INNOVATIVE IDEAS
FOR MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A Connecticut Town & City Compendium
Compiled from the year 2011 issues of Connecticut Town & City
April 2012

Dear CCM Member,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town & City Compendium – our 25th 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 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, please contact Kevin Maloney at (203) 498-3000; or email kmaloney@ccm-ct.org.

Good Reading!

Sincerely,

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

One Copy is provided free to CCM members. Additional copies for CCM members are $25 each. Price for all others is $50.

© Copyright 2012 Connecticut Conference of Municipalities
# Table of Contents

CIVIC AMENITIES .......................................................................................................................... 1-2

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ........................................................................................................... 3-4

EDUCATION ...................................................................................................................................... 5-9

ENERGY .......................................................................................................................................... 10-12

ENVIRONMENT .............................................................................................................................. 13-18

GOVERNANCE .............................................................................................................................. 19-23

HEALTH .......................................................................................................................................... 24

HERITAGE ...................................................................................................................................... 25

HOUSING ....................................................................................................................................... 26

MUNICIPAL FINANCE ...................................................................................................................... 27

PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION ................................................................................................. 28

PUBLIC SAFETY ............................................................................................................................ 29-33

PUBLIC WORKS ........................................................................................................................... 34

REGIONAL & INTERMUNICIPAL COOPERATION ......................................................................... 35-37

REDEVELOPMENT .......................................................................................................................... 38

REVITALIZATION ........................................................................................................................... 39

SENIOR CITIZENS .......................................................................................................................... 40

TECHNOLOGY ................................................................................................................................. 41-44

TRANSPORTATION .......................................................................................................................... 45

VOLUNTEERS ................................................................................................................................. 46-48

YOUTH ......................................................................................................................................... 49-50

ORDER FORM ................................................................................................................................. 51
Greenwich introduces pay-by-phone commuter parking

Have you ever left your car in a commuter parking lot and returned with time expired on the meter and a hefty parking ticket on the windshield? It need not happen anymore at certain lots in Greenwich, which is now offering a pay-by-phone system allowing commuters to add time to their space.

The town’s parking services department says if commuters end up spending the night in NYC or elsewhere and don’t get back, they can call and get space for the next day.

Pay-by-phone parking will be available in the Island Beach, Horseneck, and Soundview Drive parking lots, as well as the public garage at the town hall. A convenience charge of 25 to 35 cents will be added onto the town’s parking fees for the lots, two of which offer $5 all-day parking and two of which have short-term hourly options.

The pay-by-phone system is only being implemented in those lots with electronic pay stations, where drivers enter a space number on a keypad and purchase denominations of time.

The town is contracting with Vancouver-based Verrus Mobile Technologies to provide the service, which will allow commuters, shoppers, and visitors to the town hall to use Visa, MasterCard, and Discover to pay for parking. Other locations featuring the firm’s technology include Yale University and Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Greenwich officials welcomed the latest innovation. “It’s a great idea, especially for commuters and people who work in the city and want to enjoy a dinner there with their significant other,” Selectman Drew Marzullo said.

Coginchaug kayak and canoe launch in Middletown moving forward

Plans to create a kayak and canoe launch on the Coginchaug River’s peninsula in Middletown are moving forward while the City lines up the necessary certifications for the project.

The project is a collaborative effort between the Coginchaug River Access Group (CRAG) and the City’s Planning Department. It is being funded largely by a $50,000 federal trails grant that the Jonah Center initiated and applied for on behalf of the City. “There is a tremendous amount of birds, fish, and other animals in that area,” said John Hall, Coginchaug River Access Group representative and director of the Jonah Center. “In order to protect the area, you must have people who are aware and passionate about it. That’s what this project will help achieve.”

It will also bring added recreational benefits to the City’s North End, the area where the launch will be located.

The required permits include a Flood Management Certification from the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, an application to the state’s historic preservation office, and approval from the Office of Long Island Sound before construction may begin.

The area is also undergoing a review from the state’s Natural Diversity Database to assess the vicinity and determine whether or not any threatened or endangered species would be impacted by the launch.

The launch project gained final City support in late October. It will be located in an area parallel to existing railroad tracks and will include a ramp to make the area handicap accessible. City officials are targeting a spring/summer construction date for the launch. A preliminary plan indicating parking, topography of the area, and the access path has already been drafted.

There are also plans for an information kiosk at the trail’s entrance with background on the area’s history, information on wildlife in the area, and safety tips.

The city department of public works will provide a number of services to prepare the area, including engineering work, brush removal, and grading. The first step will be clearing the brush and laying the trail with flexible concrete pavers, a job the City will undertake. The launch project is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.
New London Earns Second National Main Street Accreditation

For the Whaling City, twice is nice now that New London Main Street has met a rigorous set of guidelines and become accredited as part of the National Main Street Program for the second year in a row.

"Accredited Main Street programs are meeting the challenges of the recession head on and are successfully using a focused, comprehensive revitalization strategy to keep their communities vibrant and sustainable," said Doug Loescher, director of the National Trust Main Street Center.

The National Trust Main Street Center sets performance standards for commercial district revitalization and to win accreditation, local groups must have strong revitalization organizations and a demonstrated ability to strengthen their local economy and protect their historic and cultural assets.

Performance standards include developing a mission, building strong public-private partnerships, securing an operating budget, tracking economic progress, and preserving historic buildings.

"We work hard for this community and for this accreditation," said Penny Parsekian, chief executive officer of New London Main Street. "The accreditation requirements give us a solid foundation by making us more transparent, accountable, strategic and with broader community participation than we might have had we not followed these guidelines."

The nonprofit has been in existence since 1998, and was accredited in that year and some subsequent years, but then experienced several years when it did not meet the comprehensive guidelines.

During the years that New London did not receive accreditation, the organization struggled to keep up with the national requirements for strategic planning, involvement from the board of directors and support from the city.

"Now we have a memorandum of understanding with the city," Parsekian said. "It's a more formal relationship whereby the city expects us to deliver 30-odd projects a year, and they include things like the district gateways and all the events we do, and publications like the map and guide."

The comprehensive guidelines the group must meet require broad-based public and private support for the commercial part of town, vision and mission statements and detailed annual work plans.

Established in 1980, the National Trust Main Street Center helps communities of all sizes revitalize their older and historic commercial districts. Working in more than 2,200 downtowns and urban neighborhoods over the last 30 years, the national program has leveraged more than $51.1 billion in new public and private investment.

Community Spearheads Renewal of Town Landmark

After five years of fundraising, grant applications and renovations, the historic homestead at Maples Farm Park in Bozrah is now open to the public.

In 2007, the town purchased the 1850s Victorian house and its 31 acres in order to transform the property into the town center — a centralized hub for public and private events, meetings and celebrations.

With the opening of the building, that vision is becoming a reality.

Bozrah Selectwoman Kitty McCue said the first floor of the building will be used as a community gathering place, and the second floor will be public or private offices. The land will serve as the town green, and will be used for outdoor markets, music concerts, festivals and fairs.

In 2009, the town received a STEAP grant for renovations that included lead and asbestos removal, installation of new heating, plumbing and electrical systems, and the preservation of the original flooring, wainscoting and staircases.

In addition to the state grant, a community committee raised about $6,000 for the house, and the town bonded the remainder of the costs. Residents and local businesses also have helped out by sewing curtains, and building a gravel parking lot.

When the town bought the house, it was run-down and falling apart, First Selectman Bill Ballinger said. Ballinger said the property, which abuts town-owned recreation fields and the senior center, has potential for other uses that have yet to be explored.

The town also received a grant to build a stone wall on the property, which frames an outdoor farmers market that has operated weekly from July to October since 2008.

The town also plans to build recreational trails on the wooded part of the property. A trail that connects to the recreation fields has already been built.
Collaborative Program Helps Unemployed Workers Deconstruct Buildings, Reconstruct Careers

Hamden officials, the Hamden Economic Development Corp., the Workforce Alliance, VetsLink, Gateway Community College’s Center for a Sustainable Future and a local company “Urbanminers” have teamed up to offer a class to teach people about deconstruction.

As a result, six formerly unemployed adults – and recent graduates of the class – have begun new careers utilizing newly learned skills.

Using deconstruction techniques, buildings are carefully taken down, not torn down, so that materials can be saved and reused.

After receiving graduation certificates from Gateway’s Sustainable Future Center, the six are now on the job, taking apart three old homes in the Newhall section that are not candidates for rehabilitation.

The Workforce Alliance provided a $49,500 grant that paid for tuition and materials to Gateway and Urbanminer’s founder Joseph DeRisi taught the nine-week class at a local community center. Class topics included use of tools, site safety and deconstruction as an industry. The grant also covered the salaries for the new workers for up to eight weeks.

Two of the students, Okan McCullough and Daniel Blakeslee, were previously in the construction field.

“I was out of work for 2½ years. I really enjoyed the class,” McCullough said of learning the new skill. “You can save 95 percent of the materials, and they’re reusable.”

Blakeslee said he hopes the reuse of building materials “is a step in the right direction.”

Town Director of Economic and Community Development Dale Kroop, said Hamden is prioritizing the homes in the Newhall remediation project that will be deconstructed.

Officials from the Sustainable Future Center pointed out that the greenest parts of building materials are brick and wood and that materials that are reconstituted leave a smaller carbon footprint and can help lower construction costs.

Southington downtown investments pay dividends

Art Secondo, president of the Greater Southington Chamber of Commerce, says that downtown Southington in the 1990s “was becoming like one of those towns in a western movie where the tumbleweed goes tumbling through.”

It was a time when shopping malls had long since taken business away from many town centers. The sidewalks and curbs were crumbling and the downtown area was dingy and uninviting.

“There couldn’t have been one piece of sidewalk that wasn’t broken. The curbs were completely gone. It was desperate,” said Joseph Eddy, owner of a downtown architectural firm.

Eddy was one of a group of local activists who decided to do something to keep the historic center of town from becoming a ghost town by forming Southington Downtown Renaissance.

For ideas, the group drew upon West Hartford Center which had suffered from the development of Westfarms Mall but succeeded in reinventing itself by making the area convenient and appealing to both shopkeepers and shoppers.

Eddy said Barbara Coleman, president of the Southington chamber at that time, was the driving force that got it all started. With her help, the group developed a plan for the first phase of downtown improvements and then secured financial backing from the state government and Connecticut Light & Power Company.

Town officials also got on board and the first two stages of Downtown Renaissance for brick sidewalks and crosswalks and new light fixtures and benches moved forward. By 2002, a report from the town assessor’s office indicated that property values in the area had risen a total of $2.77 million since the improvements began in 2000.

