follow up visits to seniors’ homes by nurses or volunteers.

Mary Jo Riley, supervisor of the Groton center, said in a New London Day report that seniors need to be aware that a simple fall can lead to a fatal infirmity, especially if they are frail.

The award recognizing superior programming for seniors was announced in December and was to be presented at a Council on Aging conference this spring.

It includes the cost of attending the conference and $1,500 case. The centers plan to use the money to conduct further collaborative programs.

iPads were well-received at Brookfield’s senior center, suggesting people of pre-digital age may be more eager to embrace the touch-screen devices than they would regular computers.

One senior was reported using one of three iPads acquired by the center to look at satellite images of her house on Google maps.

Another sampled a movie and then did research on WebMD, while a third looked up quilting patterns.

Center Director Ellen Melville said, however, that the most popular option was using the iPads as photo albums.

She added that she hoped the iPads would help people get over their fear or aversion to the machines in the center’s computer lab.

The idea to acquire iPads came from Ron Jaffe, a board of finance member and technophile, after he saw a YouTube video of a 100-year-old reading a book on an iPad.

The cost of the iPads was covered by a grant from the Brookfield Education Foundation.

Ridgefield’s police and fire departments have partnered with the local Visiting Nurse Association to launch a home safety program they call “Senior Watch.”

Just as the trio of collaborators suggests, the program targets three of the most common threats to seniors at home: theft, fire and falls.

The police role is to check locks on doors and windows, and to generally inspect a house and surrounding grounds for security risks, such as overgrown shrubbery.

The fire department checks for fire and fall hazards, and offers free smoke detectors and battery replacements.

Visiting nurses do additional duty by helping seniors make photo records of their valuable possessions that are then stored on compact discs. The photographic record is important for insurance coverage in the case of theft or fire.

The underlying philosophy of “Senior Watch” is that elderly people benefit psychologically from feeling safe and that the peace of mind alone can help them stay in their homes longer.

The VNA, in fact, promotes “Senior Watch” as a component of its Quality Living at Home program.
**Suffield center gets home of its own**

Suffield’s senior center finally has a home it can call its own, paid for almost entirely from grants and donations, including many from individual townspeople.

The new center moved into a renovated former church at the end of June, gaining twice as much room as it had at its previous locations: a storefront in a shopping center and borrowed space in the high school.

Grants from the state and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving covered most of the $1.82 million cost. But smaller donations came from individuals after the town sent a solicitation letter asking for help in closing a $137,000 shortfall.

The letter brought in about $25,000 and the local Rotary Club and a bank pitched in another $12,500 to cover the cost of a kitchen.

Center Director Paula Pascoe said seeking a permanent home had been a 10-year process that will end with a formal grand opening in the fall.

With the extra space the center will be able to offer a greater variety of programs. One of the renovated building’s new features is a digital sign-in system that scans member ID cards.

The system is not so much for security as to allow center staff to track attendance and provide data for budget requests and grant applications.

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**Website transformation enhances Norwalk schools**

The revamped Norwalk Public Schools website that features a video tour with voice-over narration is proof that governmental websites continue to evolve with the internet itself.

The voice-over on the school site is provided by the district’s new director of technology, Robert Polselli Jr., who credited his staff with accomplishing much of the redesign at almost no extra cost.

Visitors to the site, www.norwalkps.org, who click on video tour can listen to Polselli explain how to use the site as they watch its various pages unfold before them.

The site also can translate from English into more than 40 other languages and has a Wikipedia-type function that permits shared editing of some content, according to a Norwalk Hour report.

Municipal websites have been under extra pressure to keep current because of a state law requiring them to post meeting notices and minutes in a timely fashion. The average citizen, however, tends to judge a website by ease of use and depth.

The town of Manchester, www.townof- manchester.org, has a model website that the Center for Digital Government has consistently ranked in the top 10 nationally for municipalities in its population group (30,000 to 74,999).

The Manchester site includes maps, police reports, a way to report broken street lights and even a link to check water consumption.

Even a small town can build an excellent website, as a survey done by Fairfield University staff found.

Large cities getting high ratings for accessibility or ease of navigation were New Haven, Danbury and Stamford.

The regional survey was conducted by Fairfield Information Systems Professor Chris Huntley and Director of Web Communications Scott Barnett.