The report said the increase in property values stemmed from the Renaissance investments – which provided an incentive for property owners to improve their own buildings – and because the improvements drew in new businesses.

The latest improvements were completed in mid-December with the addition of decorative, energy-efficient LED lights on 40 vintage lamp posts in the area. The chamber spent $4,000 on the lights, which will be lit at night year round.

“Those provide an opportunity for people from town, or from out of town, to take a look at what our downtown has to offer,” he said. “You walk around and see some wonderful art venues and some great dining opportunities in the midst of a revitalized area.”
Windsor’s Ambitious Mixed Use Development Will Boost Town Revenues

Windsor officials and developers provided residents in July with an overview of the Great Pond Village project on property formerly owned by Combustion Engineering.

When completed, 4,010 single- and multi-family dwellings, 85,000 square feet of retail space, 128,000 square feet of civic space, and 640,000 square feet of office space will occupy nearly 400 acres with an additional 365 acres set aside for recreational activities.

Town Manager Peter Souza said the Great Pond area is a great location with access to highways and rail lines and is just a 15-minute ride to Bradley International Airport.

Souza said there are quite a few people who work in town but don’t reside here and the project would “help capture them and bring them into Windsor.”

The town could see its population rise by nearly 8,000 people when the project comes to fruition. According to fiscal projections, Windsor could receive between $1.3 million and $2.1 million in revenue annually from the mixed-use project that would include housing and commercial components.

The economic projection over the next 15 to 20 years forecasts $1 billion in total revenue, $25 million to the local tax base, and the creation of 2,300 permanent jobs. The community will also benefit from 365 acres of parks that will connect with northwest Park and will offer activities including hiking, bike trails, parks, a community center and kayaking.

Souza said that the town would assume a leadership role and follow a “form-based code” that would ensure that the architectural style and height of buildings, the infrastructure, lighting, storm water drainage system, and signage are closely regulated.

Souza said that developers would begin phase one at no cost to the town. Once it is completed and homes and businesses are occupied, the town would begin to receive additional tax dollars.

In addition, legislation signed into law on July 8th allows the town to create a special taxing district. The taxing district includes a mechanism to provide developers with a share of the taxes to purchase low interest bonds and continue with the next phase of the project.

Wethersfield redevelopment agency tackles first project

Like many towns and cities throughout Connecticut and the Northeast, Wethersfield is striving to make adaptive re-use of its former manufacturing and industrial properties. Many long boarded-up eyesores hold significant development potential – if the right resources and the right players can come together to create a new vision for the properties.

Now the Wethersfield redevelopment agency has started its first project – one it hopes will revitalize a key commercial corridor in town.

After considering a number of sites, the redevelopment agency has focused on the redevelopment of the former Weight Watchers food packaging plant and adjacent properties on the Silas Deane Highway. The Weight Watchers building sits on 3.5 acres and has more than 100,000 square feet of floor space. It has been vacant for ten years.

The redevelopment agency chose the Weight Watchers site and nearby existing commercial buildings because as agency Chairman Michael Zaleski said, “It’s a very high-profile building on a heavily trafficked street — an old manufacturing building in a commercial district.”

In other words, it is the perfect candidate for a makeover. The redevelopment effort is consistent with Connecticut’s “smart growth” focus, which favors rehabilitation of existing unused structures over new development on virgin land.

With Connecticut’s industrial and manufacturing heritage, nearly every municipality in the Nutmeg State has similar properties that are ripe for re-use.

Bartram & Cochran, a Hartford land-use planning and consulting firm, will conduct a market analysis for the town and recommend options for redeveloping the area.

The study area consists of 14 acres and eight buildings spread out over six parcels held by six different owners. There are nine existing businesses in the target area, according to Peter Gillespie, Wethersfield’s director of planning and economic development and initial discussions suggest that several of the owners might be interested in participating in comprehensive redevelopment.

The property at 1000 Silas Deane Highway has been on the market for several years. The owner of the property has agreed to work with the town and is paying for 25 percent of the consultant study.

Wethersfield expects the redevelopment of the site to be a win-win-win – for the property owners, the town, and its taxpayers. By putting a new face on an old place, Wethersfield hopes to add to its Grand List and set an example of adaptive re-use for other towns to follow.
Greenwich program helps kids without computers

Getting homework done on time can be tough for the average high school student, but it becomes a real challenge for the small minority of students who do not have access to a home computer or the Internet.

Last year, Greenwich High School freshman Melissa Alvarez had to type an entire essay on the keyboard of her Blackberry, email it to herself and then get to the school early enough to print it out and hand it in.

This year, Melissa is one of four students taking part in a local pilot program to help students without a home computer or Internet access.

"Bridging the Digital Divide in Greenwich" is being funded through grants from the Danbury Partnership for Early Learning, a local nonprofit education foundation, and Verizon.

Students involved in the program have been provided with computers and Internet access. The students’ parents are also involved, and received training at the library.

Jennifer Lau, a media specialist with the school district, is leading the program. "To see the difference in students who had been living with technology, versus the students who had never held a mouse, that's when it really hit me," Lau said.

“For students who have a computer, it’s easy to play a variety of sports and get involved in community service, and then come home to start their homework,” she said. "You can’t do that if you're at a public access terminal with very little time," Lau said.

Sophomore Alleyha Dannett said her mother is unemployed, so a computer is not something they can afford at the moment.

Last year, Alleyha was trying to use the computers at the Boys & Girls Club of Greenwich or at Greenwich Library. "As soon as I got home, the library would be closed," she said. "It was never easy. I always had to travel."

"Having access to the Internet at home will make our successful students more successful," said Julie Farynierz, executive director of the Greenwich Alliance for Education.

GHS Headmaster Chris Winters said he had heard similar ideas in the past, but nobody made it happen until Lau approached the Alliance.

Winters said there are also local programs warning parents and kids about the dangers of the Internet. "What I love about this program is it's not just providing the technology, but providing the education to use technology wisely," Winters said.

Danbury Partnership Focused on Early Learning

A Danbury community partnership that is helping to prepare young children for school and life says early childhood education is the key to success not only for children, but also for the community as a whole.

Studies show that children who read well by age 8 are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to pursue higher education. But 74 percent of children who are not reading on grade level by age 8 will not catch up in time to graduate with the rest of their class.

Since each child who drops out costs society approximately $260,000 (in lost tax revenues, social service costs and other costs), preparing children to read on grade level by age 8 has huge economic benefits to the Danbury community and the state as a whole, said Caroline LaFleur, coordinator for Danbury’s Promise for Children Partnership.

The Alliance for Excellent Education, a national education policy and advocacy organization, estimates that by cutting its dropout rate in half, Connecticut would gain $264 million in home sales, $6.2 million in auto sales and $9.7 million in tax revenues.

“The way to prepare an 8-year-old child to read on grade level is to begin at birth,” LaFleur said. “You ensure that children have literacy-rich home environments, are read to frequently, are physically healthy and have the life skills they need to function well in school.”

LaFleur maintains that starting at birth means the responsibility for early education requires the involvement of all sectors of the community – schools, pediatricians, social service agencies, community leaders, child care providers – and especially parents.

Accordingly, Danbury’s Promise for Children Partnership includes more than 60 members working on three teams to implement strategies for children ages birth to 8.

Their work includes:
• distribution of "Let's Get Ready for Kindergarten Early" placemats at local restaurants;
• presentation of videos that illustrate how learning begins at birth; and
• bringing Danbury's preschool and kindergarten teachers together to identify specific skills children need to have a successful first year of school.

The support needed to prepare children is especially important for low-income children. Danbury, like the entire state of Connecticut, has a huge achievement gap between low-income students and children with higher incomes. Preparing young children for advanced education can end the cycle of poverty while expanding Danbury’s pool of educated, talented and well-trained employees.
The City of Middletown has acquired the former St. Sebastian School with plans to convert the structure for use as a senior center, police substation, military museum, and municipal office building.

The conversion will address two important City needs – a new site for a senior center to replace the existing, inadequate facility, as well as new space for City offices.

The 13,000-square-foot property will offer more than double the space of the current senior center.

To give some perspective, says Planning Director William Warner, the existing public works department, 50 percent of the building division, 50 percent of the planning office, the city attorney’s office, the human relations office and the conference room at City Hall – could fit on the second floor of St. Sebastian. The senior center is slated for the ground floor.

The purchase generated significant support from local senior citizens and veterans.

The city purchased the building from the Norwich diocese for $800,000 and an additional $2 million is estimated for renovation costs. The full renovation of the building will include the replacement of the boiler and air conditioning unit, the addition of an elevator to make the building ADA compliant and the leveling of the lower level floor. The building’s roof will also be replaced.

Before it closed in 2009, the school possessed an accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which required that the facility be “lead safe.” Accordingly, a report on the building is confident there are “no lead paint issues that would pose a threat to young children.”

In mid-July, city officials toured St. Sebastian’s School as a possible alternate site for the senior center. Former Mayor Sebastian Giuliano proposed the acquisition of the building in late October.

“I think we have taken a step in the right direction with this plan,” he said after the purchase vote.

New Haven’s “Promise” keeps kids and parents focused on education goals

A new program is encouraging young people in New Haven to focus on their studies by offering the chance for a free college education to students who graduate from New Haven public or charter schools.

Since the launch of New Haven Promise in November, school and city leaders have emphasized the importance of parental involvement in helping kids get on track toward college and a scholarship.

To participate in the scholarship program, both students and parents must sign a “pledge” form indicating that they understand the terms of the program and that they will "work hard every day to reach (their) full potential."

To qualify for the scholarship, students must have a 3.0 grade point average in high school, a 90 percent attendance rate, a record of good behavior, and completion of 40 hours of community service. To retain the scholarship, they must maintain a 2.5 grade-point average in college.

The program is a true “it takes a village” initiative, involving parents, students, Yale University, the City of New Haven, the schools, and the New Haven community. Yale is funding the scholarship portion of the Promise program, and the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven is providing administrative costs.

“Students, parents, and staff are all very excited about this real support to make college a reality,” schools Chief Operating Officer Will Clark said.

The goals of New Haven Promise are to:

• cultivate an aspiration for college education in New Haven public school students
• build community and parental engagement
• grow economic development in the City of New Haven
• promote a culture of college- and career-readiness, high expectations, and hope for students
• motivate children to believe they can succeed and
• promote a focus for adults to work with their children to help them achieve.

The school district expects to receive between 3,000 and 4,000 signed New Haven Promise pledge forms from high school students and their parents.

Pledge forms can be downloaded at www.newhavenschoolchange.org. Click on "New Haven Promise" and go to "forms."
Community groups help towns get kids ready for school

The first day of school can be stressful for any child but for kids who do not have school supplies and other items most youngsters take for granted, it can be downright trying because what children wear and bring to the opening day of classes can affect their early educational experience.

A child’s self-image has a dramatic effect on performance in the classroom and the lack of a positive self-image can create lasting consequences.

Working with the towns of Bristol, Burlington, Plainville and Plymouth, the United Way of West Central Connecticut is sponsoring its 13th annual Adopt-A-Child program, which assists families in need with school supplies, a backpack, and a first-day-of-school outfit for students.

This year’s program is preparing to provide school supplies to 425 students attending kindergarten through eighth grade. The students’ names are provided to the United Way through a total of 20 local programs such as the Salvation Army, Bristol Boys & Girls Club, and Bristol Community Organization.

While the students who are receiving donations are from four area towns, anyone can choose to help by “adopting” a child. Both individuals and companies are encouraged to participate.

Once assigned a child, donors receive the child’s name, gender, clothing sizes, favorite color and/or cartoon character, and the grade the student is entering.

The United Way asks donors to purchase a backpack, age-appropriate school supplies, and a school outfit. The outfit should consist of pants or skirt, shirt, underwear, and socks. Anything additional is welcome, but not required. The backpacks and supplies were collected at the beginning of August to allow time to distribute the donations.

Bolingbroke said assisting students in need causes a ripple effect through the community. She said students who are well prepared for school do better in class, and students with better grades are more likely to move on to college and then get better-paying jobs.

Adopt a Child began in 1999 when 30 children were served. The program has grown each year and last year more than 400 children were able to start school with hope and confidence – and a new, first day outfit.

Education Program creates future engineers

Newington is trying to develop the engineers of tomorrow one building block at a time – in this case, using LEGO pieces in a Parks and Recreation offering called the Play-Well TEKnologies Pre-Engineering program.

The pre-engineering program for children ages 5 to 7 ran for six sessions during January and February. The only heavy lifting involved was when the kids hoisted their proud creations in the air.

The youngsters not only impressed their friends after building motorized cars and planes, bridges, even cities — using over 10,000 LEGO pieces — they also learned the fundamentals of engineering and architecture along the way.

Play-Well offers a variety of camps, after-school classes and even birthday parties for kids all over the nation. Play-Well strives to:

• build problem-solving skills;
• provide an opportunity for creative expression;
• foster a greater appreciation of how things work; and
• encourage the qualities of inquisitiveness, self reliance, and self confidence in children.

They strive to accomplish all that in the context of fun-filled engineering and architectural projects by providing activities that both the children and the instructors enjoy.

Many Play-Well classes use LEGOS, but they are not affiliated with the toy company in any way. “It’s a very free-form class — we’re using LEGOS as the teaching medium so they see it as having fun and playing but at the same time they’re learning and applying engineering concepts.”

Because kids are always very proud of what they’ve built, the Play-Well instructors take photos of their work so they can share it with their families. And they don’t have to be science and math whizzes to sign up.

Escalera said the goal is to get them interested in science, math and engineering by presenting it in a fun way. They just have to have a passion for hands-on building, creativity and putting things together.
Danbury tries to close preschool learning gap

Danbury school officials are helping preschool and kindergarten teachers understand how parents and educators can better prepare children for elementary school and eliminate the learning curve between students who have had preschool experience and those who have not.

The initiative is gaining urgency because preschool programs and student cultures are growing increasingly diverse and the relationship between early learning programs and later educational success is well documented.

As schools try to reduce the gap in academic performance between poor children and their more middle class and affluent peers, the learning gap between preschool children is a crucial issue.

“For a child with a high-level preschool experience, the transition to kindergarten can be seamless. For those who watched television and had no educational exposure, there is an immediate achievement gap,” Danbury Deputy Superintendent William Glass said.

While all schools that receive state money must follow state preschool guidelines that are aligned with public schools, many preschools are private and have uncertified teachers.

“Things that were taught in kindergarten and first grade are being taught younger and younger,” said Karen Thompson, director of a local preschool. “Kindergarten teachers are teaching more advanced material and it helps both the parents and the preschool teachers to know what kindergarten expects of us in terms of preparing students.”

Danbury’s plan will require representatives from preschools and kindergartens to work together to understand alignments and gaps between their programs and create a guidebook for teachers and parents.

Officials say existing guidelines require children to leave preschool with certain age-appropriate skills, but the difference between students’ skills is sometimes really big. Some kids know how to sit in a circle, raise their hand, and stand in line. Others are not toilet trained. The disparity has increased in the last decade for several reasons:

• the growing diversity of children’s backgrounds,
• the greater differences in the quality of preschool experiences, and
• Danbury’s high poverty rate and the high number of students who move from school to school within the year.

Classroom program helps deter gangs in Groton

In an effort to prevent gang violence, the Groton City Police Department sends its youth officer into local schools to teach the 13-week Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. Created in Phoenix in 1991, G.R.E.A.T. is geared toward the age group at risk of getting involved in gangs and has reached millions of children in all 50 states.

Groton Police officials say it has helped reduce youth violence and gang problems in the city. Other G.R.E.A.T. goals include recognizing and resisting peer pressure, resolving conflicts, and learning about empathy and social responsibility.

While the major focus of the program is exploding the myth that being in a gang is “cool,” the uniformed officer in the classroom often strays from workbook lessons about subjects like anger management to address other topics, like the importance of having privacy controls on Facebook and not “friending” people unless you know them.

A few years ago, Groton police were concerned that gang activity was gaining foothold in the city and what was most disturbing was that students as young as middle-school were getting involved.

The department responded by assigning a youth officer to the middle school, and by concentrating staff at the Branford Manor apartments, where there had been some gang activity. Now local police know the students’ names, laugh at their jokes, and eat with them in the cafeteria – just some of the ways they establish a good relationship with area youth.

In the classroom, students tell Patrolman Scott LeSage what makes them angry, including being harassed and people who talk behind their backs. LeSage then listed things students can do to stay calm like counting to 10, talking it out, or walking away. He told them to practice “cooling your anger.” Students have seen the positive difference the G.R.E.A.T. program has made in their community.

Gia Aubin said she has learned techniques to get out of situations when people ask her to do things she doesn’t want to do. Halle Elal said LeSage has taught her how to stay away from “drama” and what the consequences can be if you don’t. Teacher Laura Johnson said the students like and respect LeSage, and that the program provides students with a rare opportunity to discuss emotions and to learn skills they need to become good citizens.

In addition to learning how to avoid gang activity, this year students will also decorate heart-shaped boxes, fill them with candy, and deliver them to senior citizens to fulfill a community service requirement.
**UPDATE: New Haven promise soars with scholarship sponsors**

“New Haven Promise” is a community partnership program that rewards academic success with the promise of college scholarships. Featured in the January issue of CT&C, the program is a great success story and the money continues to flow with the news that the program has received major funding commitments from Yale-New Haven Hospital and Wells Fargo.

Yale-New Haven Hospital, the flagship sponsor for New Haven Promise, has agreed to donate a total of $2 million which will be awarded over four years. Wells Fargo will donate a total of $300,000.

The Promise community partnership is both school- and community-based and represents one of the first comprehensive community and preK-12 college-going programs in the nation. A key program goal is to ensure that all New Haven public school students who meet the residency requirement will be able to receive a college scholarship and the funding commitments will make sure that promise can be kept.

New Haven Promise covers full tuition to in-state public colleges and universities or up to $2,500 annually to in-state private nonprofit colleges and universities to students of New Haven public schools and approved city public charter schools.

At a recent event in New Haven, Mayor John DeStefano Jr. thanked the sponsors for joining the effort to prepare New Haven students for college and beyond and said the partnership “is designed to create a college-going atmosphere in all of New Haven Public Schools and foster our students’ educational aspirations.”

Marna P. Borgstrom, president and CEO of Yale-New Haven Hospital, lauded the partnership’s ability to transform lives and said that “education will continue to be the foundation that helps build this community by providing a talented future workforce.”

Kent McClun, Wells Fargo's Greater Connecticut regional president, said the partnership will help train local students to fill the highly skilled jobs that are already dominating the workforce and will “encourage our best and brightest to attend our local colleges and universities.”

As part of the partnership program, New Haven is teaming up with College Summit, a nationally recognized nonprofit that improves college success rates for low-income high schools by helping students connect the dots between college and career goals and the academic decisions they make each day.

College Summit will be phased in at high schools throughout the district as a strategy of boosting college enrollment and participation in New Haven Promise.

---

**East Hartford to survey students on substance use**

East Hartford’s Board of Education has partnered with East of the River Action for Substance Abuse Elimination (ERASE) to administer an anonymous survey about students’ substance use habits.

The survey will put the school system in a better position for seeking grants and help the district create new programs. Separate surveys will be created for high school and middle school students. Students will not be required to take the survey and parents could choose to have their children not participate.

While the exact survey questions have not yet been worked out, local officials believe the results may reveal some “uncomfortable truths about the community” that nonetheless represent important information for the Board to review.

The 45-minute anonymous survey will be administered to students in grades 6 through 12 to gauge their drug and alcohol use.

A three-member subcommittee of the Board will work with ERASE to develop the survey for East Hartford and a draft notification letter to parents.

Parents will receive written notification of the survey and can choose to decline their child's participation or the student can refuse to take the survey during the actual survey period.

The survey will be conducted through “passive consent,” in which parents or students could opt out and which officials believe would achieve the best participation and the most valuable data.

ERASE recently awarded East Hartford with a 2010 Creative Prevention Productions award for its unique creation of “Prevention Idol,” a substance abuse prevention contest.

Students were asked to compose and perform songs, poetry, dance, or dramatic readings to illustrate how substance use negatively impacts lives and to showcase the benefits of living substance free.

Local officials said the activity was a huge success which brought together many youth and their families from the East Hartford community.
Proposed Norwich co-generation plant moves forward

The $1.47 million natural gas co-generation plant that Norwich has proposed to build in its industrial park has gained a favorable final environmental assessment from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).

The power station would help secure the future of a major tenant in the city’s industrial park and create additional electricity for residential customers.

Municipally-owned Norwich Public Utilities plans to build the unit adjacent to the Atlantic City Linen Supply Company in the city’s business park. NPU will pay half the project’s cost and the DOE is contributing a grant of $718,000.

In its final environmental assessment, the Department of Energy cited the benefits of the project to the environment such as more efficient energy production and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

The DOE also said the project will set a good example by advancing research and development and demonstrating an energy efficient technology.

With the favorable environmental assessment in hand, NPU has applied for local permits to the city’s planning and building departments and is seeking state air emissions permits. Once those hurdles are cleared, the construction could begin this summer.