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**Police adopt online crime watch**

Police departments in Branford, Darien and Westport are among the first in Connecticut to subscribe to an online service that enables residents to keep track of where crimes are being committed.

The service, CrimeReports.com, depends on local departments feeding information about criminal activity into the system, making it a more accessible police log.

Residents can visit the site free and see a Google map that shows reported incidents by location and type.

The purpose is not to satiate curiosity, but to provide information that may help deter or solve crime. Lt. Geoffrey Morgan of the Branford department said it follows the principle articulated by a British prime minister that “the police are the public and the public are the police.

As of early this year, more than 600 municipalities around the country had subscribed to the service, paying a small monthly fee.
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.
Coalition explores rails and trails

A proposed network of recreational trails extending from Norwalk to Danbury would do more than give walkers, runners and bikers new places to exercise.

As imagined, the Norwalk River Valley Trail would also provide an alternate path to rail stations and commercial centers along the route.

The concept already has won the endorsement of the state Department of Environmental Protection, which okayed the coalition’s pursuit of a grant for $180,000 feasibility study.

It is led by the towns of Wilton, Ridgefield and Redding, with assistance from officials and organizations in Norwalk and Danbury.

Patricia Sesto, director of environmental affairs for Wilton, said that the network of trails would serve the dual purpose of bringing people closer to the natural world and changing the way the commute.

Wilton is also among the towns served by the Metro North Danbury branch line exploring the creation of “transit-oriented development districts.”

TODs, as they are called in shorthand, essentially try to recreate a village environment where housing and commerce are mixed around a commuter train stop.

One area TOD, in the Georgetown section of Redding, recently received $1.3 million in state funding and earlier won a Smartgrowth award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

New London rewards rail riders

Eager to promote expansion of the Shore Line East rail service, New London offered a big discount to monthly commuters who park at the city’s downtown Water Street garage.

The discount, for half the regular $52 monthly rate, was timed to coincide with the addition of a new daily round trip connecting to New Haven, the terminus of the main Metro North commuter line.

The discounted rate, approved by the City Council, was to last three months.

The owner of a private downtown garage three blocks from the New London station followed the council’s lead by offering free parking to commuters, whose numbers have been limited by the frequency of the Shore Line trains.

The owner, William Cornish, said his offer would stand until the state and Amtrak find a way to provide free commuter parking, as it is at other Shore Line stops.

The new train added was to leave New London at 5:52 a.m. Three more trains, one in the morning and two in the evening, were expected to begin running in May.

Even more trains have been promised, but have been delayed partly because the train traffic over draw bridges conflicts with river traffic.

Amtrak runs Shore Line East trains. Its other stops are in Old Saybrook, Westbrook, Clinton, Madison, Guilford and Branford.

Make way for hybrids

A round of grants from the Connecticut Clean Cities Future Fund will bring a natural gas filling station to Bridgeport and a pair of hybrid passenger buses to the transit district that serves eastern Connecticut shoreline towns.

Both mark milestones in Connecticut’s transition into a new age of alternate-fuel vehicles and are among eight projects involving some 30 municipalities that the Clean Cities project is funding with $13.2 million in federal stimulus funds.

The natural gas station in Bridgeport will be the first of its kind east of the Mississippi River and will service 18 Kenworth tractors owned by Enviro Express Natural Gas that will haul ash from a trash-to-energy plant to a disposal site in Massachusetts.

It will also be open to sell compressed natural gas to the public and provide fuel for city-owned dump trucks converted to run on natural gas.

The pair of 12-passenger buses acquired by the Estuary Transit District also is believed to be among the first of their kind. They will complement the district’s broader goal of promoting the environmental benefits of public transportation.

The district also recently acquired three new conventionally powered buses and extended its weekday Southeast Shuttle service to New London. The shuttle, which connects with the Old Saybrook train station, previously ended in the Niantic section of Waterford.

Among the other Clean Cities projects is a fast-fill station that will serve Glastonbury’s growing fleet of natural gas powered vehicles.

As the name implies, a fast fill station refuels vehicles more quickly, and thus enables the town to keep its fleet on the road. At the existing slow fill station, refueling is an overnight process.