The project calls for installing a natural gas-fired engine that would provide about 540 kilowatts of electricity for NPU customers. The engine also would have a closed-loop water system for the commercial laundry business, one of NPU’s highest energy-consuming customers.

Atlantic City Linen Supply would heat water for its laundry operation through a thermal energy system. That partly heated water would return to the cogeneration facility, pick up more heat and repeat the process.

The operation would increase energy efficiency of the linen operation from 35 percent to about 60 percent. The laundry facility uses 130,000 to 160,000 gallons of hot water per day.

Atlantic City Linen’s high demand for heat for hot water fits perfectly with the co-generation concept used in the station. Co-generation produces electricity and heat simultaneously and it is also a form of energy recycling. “Atlantic City Linen is a big utility user that’s talked about expanding,” said Bob Mills, Executive Director of the Norwich Community Development Corporation. “During these times, I’m happy to see any investment being made.”

Atlantic City Linen, which does large loads of laundry for Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun, employs about 100 people in Norwich.
Solar energy will power Somers town buildings and cut costs

Somers has received an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant worth $387,200 for the installation of solar panels and to purchase discounted energy for the town’s elementary school and public works building.

The project at Somers Elementary School calls for the installation of 2,500 solar panels, which will produce 175,000 kilowatt-hours per year and provide 39 percent of the school’s electricity.

Another 850 to 1,000 panels will be installed at the public works building, producing 75,000 kilowatt-hours per year and providing 99 percent of the building’s electricity. Along with the recent installation of energy efficient lighting at the public works facility, the panels will help the building generate almost all the electricity it needs.

DBS Energy Inc. will design and install the panels and some of the grant funds will be used to purchase energy from DBS at a 20 percent discounted rate that will help recoup the costs of the two projects. The solar panels combined with the energy efficient lighting will help close the gap between the amount of energy produced and consumed in each building. The town originally planned to install 1,500 solar panels at the elementary school and 800 at the public works building but because DBS Energy was able to negotiate a 25 percent reduction in the price of the panels, more were able to be purchased.

With the improvements in place, the town estimates it will save $20,000 a year in energy costs at the elementary school and $12,000 a year at the public works building. The life of the panels is 20 to 25 years and they will be maintained by DBS for 20 years.

Local officials said the panels will also help in other ways and noted that because they generate heat, the panels will help melt snow from the roofs in winter – a problem for many schools and public buildings this past winter that brought the sight of bundled-up public works employees shoveling snow off roofs in communities across the state.

The installation of the solar panels began at the end of June and was expected to be completed by October.

Litchfield Seeks Cost-Saving Energy Improvements

Armed with grant funds and assisted by a community college intern, Litchfield is looking at cost-effective energy alternatives and architectural improvements that will help the town go green and save money in the future.

While improvements to older town-owned properties may not be undertaken immediately, local officials are developing a blueprint for future action by exploring cost-saving options and different ways of trying to lower building energy expenses.

Jesse Philippi — a Naugatuck Valley Community College student, working through the federal “Sustainable Operations: Alternative and Renewable Energy (SOAR) Initiative” – conducted an energy audit of six town buildings to benchmark their energy ratings and discover areas where improvement could be achieved.

The town’s three schools and the town hall, public works building and water pollution control facility were given energy ratings on a scale from 1 to 100 that will help the town identify areas for saving money. Any building that scores over 75 qualifies for an EnergyStar rating, which signifies its energy efficiency.

While Litchfield’s elementary school was rated at 84 and the high school scored 78, the intermediate school scored only 27. The poor score for the intermediate school was blamed on cinderblock construction which allows outside air to pass through walls easily, causing heat and air conditioning to escape.

The town has already taken steps to improve the energy efficiency of its schools with new windows, light fixtures, new lights in the intermediate school’s gymnasium and two energy-efficient boilers in the elementary school — mostly funded through state grants.

The assessment conducted by Philippi provided town officials with new options for bringing energy costs down including LED streetlights, waterless urinals and solar tubes for the schools. Solar tubes – similar to skylights – reflect sunlight into a diffuser and spread the natural light into rooms, which is much healthier for children than artificial light.

Referencing science experiments with children and natural light, Philippi said children tend to be more awake and more open to learning when working in natural light instead of artificial illumination.

Litchfield has also been asked to be listed as a re-energizing station for plugged-in electric or hybrid vehicles. Citing the town’s location in the northwest part of the state, Philippi and local officials believe Litchfield would be a great point for “green” cars to stop and recharge their batteries.

SOAR is a federally-funded “green jobs” training program administered by the Connecticut Community College system that offers certificates in green and sustainable technologies.
East Hartford firehouse first to be environmentally certified in state

Upon completion in July, East Hartford’s new 14,000 square-foot firehouse will be the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified fire station in Connecticut. In 2006 the town bonded $5 million for the project and also received $3.4 million in stimulus money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The structure is equipped with a geothermal closed-loop system for heating and cooling that will reduce energy costs 20 to 25 percent. A series of solar panels was installed to generate heat and hot water.

It will take about seven years of energy savings for the geothermal system to pay for itself.

A 26,000-gallon underground tank was installed that will collect rainwater to test the fire pumps. Another 8,000-gallon underground tank will capture rainwater to wash vehicles, floors, and other equipment. Both tanks will help minimize runoff into the facility’s storm water drains.

Three bays were included so mechanics will be able to perform maintenance and repairs on vehicles on site.

“The center bay is larger to handle our bigger vehicles,” said Fire Chief John Oates. “It was designed so the truck could drive straight in, so we would not have to back it in. This will make it safer and more efficient.”

A backup 175-kilowatt diesel-driven generator, with a 236-gallon oil tank, was added in the event of power outages.

East Hartford officials said the new firehouse was needed to replace the old Main Street station that was built during the early 1930s and eventually developed structural problems on the upper floor. The only item that was salvaged from the Depression-era brick building was the limestone firehouse No. 5 sign that now adorns the new station.

The new fire station will be manned by six firefighters 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with sleeping quarters, a fitness room, kitchen, dining room, showers, and locker rooms.

Local officials are pleased with the progress of the project and expect the new fire station to be completed by the beginning of July and occupied by September. In the meantime, residents can view pictures of the firehouse on the town’s website.

Rep. Courtney, local officials laud Stafford energy savings

Stafford has installed 130 energy efficient LED lights in the parking lots at their library and five public schools which will reduce energy consumption by 75 percent per year at those locations and save the town more than $410,000 over the lifetime of the lights.

“With the installation of the outdoor LED lighting at our schools and public library, our town has gained a substantial energy savings and at the same time has made a positive impact on the environment,” First Selectman Michael P. Krol said.

The lights were installed with the help of both federal and Connecticut Light and Power funding and will save approximately two million kilowatt hours during their 25-year lifetime. The town received $59,000 in funding from a federal Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant in April 2010 and a $42,000 incentive grant through an Energy Efficiency Fund program from CL&P.

“Stafford is setting a tremendous example for other communities,” said U.S. Rep. Joseph D. Courtney, D-2nd District. “By taking action, the town will reduce electricity costs by $18,000 per year — a savings they can pass along to taxpayers.”

Stafford officials said the overall project has a combined 105 LED lights between the five school parking lots and 25 at the library parking lot, at a total cost of $76,000. The installation began in November and was completed in March.

“It shows the town is serious about saving energy costs,” said Michael D. Waugh, Stafford’s special projects administrator. About $25,000 left over from the grants will help fund other energy savings projects including LED lighting at the town’s transfer station and highway garage.
Talcottville Gorge in Vernon transferred to Land Trust

Ownership of the area known as the Talcottville Gorge has been transferred to the Northern Connecticut Land Trust, which will maintain the parcel as open space in perpetuity. The 20-acre property has been a top priority for Vernon’s open space task force since 1998 because of its historic value and unique terrain.

“The Talcotts have been very generous in allowing the public to use it, but now it’s formally a public property,” said open space chair Ann Letendre, noting that the gorge is forever preserved as an undeveloped piece of land, with both recreational and historic value.

Residents have long used the scenic, wooded area, which contains a portion of the Tankerhoosen River with waterfalls and striking rock formations, for fishing, hiking, and bird watching.

It was also the site of a cotton mill built in the early 1820s by prominent manufacturer Peter Dobson who observed boulders and rocks near the gorge that appeared to have been abraded by some massive force.

His observations led him to write a paper on “glacial theory,” published in 1826 which helped form early notions of what is now considered common knowledge of geological processes.

The land transfer means outdoor lovers can continue enjoying the natural beauty of the property which runs between Interstate 84 and the Hop River State Park hiking trail.

John G. Talcott, Jr. donated the property to the land trust, pending a commitment by the Town that the parcel would be cared for.

The Land Trust covered closing costs and other expenses with funding help from local organizations, including the Friends of Valley Falls, Vernon Citizens for Responsible Development, and Friends of the Hockanum River Linear Park.

The town also helped with expenses by contributing money from its open space fund.

Stewardship of the property will be a joint effort of the land trust and the Vernon Citizens for Responsible Development, who volunteered to help maintain the area, including marking trails and boundary lines.

Glastonbury is connecting its open space dots

In addition to adding to its open space inventory, the town’s latest proposed acquisition will also preserve a half-mile stretch of Roaring Brook and form a greenway by linking two other public properties.

The town has reached an agreement to purchase a 55-acre parcel known as the Yanaros property. The property lies to the south of the 43-acre Galli parcel – for which the town owns the development rights – and north of a 14-acre town-owned parcel along Coldbrook Road.

The purchase will give the town a swath of 112 acres just to the east of Hopewell Elementary School.

“The proposed purchase is consistent with the Plan of Conservation and Development goal of preserving large tracts of land,” Town Manager Richard Johnson said, “which ideally would connect to adjacent existing open space or undeveloped parcels and protect gaps in the open space stream belt system.”

As an added bonus, the town tax rolls won’t be taking a hit if the property is taken off since the current owner pays only $220 a year because the land cannot legally be developed.

Both the Yanaros property and the 14-acre parcel would preserve a half-mile stretch of Roaring Brook as it flows from the eastern portion of town through Cotton Hollow Nature Preserve and into the Connecticut River.

Since 1988, the town has preserved more than 1,500 acres of open space.

Innovative lease will preserve farmland and agricultural mission

New Milford has found a way to continue the agricultural and educational mission of an historic treasure – the 169-year-old Sullivan Farm – through an innovative lease to a local not-for-profit group.

The Town bought the 106-acre farm on Route 202 in 1997 and for the past nine years it has been run by the Town's youth agency.

It is a fully operational farm including market vegetable gardens and a seasonal farmer’s market with fruit and berry production, hay production, and maple syrup production.

The farm has long been cultivated as an educational opportunity for local youth, who have offered the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor for sale to the public.

The youth agency recognizes that limited staffing is restricting the farm’s ability to grow and expand its mission, and it supports the proposed transfer to the Friends of Sullivan Farm.

The farm offers educational programs and is a model agri-tourism farm designed to expose people of all ages to New England agriculture and farm life.

It also hosts special events designed to celebrate our agricultural heritage like last autumn’s Fall Festival which included hayrides, culinary workshops, sugar house tours, farm animals, and cider making demonstrations.

The Friends – who are run by a 12-member board – would continue the mission of Sullivan Farm as a vocational and educational agricultural center benefiting area youth.

The group expects it would donate to the town as much as $10,000 annually, beginning in 2014, for agencies that serve New Milford youth.

The Friends organization intends to position the farm as a regional destination for agri-tourism and very importantly, the farmland would remain preserved.

New Milford will negotiate lease terms with the Friends of Sullivan Farm and the plan is to transfer operation of the farm to the local not-for-profit group in July.
Collaboration turns runways to greenways at former airport

What was once an airport now has a future as a bird habitat, tidal wetland, and coastal preserve, now that fundraising for the conservation of the former Griswold Airport land in Madison has been completed.

The capstone – a $500,000 grant from the state DEP – will be used by the Trust for Public Land to conserve 17.4 acres in the most ecologically significant part of the park.

The land hosts highly valuable natural resources, including frontage on the Hammonasset River, extensive tidal wetlands, native coastal grasslands, and an upland forest. The parcel is also adjacent to Hammonasset Beach State Park.

The conservation effort is a partnership between the town, the State, the Trust for Public Land, and Connecticut Audubon.

The majority of the former airport land – approximately 60-70 percent – will be maintained as open space with walking trails throughout. The plan is to restore a portion of the coastal grassland area near the wetland in order to enhance the habitat for the wide variety of birds that utilize the area.

In May 2010, the trust and Audubon Connecticut provided $1.7 million to help with the purchase of the Griswold Airport land, but private fundraising wasn’t complete by the closing date. The two nonprofits then provided bridge financing for the acquisition and tied up the fundraising with the DEP grant.

Local officials cited the fundraising success as “further evidence of the state’s support to preserve the important and fragile natural resources that abound at the Griswold Airport site.”

The Town and the Trust have both recently received grants for the project. The Town was awarded a $500,000 grant from the state Department of Environmental Protection to reduce town bonds for the parcel and the Trust received a $260,000 grant from the Long Island License Plate fund.

In 2007, the property owner wanted to sell the land for a 127-unit housing development.

“We are very pleased that the state agrees that the ecological resources of the former Griswold Airport deserve protection,” said Alicia Betty, trust project manager and philanthropy director. “We are thrilled that this grant will complete the campaign that we’ve been conducting with our partner, Audubon Connecticut.”

Environmental remediation and demolition of the old airport buildings has already begun. In addition to the conservation area, the park will include three multipurpose athletic fields and a lawn area.

Farmington River protection gets boost

Habitat protection and recreation along the Farmington River got a major boost when the Farmington River Watershed Association received a State habitat grant to design a project to remove the damaged Spoonville Dam between Bloomfield and East Granby.

Eileen Fielding, executive director of the watershed association, said the state grant will make it easier for the group to secure federal funding toward the total $1.4 million cost of the project.

“Removing the dam is an important component of restoring the habitat that our migratory fish had 200 years ago,” she said.

In addition to allowing passage for anadromous fish such as American shad, alewife, and blueback herring, removing the remnants of the Spoonville Dam would enhance the area for canoeing and kayaking.

The Spoonville Dam is located at the outlet of the Tariffville Gorge in East Granby and was built in the 19th century for hydroelectric power. It was breached during the 1955 flood, but much of the dam is still in place except for a gap where the river now flows so fast that native fish are prevented from moving further upstream to spawn.

The dam got its name from the silver plating factory erected in 1840 on the north bank of the river. It was the first factory of its kind in the United States.

The Farmington River Watershed covers 33 towns and was the first river in Connecticut to have a section federally designated as Wild & Scenic.

The Watershed’s reservoirs and aquifers provide clean water to about 1 million people – about one-third of Connecticut’s entire population.

The Farmington River Watershed Association has been the guardian of the Farmington River and its watershed since it was established in 1953.
Connecticut farmers, facing price-pressure from the economy and space pressure from subdivisions and shopping centers, are working with officials in towns across the state and with the Connecticut Farm Bureau to ease and update zoning rules to encourage more farming.

Farm Bureau officials say a recent agriculture census showed that although farms are shrinking in size in Connecticut, they are growing in numbers and more and more have diverse operations like specialty markets, community activities, and agri-tourism.

A recent forum of about 100 farmers and local officials focused on the need for zoning laws to reflect the way farm operations are changing. They also discussed how widely zoning laws vary among Connecticut’s 169 towns. It turns out that outdated or unfriendly rules are a problem in many towns, affecting everything from farm stands to parking at wine tastings. In some towns, certain requirements on farms haven’t been updated in nearly one hundred years.

Forum presenters told farmers that some towns are hostile to farming and use zoning to ban farms and that in many cases, local boards define agricultural activities in certain ways and place restrictions not called for in state statute.

Some towns have changed zoning rules to allow activities such as horseback riding and specialty-niche farms. East Windsor recently reduced the minimum amount of land required for farming from 3 or 4 acres to one acre to promote smaller niche farming.

“We’re trying to give farmers a little more leeway in what they can do,” said Canterbury town planner Steven Sadlowski.

Farmers and officials from other towns also spoke about some of the resistance they have encountered.

One dairy farmer said when he wanted to build a bigger barn he had to move his farming operation from one town to another because of building size restrictions in his original location.

Putnam First Selectman Jim Rivers said his town could do more with zoning to encourage farms, but acknowledged that a “vocal minority” of opponents fear that any changes will threaten the rural character of the town.

The forum was sponsored by the Connecticut Farm Bureau.

---

75 acres preserved in New Milford

New Milford has permanently preserved 75 acres of land through a conservation easement donated by local residents to the Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust, Connecticut’s largest and only regional land trust.

The forested parcel is located on Bear Hill, a prominent 1,280-foot mountain in the Northville section of the town and a spot that is visible from New Milford, Kent, and Washington. The land features an outstanding mix of forest habitats and includes outcrops, open woodlands, 12 acres of upland wetlands, streams, and almost 3,000 feet of historic stone walls that are a legacy of farming from more than a century ago.

The project continues of the Trust’s multi-year effort to protect Bear Hill and Iron Hill and the upper watersheds of the West Aspetuck and East Aspetuck rivers. Over 800 acres have already been preserved in a connected block on Bear Hill and Iron Hill and an almost five-mile-long continuous wildlife corridor from Northville to South Kent has been created.

The easement is particularly important because part of the land had been slated for development, with a subdivision already approved for the area. Under the terms of the agreement, the land has been designated as Forever Wild which allows the native trees to survive for their entire natural lifespan.

Old-growth forest was the most common pre-settlement habitat type but is now the rarest and the only way to restore them is to create protected forest refuges that will allow native trees to reach their age potential of 300 to 800 years without interference from loggers.

The regional Trust’s Forever Wild program now exceeds 1,100 acres in 18 preserves in the communities of Cornwall, New Milford, North Canaan, Kent, Litchfield, and Falls Village. The restoration of this habitat ensures that future generations will have as part of their landscape a representation of what was once the most common forest type before European settlement.

The non-profit regional Trust works in 17 towns and has permanently protected over 10,000 acres in the Northwest Corner.
Middletown has acquired as open space a 22-acre parcel of land known as the Jablonski property that now helps constitute a total of 900 acres of continuous open space in that area of town, which includes the 30-acre John J. Tynan Park.

The new acquisition, along with other open space and city water and sewer department land, allows the trails in Tynan Park to connect with the blue-blazed Mattabesett Trail all the way to the top of High Mountain. The 22 acres of forest will be accessible from the Tynan Park parking area.

The city, along with the state Department of Environmental Protection through an open space matching grant, split the purchase price of $331,500.

“With the help of state, local, and charitable funding, the Northern Connecticut Land Trust has preserved a key 30-acre forested property adjacent to the Shenipsit State Forest as open space in Ellington.

The property is watershed land that includes a feeder stream for the Shenipsit Lake reservoir. It also provides hiking trails linked to the Soapstone Mountain Blue Blaze trail system and it is surrounded on three sides by state forest.

While it was not in immediate danger of being developed, it was a strategically important parcel that the land trust feared could become a target for development in the future. For the last two years, the land trust has tried to acquire the land which is located off Webster and Porter Roads.

It was finally acquired from a private owner for a total cost of $95,000. The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Lead Trust-Cox Family Fund at the Boston Foundation provided $50,000 in funding, the state Environmental Protection Department awarded a $29,742 grant, and the Town of East Lyme contributed $15,000 towards the purchase.

The land trust is an all-volunteer organization that serves East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Somers, Stafford, Tolland, and Vernon. Their mission is to preserve the natural resources of the northern region of the state, including agricultural land and other ecologically important open space.

---

Cooperative effort preserves 30 acres of forest in

East Lyme and The Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit group, have agreed to purchase 301 acres surrounding a local pond, a parcel Trust officials called “one of the more beautiful forests in the state and an important habitat.”

After the purchase is finalized, the Darrow Pond land will complete 3,800 acres of contiguous open space linking Camp Pattagansett, the Yale University-owned Sheffield Scientific School, Ponderosa Park and Nehantic State Forest – making it one of the largest parcels of open space in Connecticut.

During the past 20 years, there have been proposals to develop the wooded 301 acres into a golf course and a 600-unit retirement community. Those plans that never advanced past the drawing board and today the Darrow Pond area is still a hilly forestland with impressive stands of oaks.

Under the agreement, the town will preserve most of the land as open space. The trust would buy the property for $4.15 million and then transfer it to the town for the same price after the closing date.

About 50 acres will be set aside for a water tower that will play an important role in the town’s efforts to modernize its water supply. The remaining 250 acres will be preserved as open space suitable for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing, and for wildlife habitat.

“It’s an opportunity the town should not pass up,” said First Selectman Paul Formica.

“We can’t afford not to do it.”

Formica said the Darrow Pond area rises at one point to an elevation of 260 feet, an ideal spot to build a tank to store between 1 million and 1.5 million gallons of water. The height would help create better water pressure.

The property’s two wells - dug as part of the planned retirement community, but never used - would also be available to the town.

Earlier this year, residents voted in a referendum to approve a $10.7 million plan to pipe in water from Lake Komokom, a reservoir owned by New London. The plan, called the regional water interconnection, would give the town an ample supply of water, especially during the summer months when residents are often ordered to conserve water.