The web address of the New Haven-based Clean Cities project is www.ctfuturefuels.com.
School’s “Big Event” has big reach

Municipalities from Wallingford to Stamford got some very temporary workers in April when Quinnipiac University staged its first “Big Event” day.

Patterned after a service project that originated at Texas A&M University, it dispatches squads of students to communities to paint, collect trash, prepare food, and generally do anything they can to help out for a day.

All told, the some 700 Quinnipiac students who participated visited 53 different day care and senior centers, schools, nursing homes, animal shelters, and parks.

Both New Haven Mayor John DeStefano and Hamden Mayor Scott Jackson were scheduled to address the students and faculty at the start of the day at the Quinnipiac campus in Hamden.

The sponsoring groups were the Student Government Association and the Community Action Project, a campus group that regularly does community service at the school and in the New Haven area.

Since the first Big Event at Texas A&M more than 20 years ago, some 200 colleges nationwide have adopted the program.

Waterbury PAL expands role

The Waterbury Police Activity League has expanded its focus from helping city youth to improving the neighborhoods they live in.

The transformation had its beginnings in 2006, when the PAL bought and renovated the vacant St. Lucy’s School and adjacent gymnasium in the city’s North End.

The donated labor of contractors, off-duty police and PAL supporters kept the total cost to about $900,000.

The PAL followed up by buying and renovating a former warehouse across the street from the school into a boxing center. More recently it bought three vacant lots near the school and turned them into community gardens.

The PAL’s latest project is one of its most ambitious. It has started a fund raising campaign to buy a two acre lot near its growing campus that it hopes to turn into a park with recreational facilities such as ballfields and basketball courts.

The project, including the $250,000 purchase price, is estimated at about $1.1 million. One of the dilapidated buildings on the site once served as headquarters for motorcycle gangs.

Much of the credit for the PAL resurgence is given to Neil O’Leary, who became Waterbury police superintendent in 2003 and now is PAL president.

The population it serves has grown from a few dozen to about 3,000. It also claims to have more than 200 regular volunteers.

Canterbury musters CERT squad

The town of Canterbury, with a population of just about 5,000, has proven that even a small town is big enough to have, and need, its own Community Emergency Response Team (CERT).

It reached field strength earlier this year after 11 residents completed an eight-week training course at the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Government’s offices in Killingly. The new recruits gave the town the minimum 13 trained residents required for a CERT.

Carol Kent, the team leader who retired recently from a preparedness post in Rhode Island, said even small towns must abide by the emergency management maxim, “the first 72 is up to you.”

It expresses the general rule that in the event of a disaster, local people must be ready act because outside help may not arrive for 72 hours.

Kent said the Canterbury team’s first priority would be to write a mission statement, so that it can apply for funding and supplies from the state.

CERTs are an outgrowth of the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and are allied with the state Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

Teams can assist first responders in many ways, including traffic control, first aid and supply distribution.
Parents in Ashford, Mansfield and Willington can access a new website that was created to help them keep up with their digitally adept children.

The website contains video tutorials on photo sharing, blogging and the other ways kids use the internet to communicate, and sometimes get in trouble. It also allows parents to communicate with each other.

The idea for the website to put parents on a par with their children emerged from a tri-town coalition originally formed to discourage under age drinking.

The mission was made more difficult by the relative isolation of residences in the towns, lessening the opportunities for parents to casually touch bases with each other. Also, older youths have the nearby temptation of University of Connecticut student parties.

Kevin Grunwald, director of human services in Mansfield, said the panel that created the iParent website, decided that increased "social access" was one of the factors contributing to the under age drinking.

The coalition is funded by a three year $150,000 federal grant awarded through the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Rockville High fights iPod crime

To deter their sometimes all too easy theft, Rockville High School has established a registry for iPods and similar music players to popular with students.

School police officer Earl Middleton started the system after the holidays – when the players are common gifts – and registered 75 in the first month.

Students fill out a form listing identifying information, such as model, color and serial number that Middleton maintains on a spread-sheet.

Students can also get stickers to paste on their players that warn potential thieves the player is registered.

Middleton said he got the registry idea from a counterpart at a school in Portsmouth, N.H. He also said teachers themselves had expressed interest in registering their own iPods.

At the time he started the registry, Middleton estimated that about 20 iPods had been stolen during his year and half at the school.

Website helps parents monitor kids
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