“The regional water interconnection will position East Lyme with the water it needs well into the future,” Formica said.
The work to transform the former Griswold airport in Madison from asphalt runways and airport buildings into a tidal wetland and coastal preserve continues to progress, thanks largely to the support of town voters who approved a $9 million bond authorization to protect the environmentally important coastal property adjacent to Hammonasset Beach State Park.

The bond authorization was the culmination of a decade-long local effort to save the 42-acre environmental gem and its extraordinary natural resources from a 127-unit adult housing community that had been proposed for the site. The land includes frontage on the Hammonasset River, extensive tidal wetlands, native coastal grasslands, and an upland forest.

In addition to covering $7.8 million of the $9.5 million purchase price, the town bond authorization also set aside $1.2 million to convert the area to a park including runway and hanger removal, general cleanup, and the development of multipurpose athletic fields and a lawn area in the new park.

The effort was also supported by the Trust for Public Land and Connecticut Audubon and the project received a pair of grants from the state departments of Environmental Protection and Economic and Community Development.

In 2008, the town invited the Trust for Public Land to explore the purchase of the site on behalf of the town, which is the permanent owner and steward of the land.

“Future generations of Madison residents will benefit from the action we took to save this important landscape,” First Selectman Fillmore McPherson said at the time of the bond approval.

The majority of the former airport land – approximately 60-70 percent – will be maintained as open space with walking trails. A portion of the coastal grassland area near the wetland will be restored in order to enhance the habitat for the wide variety of birds that utilize the area.

Environmental remediation and demolition of the old airport buildings has already begun. An environmental review of the property – including soil and groundwater analyses and the use of ground penetrating radar – determined that only minor soil remediation would be necessary.

Griswold Airport opened in 1931.

---

A former metal plating factory, environmental hazard, and EPA Superfund site on 11 acres in Fairfield has been redeveloped into a retail complex providing hundreds of new jobs.

The location was once home to a metals refining factory that rolled out sheets, bars, wire and anodes for electroplating. Later, a business that recycled precious metals from scrap and industrial waste employed about 430 people in the town.

By 2002, the plant stood empty and it was designated a year later as an EPA Superfund site due to industrial contamination.

Private developers purchased the property for $8 million in 2003, after soil samples showed unacceptable levels of cadmium, arsenic, and lead, and surface water samples indicated dissolved arsenic and mercury above criteria allowed by the state. As part of the sales agreement, the former owners were responsible for the clean-up.

Working with state officials on the clean-up and with the developers on a plan for the site, town officials kept the project on track, met with prospective tenants and today – after five years of site remediation and three more of planning and construction – the once-polluted property is now home to the new “Kings Crossing” retail complex which opened in June.

Once the site cleanup was complete, work began on preparing parking lots, leveling and grading the property, and installing utilities such as water, electricity, and sewer systems. The buildings on the property began to rise this year when the spring construction

(Cont. on page 18)
Citizens group plans greener Manchester

A local citizens group has developed a ten-year plan to increase energy and resource conservation and transform Manchester into a model “green” community.

Working with the town’s Environmental Services Department, “Citizens for a Greener Manchester” recently released a green energy and sustainability master plan that focuses on recycling, making town and residential buildings more energy efficient, reducing auto emissions, and providing training for “green” jobs.

Specifics of the 10-year plan include:

• Increasing recycling among residents, businesses, and town agencies and creating a compost operation at the landfill with a “wet compostable” collection service to be added by 2015.
• Expanding transportation options, including the development of bicycle and walking routes and working with CT Transit to improve and expand local bus service.
• Identifying properties, both town-owned and private, to be redeveloped as energy-efficient, mixed-income housing and businesses.
• Analyzing the energy efficiency of town-owned buildings and housing authority units and the cost to increase efficiency and adopting green building standards for all new town construction and renovation.
• Providing outreach and information about green construction, solar energy, and home energy efficiency through town offices, the library, and the municipal website.
• Protecting and expanding open spaces and encouraging the development of community gardens and small parks.
• Increasing “green” businesses in town and increasing training for “green” jobs by working with the chamber of commerce, the high schools, and Manchester Community College.

Manchester General Manager Scott Shanley said the town has implemented a number of measures over the past several years to improve conservation and energy efficiency including the replacement of all lighting and ballasts in public buildings, the purchase of 11 hybrid vehicles, and the purchase of 20 percent of the energy used in public buildings from green sources.

New retail complex rises in Fairfield from former Superfund site (Cont. from page 17)

season began.

The anchor tenant is a Whole Foods market, a “green” grocery with products that are free from artificial sweeteners and preservatives and with energy-efficient and environmentally conscious policies that include seeking LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for its stores.

The 45,000-square-foot store employs 200 people and will offer a variety of “locally sourced foods.” It will be the first in the area to feature an in-store cooking department. There will also be a “Healthy Eating Center,” part of a company program that hosts classes, demonstrations, and educational programs to help shoppers make healthier eating choices.

There are two other retail buildings on the site and tenants include CVS, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Chase Bank, PETCO, and Five Guys Burgers.

“To see a site successfully cleaned up and revitalized with tenants of this caliber is a home run for our community,” said Mark Barnhart, Fairfield’s Director of Community and Economic Development.
Trumbull requires defined contribution pensions for new, non-union hires

Trumbull’s town council has voted to bar new, nonunion employees from joining the town’s established pension system, instead requiring them to participate in a defined contribution plan – a move First Selectman Tim Herbst called “a monumental step toward pension reform.”

The plan will be based on a 457 plan, similar to a 401(k) plan. Town employees will choose how to invest their retirement savings and the town will provide a dollar-for-dollar match up to 5 percent. Fully vested employees will be able to take all of their funds with them when they leave their town jobs.

Thirty-seven other towns in Connecticut offer defined contribution plans as an option and about twenty towns use defined contribution plans exclusively. One advantage to a defined contribution plan is that it requires the town to make a contribution year after year so there is no unfunded liability.

Currently, only 27 percent of Tumbull’s pension obligations are funded. Even if the town added $400,000 to its pension investments every year, the entire pension fund would be depleted by 2035, Trumbull financial director Maria Pires said. At that point, Trumbull would have two options: borrow the money or put pensions into the annual budget. Both options would result in higher taxes.

Pires said actuaries have calculated that Trumbull would have to increase its yearly contribution to the pension fund to almost $4.5 million a year for the account to be sustainable.

During the last three years the town has increased its pension funding and it now totals $3 million a year. There is no way the town can afford another $1.5 million to reach the actuaries’ recommended goal, Pires said.

Pires said a fully vested town employee making $50,000 a year will get a net total of $247,000 from the town under a defined pension plan, assuming he or she lives 10 years after retirement. Meanwhile, the town would pay $75,000 for the same employee under a defined contribution plan.

The town has already included the 5 percent match in the 2012 fiscal year budget for the 10 people who will be eligible to join the defined contribution plan this year.

"The only way we are going to solve this problem is with both short term and long term reform," Herbst said. "At the end of the day, these efforts will yield positive dividends for Trumbull taxpayers."

Branford teachers agree to salary freeze

Branford’s board of education has negotiated a new three-year contract that freezes teachers’ salaries in the first year of a contract with the Branford Education Association that runs from July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2015.

The new contract requires a salary freeze for all teachers in the first year with a general wage increase of 1 percent in the second and third years of the contract. Teachers who are not on the maximum salary step will advance one step in the second and third years.

Board of Education Chairman Frank Carrano said the new contract differs greatly from the previous three-year contract, which amounted to almost 4 percent per year for each of the three years.

"Now we have a three-year agreement that comes in at less than 6 percent," said Carrano, who added that the significant change between the contracts can be attributed to the economic times as well as other factors.

Health insurance stipulations also changed in the new contract. The contract increases health insurance co-payments in the second year of the agreement and increases health insurance premium contributions by teachers in the second and third years of the contract.

The contract also includes an optional Health Savings Account insurance plan, which could benefit both the employer and the employee and has the potential to generate savings in the district.

The contract also maintains additional planning time for teachers in the elementary schools.

Carrano, BEA president Carl Seeley and Superintendent Hamlet Hernandez all praised the collaborative work of those involved in the agreement.

"The teachers deserve a tremendous amount of credit for the way they recognized the community’s economic challenges and partnered with the board to meet those challenges," said Carrano.
New Britain ordinance puts bite on blight

New Britain has adopted a new anti-blight ordinance that increases fines for violators and puts more teeth in the city’s former blight policies.

“We will be aggressively addressing the most blighted of properties,” Mayor Timothy O’Brien said.

“Graffiti-marred buildings with shattered windows and garbage-strewn yards ruin property values for neighbors, and cost tax-payers by driving down the city's tax base,” O’Brien said.

The new law increases fines from $100 per violation a day to $250 per violation which officials believe will be a deterrent to those who have tried to skirt the law in the past. In cases where numerous violations occur on a single property, the daily fines could exceed $1,000 a day.

“It's not just $250 a day. If you have 20 broken windows, it's $250 for each window. That will get attention,” O’Brien said.

The ordinance also gives the city the power to take possession of the most egregious abandoned and blighted properties if the owners don’t fix the violations or pay the fines.

The ordinance also adds public safety violations, such as excessive noise and off-campus partying sometimes associated with the local university.

Officials said the most common blight issues relate to garbage, debris and tall and overgrown grass. The city gets about 30 blight complaints a month.

Housing Inspector Tim Digan, the city’s lone blight official, will now be working Saturdays to address the growing problem.

The ordinance also includes a provision leading to the establishment of an easy-to-search database of violators and inspected properties – currently all of those records are kept on paper.

Violations include:

• collapsing or missing walls, floors or roof;
• vermin infestation;
• exterior paint that is significantly chipped or faded;
• interior furniture left outside;
• uncut grass, weeds or overgrowth at least one-foot in length;
• clothing left hanging from trees;
• screening which contains tears or ragged edges; and
• dead trees deemed hazardous to the public or to adjacent property.

In addition, a 1 percent per day interest charge will be applied for failure to pay within 45 days.

Ridgefield takes action to control downtown destiny

Downtown Ridgefield was once home to an internationally renowned research center, where scientists from around the world studied the geology and chemistry of petroleum. At its peak, about 300 people worked at the center but in 2006, the company vacated the property and moved its research operations to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The center’s main building was designed by Philip Johnson, one of the most acclaimed American architects of the 20th century. Now, after sitting vacant for five years, the Schlumberger Doll Research Center and its 40-acres of prime downtown property are being purchased by the town.

The potential of what could be developed on the site, like hundreds of condominiums or other highly concentrated development, was a concern for local officials.

“It was important for the town to control the destiny of this property,” First Selectman Rudy Marconi said. “If the property was developed to its fullest extent, the traffic it would generate would choke the downtown. The traffic implications are horrendous.”

The town is spending $6 million to buy the 40-acre site and its 10-building scientific research complex. An additional $1 million will be used to demolish some of its aging buildings, pay a variety of fees, and prepare the site for planned re-sales which they hope will recover a good portion of the $7 million expenditure.

Schlumberger – a multinational corporation that still supplies technology and management services to the world’s petroleum industry – will pay for the environmental cleanup of the property under the terms of the sale. That work includes cleaning up an oil-tank spill that has spread petroleum into the site’s groundwater, and removal of contaminated soil.

Once the remediation is complete, the town hopes to sell about 10 acres of land of the campus. The town will sell the land on the condition that the developer builds a mix of single-family homes and apartments on it.

Marconi said that an individual is interested in acquiring another 12 acres of the land – including the corporate center designed in 1952 by Philip Johnson – to house a private art collection.

The town plans to use the remaining land as open space that could be used to extend Ridgefield’s 2.5-mile rail trail.
Bethel and Newtown consider defined contribution pension plans

Bethel and Newtown have joined the growing ranks of municipalities exploring the transition from traditional pension plans to alternatives like 401(k) plans for their employees.

Newtown First Selectman Pat Llodra said the town is considering the switch from a defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan because the latter is more financially predictable and shifts the investment risk from the town to the town’s employees.

The town provides pensions for town employees who have worked in the municipality for at least 10 years and for department heads who have worked at least 5 years. There are currently 40 retired town employees receiving pensions and 19 retired police officers who are receiving pension funds.

With defined benefit pensions, towns are responsible for funding the pension benefits and in tough economic times when the pension investments are not making enough money, towns have to contribute more.

By switching to a defined contribution plan, the town would not only save money, it would also transfer the risk to the employees and be able to better predict the amount it would spend on pensions each year.

Newtown will focus on the development of a transition plan over the next six months and will then begin negotiating with the bargaining units in town.

Current employees would continue to receive their original pension plans, while new employees would be enrolled in the defined contribution plans.

In addition, the Town of Bethel recently issued a request for proposals for a consultant to study the retirement plans offered to its employees.

First Selectman Matt Knickerbocker said that while many people assume a municipality can save money by going with a defined contribution plan, “we want to do our homework and make sure that’s true.”

The town expected to have the report completed in June when negotiations are set to begin for some of the town’s bargaining units.

Bethel does have one defined contribution plan that officials began in the early 1990s for members of the police department. The plan – known as a 457 – is similar to a 401(k) in that employees contribute a portion of their paycheck on a pre-tax basis to the account.

While members of the police department’s union have since returned to a traditional pension plan, the defined contribution plan is still used by some employees, including non-union employees such as department heads and elected officials.

That plan is voluntary and does not include a match by the town.

South Windsor tax abatement program spurs growth

As part of its efforts to generate business development and local jobs, South Windsor has made frequent use of municipal tax abatements which have helped bring new companies to the town and encouraged existing ones to expand.

The town council recently approved a tax abatement with FedEx Ground Packaging Systems Inc. with the hope that the company will invest $25 million in a new distribution center in town.

Under the agreement with FedEx, the real property assessment for the distribution center would be reduced by 70 percent for seven years. The action followed a town economic development commission recommendation to approve the agreement.

FedEx Ground has proposed building a new distribution center with an assessed value estimated between $6.4 million and $8.4 million. It is estimated that the agreement would reduce the company’s annual tax bill between $125,000 and $166,000 and South Windsor hopes the abatement will be the sweetener to get the deal done.

“The town has done everything to make it work,” Town Manager Matthew B. Galligan said.

The agreement is contingent on FedEx Ground’s meeting the estimated $25 million construction cost estimate and agreeing to continue operations at the site for a minimum of 10 years from the date the town issues the certificate of occupancy.

The town’s tax partnership program helped to persuade Aldi Inc. to build a 500,000-square-foot regional warehouse and distribution facility in 2007. The agreement included a seven-year, 100 percent tax abatement on the new building, which had an estimated assessed value of $33.2 million.

DST Output also expanded its facilities under a July 2002 agreement with a seven-year, 80 percent assessment reduction. The new construction at DST Output had an estimated value of $3.1 million at that time. DST Output prints and delivers bills, statements and other documents for large financial services, insurance, health care and utility companies.

And in exchange for a $415,000 tax lien, the town in January agreed to convey a long-vacant industrial building on Nutmeg Road to a developer who intends to clean up and restore the property that formerly housed a military contractor and is currently on the list of brownfield sites in Connecticut. The agreement included a property tax abatement for six years on the site.

Councilman Kevin McCann said the tax partnership program is important as a vehicle for creating jobs. Companies receiving the tax benefit must agree to maintain operations at their local facilities for a certain period of time or pay property taxes on the full tax assessment from the date that the abatement agreement took effect.
Seymour Retools Tax Incentives to Attract New Business

Seymour officials are updating the town’s outdated tax incentive program in hopes of attracting new businesses to the community and keeping existing ones right where they are.

“There’s too much residential and not enough commercial, and we want to change that,” said First Selectman Paul Roy.

Selectmen Kurt Miller and John Conroy have been compiling data and poring over other towns’ incentive plans – including plans in Oxford, Orange and Shelton – in order to devise one for Seymour. Miller says if Seymour wants to compete in the contest for new jobs, its incentive program needs some serious work.

The town’s only program, the Seymour Manufacturers Assistance Retention/Recruitment Tax (SMART), is 12 years old and is geared only to the manufacturing industry.

The selectmen plan to update and expand incentives for all types of businesses, including retail, office, commercial, hospitality, warehouse distribution, storage, research and development, and manufacturing.

“That is far more broad than what we have with our current SMART plan,” Conroy said.

Under the new proposal, some of the eligibility guidelines that businesses would need to meet include: not being delinquent on taxes, not having a dispute with their tax assessment and a requirement that they operate in a commercial, industrial or a mixed-use zone.

Also being reviewed is the process for the town to determine if a business would be granted an incentive. That process will likely involve meetings with the economic development director and first selectman, as well as a review and comment process by the Economic Development Commission and the other selectmen.

The types of incentives and percentages of tax reductions the town would offer are likely to include different levels based on a company’s expansion plan and the number of jobs they would add, rather than setting a fixed number or percent.

Miller believes a tiered system of incentives would be most effective, especially if a developer presented a large proposal that might qualify for better incentives than a smaller development.

Local officials also say that small-businesses will be a focus when finalizing the incentives because they are the primary generators of new jobs.

Litchfield investigating pension plan change

To control costs and ease taxpayer burdens, the Litchfield Board of Finance has approved funding to study the cost-benefits of requiring town employees to move from defined-benefit to defined-contribution pension plans.

The board’s unanimous decision allocated money in the town’s 2011-12 budget for an evaluation to determine how much money Litchfield could save by having non-union municipal employees transfer to a 401(k)-style pension plan. According to the board, that step would allow for the town to engage in negotiations with the union and its employees.

“The overall intent is to start a dialogue that this is going to become available in future negotiations,” said Board of Finance member David Wilson. “The board talked about it and said we’re going to look into it further and see if we are statutorily allowed to do that. Even if we can’t, we can still put money into a discussion, and at least taxpayers know we’re looking at alternative options.”

Litchfield’s pension obligation was $5 million in 2005 and has doubled over five years to $10 million. Finance Board members said taking this next step of investigating money-saving options through pensions would not only make a statement to unions, but would also be an act of protecting the taxpayers.

Board members gave credit for the idea of examining the pension issue to the town of Middlebury, noting that Middlebury recently completed its migration to a defined contribution plan.
East Windsor has drafted 22 proposed changes to its local farm rules as part of an initiative to encourage farming and preserve agricultural lands.

“One of our primary businesses in East Windsor is still farming and we are trying to preserve that here,” said Laurie Whitten, East Windsor’s director of planning and development. “To preserve the farms, you really need to establish regulations that will allow them to even exist.”

The town’s Natural Resources and Preservation Committee this year received a $30,000 agricultural viability grant which requires compliance with new regulations that cover a wide range of farm operations from directional signs to manure storage. There are waiver provisions for farmers who cannot immediately comply with the new guidelines.

“We have chosen to adopt more farm friendly regulations,” Whitten said. “There is a state goal to preserve more farms, more open space. Here we have 200 to 300 farms, and it’s in our plan to match the state’s goal to preserve farming.”

Joan Nichols, a government specialist with the Connecticut Farm Bureau who is leading an effort to encourage agricultural growth across the state by revising zoning laws and local ordinances, is working with the town. Nichols noted that farms have become much smaller and more diverse and that the goal of the grant and the regulations is to preserve the state’s agricultural character.

She sais some local farmers were initially concerned when they heard about the new regulations and were relieved to discover that the new regulations are actually very friendly to farmers.

A recent University of Connecticut study showed that the state’s farming industry contributes more than $3.5 billion dollars to the state economy and provides at least 20,000 jobs.

In other good news for farmers, a bill passed during the last legislative session which took effect October 1, established an Agricultural Council, which will become part of the executive branch. The bill requires each participating town to establish a council of its own with the hope of bringing farmers and their local leaders together.
Southern Connecticut health and wellness initiative promotes healthy habits

Armed with statistics showing that Americans are growing less fit and that youth obesity is approaching a national crisis, Southington community leaders have initiated a town-wide effort to boost the health and wellness of local residents.

“Activate Southington” includes 12 members of the community, including town, school, and business officials and parents. Funded by a $52,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the group is looking at a host of issues it hopes will lead to sustainable outcomes in the community.

Efforts include community gardens to be used by individuals and businesses, a new website, guidance on nutrition, and exercise tips.

“Activate Southington” introduced its website in early 2011 as a resource for residents to research ways to increase physical activity and to eat healthier. The website is a complete guide of places to go in town for hiking and recreational fun.

“Activate Southington” is already working with school officials and town leaders on the effort and Bill Masci, the town’s director of recreation and a member of “Activate Southington,” says the group will also be working with organized recreation groups to get the word out to Southington’s 42,500 residents.

Masci says offering juice as well as soda and granola bars and apples along with candy bars is one way to teach children about healthy eating. Most local recreation and sporting venues have concession stands and the town has an opportunity to give people healthier options.

Putnam Community Garden Promotes Healthy Eating

Plans are under way to develop a community garden in Putnam to try to teach the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Putnam resident and community development director Delpha Very said the town is working with the Northeastern Connecticut Food Policy Council using a $22,000 grant from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection on the initiative. Very said the community garden will give Putnam residents the chance to grow their own fruit and vegetables and will serve as an educational tool for children to learn about where food comes from.

“Northeastern Connecticut is one of the lowest areas for food security in Connecticut,” she said. “Many things are taken into account, such as the number of grocery stores versus citizens and the availability of transit for people to grocery stores.”

The garden will planted on the site of a former housing complex that was demolished several years ago.

Woodstock resident and volunteer Rosie Gallant is spearheading the community outreach portion of the project. Gallant is studying for a Masters of Business Administration in organizational management and sustainability from Antioch University New England.

She said her studies “focus a lot on local agriculture and how to get the community involved in local sustainability.”

Gallant said the outreach portion will include working with local charitable and community organizations and Putnam public schools, to raise awareness and education. She said the organizers plan to have the garden ready by April and that soil samples to check for contaminants and meetings with neighbors to gain their input are now being conducted.

Manchester to offer free STD screenings for high school students

Manchester health officials are trying to raise awareness about an issue that few people want to talk about – sexually transmitted diseases – and are offering a pilot program to allow free screenings of sexually transmitted diseases for high school students.

The pilot program has been approved by the Board of Education and will focus on raising awareness, education, and providing an opportunity for people who think they need to be tested to get tested.

The no cost screening program will be available to any student at the high school. It will be funded through the state Department of Health, which will also provide referrals and assistance to those who need additional treatment at area clinics if needed. Transportation can also be provided under the program.

Manchester health officials say the number of town residents under the age of 19 reporting two of the most common STDs – chlamydia and gonorrhea – is climbing and has become a public health concern.

“These are significant numbers and as a trend they need to be addressed,” Health Director Maryann Cherniak-Lexius said.

In 2009, Manchester’s STD numbers were higher than the state average and preliminary data indicates they climbed further during 2010. The town tracks 45 diseases that can be passed from person-to-person.

The rising number of STDs is both a local and national trend and the numbers could be higher than reported because people infected with the diseases sometimes do not have any symptoms.

Officials believe education programs at earlier ages are needed and are targeting the 10-19 age group. Raising awareness is important because some students do not know the disease they have is contagious.

During the last school year, the health department introduced an STD educational series for 10th-graders in which health officials came into the classroom to discuss the sometimes delicate issue with students.

Under state law people under the age of 18 do not need parental consent to be tested or treated.
Interpretive outdoor museum brings Vernon rail depot to life

From the late 1800s through the 1930s, Vernon Depot was a busy passenger and freight station that served trains and trolleys on the Hartford, Providence, and Fishkill Railroad line. Back then, it was a bustling railroad with a passenger station and freight house, each with a platform; section house; switchman’s shanty; pump house; water tank; turntable; bunk house; and coal bunker.

Today the depot is part of an outdoor museum with interesting remnants of days gone by accompanied by interpretive signs that bring the station and its surroundings to life, including the well-preserved remains of a turntable where locomotives were turned around to run from the depot to Rockville.

The depot is located at the main trailhead to Vernon’s Rails-To-Trails Park, a 5-mile multi-use trail that runs along the abandoned railroad bed from the Manchester border all the way to Bolton where it meets the Hop River State Park trail.

Adjacent to the depot, old transmission line poles, ledge cuts, and an old stone tunnel are some of the reminders that this was once a hub of transportation activity, connecting Vernon to both in- and out-of-state destinations. Also on site are the footings of a 30,000 gallon water tower that once refueled steam locomotives running between Hartford and Willimantic.

The interpretive signs are full of information and feature dozens of old photos and memorabilia, including vintage train tickets. The signs describe the area’s industrial legacy and the history of the depot’s heyday when as many as 22 passenger trains stopped daily. The depot also served as a trolley stop connecting to towns that included Hartford and the resorts of Stafford Springs.

Bruce Dinnie, director of Vernon’s parks and recreation, said he got the idea for the museum after visiting Gettysburg and seeing the dozens of interpretive signs detailing the history of the battlefields.

Using a grant provided by the Federal Highways Administration, Dinnie recruited a team of historians, including amateur historians and train enthusiasts, to create a place where school kids would be able to visit and learn about the history of Rockville and better understand how the country was developed by railroads.

Now walkers, joggers, and cyclists may not be able to ride the rails at Vernon Depot, but those who pause at the trail head for a few minutes can gain a deeper appreciation of the town’s rail heritage before setting off on their exercise regimen.
Norwalk officials have adopted an ambitious ten-year plan to end homelessness. The plan is the result of a community-wide partnership and experts believe it has a “real chance for success.”

Modeled after a June 2010 federal plan entitled “Opening Doors,” Norwalk’s plan is the latest of 12 such plans developed by municipalities in Connecticut and one of more than 300 in the nation.

Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia and David Kennedy, chief operating officer of United Way in the region, served as co-chairs of a 37-person council that oversaw the creation of the plan. The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and five work groups comprised of 100 local leaders and residents developed recommendations for the plan over a ten-month period.

Priorities include establishing a single point of access to information and services related to housing, and coordinating social services and employment and training services. The plan also recommends the creation of an employee-to-employer network to help the homeless find work and calls for 400 units of affordable housing to serve sub-populations of at-risk individuals such as low-income seniors, veterans, and families.

Funding for the development and printing of the plan was provided by Pepperidge Farm, Bank of America, United Way of Coastal Fairfield County, and the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency.

A steering committee is overseeing the work of the housing, services, communication, and community education task groups. Other priorities of the plan include identifying best practices from other cities, keeping the public informed, reviewing work completed annually, and coordinating information among all stakeholders.

A January 2010 point-in-time count of the Norwalk-Fairfield County area homeless shelters revealed approximately 174 people living in shelters or on the streets. A January 2009 count estimated 225 people were experiencing homelessness.

An annual snapshot of homelessness in Connecticut found that 4,000 people living in shelters in January 2010 had never been homeless before. Of those persons, 771 were children. Fifteen percent were veterans and that number is expected to increase as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Norwalk Mayor Richard A. Moccia is optimistic the city’s plan will achieve its goals of ending homelessness and creating more affordable housing.

“This is not a short-term process,” Moccia said. “It’s not going to be easy, but I believe that we have the leadership and the will in this community to do it.”
Columbia offers residents cheaper energy options

Columbia has become the sixth eastern Connecticut town to participate with energy provider Direct Energy in the “Direct Choice” program, which provides fixed-rate electricity to residents and businesses. Coventry, Windham, Hebron, Colchester, and Hampton are already participating.

Town officials say the program will give residents a break on energy costs during a heating season that has started out as a “perfect storm,” with colder than normal temperatures and sharply higher fuel prices. The program also offers customers tips on energy consumption, energy reduction, and energy contracts.

Direct Energy serves 6 million residential and commercial customers in 46 states. Under the program, homeowners aged 65 and older will pay 8.99 cents per kilowatt hour through July 2011. Younger customers will pay a fixed rate of 9.29 cents per kilowatt hour during the same period. In May 2011, participating towns will negotiate with Direct Energy to establish new rates for the billing cycle that began in August 2011.

There are no penalties for residents who decide to opt out of the program and Columbia will receive a small rebate from Direct Energy based on the number of participants enrolled. The town intends to use those funds for its food and fuel bank.

Towns that are already participating in the program have received positive feedback from their residents who say one of the biggest benefits is being able to lock in prices for a specified period.

In Coventry for example, the 302 residents who signed up are already seeing a difference in their electric bills after one month. Town Manager John Elsesser says that citizens have found it particularly helpful to have an energy company pre-vetted and selected.

“There are many energy choices out there and that can be confusing for consumers,” he said. “It takes some of the guess work out to have someone – in this case the municipality – check out the company first.”

Windsor Locks solar project creates green energy, lean costs

The installation of 1,000 solar panels on the new roof of the North Street School in Windsor Locks will be completed by the end of February and the school will then begin to save an estimated $5,000 a year on energy for the next 25 years.

The town did not have to invest any upfront capital for the new solar system. All it had to do was agree to buy the power output from the solar panel system at a guaranteed discount of 20 percent over the life of the system.

The state-of-the-art, thin-film panels of the $300,000 system are being installed by Berlin-based DBS Energy. The solar panels have a 25-year warranty so the life of the panels matches up with the life of the new roof.

Under the contract with the school board, DBS will also conduct all maintenance and repairs. The panels will provide 80,000 watts of power – about 25 percent of the school’s needs — at a cost of about $20,000 which is 80 percent of the amount the Connecticut Light & Power Co. would have charged.

CL&P will provide the remaining 75 percent of North Street School’s electricity load.

In addition to cheaper energy, the system “also provides a source of green energy, and this is a way of doing it without having to invest capital dollars,” says Eric Bartone, owner of DBS.

The state’s Clean Energy Fund is providing a $74,000 grant to pay for part of the system. Also, DBS Energy gets a 30 percent tax credit on the total $300,000 cost. DBS will recover the remaining $134,000 in costs by making a small profit from selling the school the power produced by the panels.

Coventry wind turbine will save money, teach students

When the cold wind blows, most people think about their heating dollars flying right out the window. But windy days in Coventry actually mean energy savings now that the Town’s new clean energy wind turbine is up and running on the town’s high school and middle school campus.

The wind turbine will provide free power to town buildings and learning opportunities for the school system’s science classes.

Looming above the running track and adjacent to the football field, the turbine — a 105-foot tower with 8-foot blades — was installed in December on the large school campus because of its ideal location, proximity to town buildings, and accessibility to the school’s science programs.

The turbine was run for a two-week period for testing and software debugging before being fully integrated into the town. Town officials say the test revealed a couple of glitches — the safety mechanisms intended to shut off the turbine were not engaging properly and the turbine was not turning back on when it was supposed to.

Once the testing and corrections are made, it will be all systems go for Coventry’s entry into the world of clean and green power.

The turbine was installed through a competitive grant from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund.

Coventry won out over 30 other municipalities at the completion of a months-long Small Wind Turbine Demonstration Program grant application process.

The town expects to save money on energy costs through the program, with the wind turbines providing between $5,000 and $7,000 in electricity each year.

The town’s science curriculum emphasizes green energy programs and the turbine will give students access to a live demonstration of new renewable energy sources. The wind turbine program will also pave the way for the town to promote appropriate zoning regulations that would allow local residences and businesses to have their own wind turbines.
Public-Private initiative creates new town center in Mansfield

State and local officials as well as 200 attendees gathered in July to break ground for Storrs Center, a mixed-use town center and main street corridor at the crossroads of the Town of Mansfield and the University of Connecticut.

The new center will be adjacent to the University, the town hall, the regional high school, and the community center and will include a new town square across from the School of Fine Arts complex.


Storrs Center, which expects to hold its grand opening next fall, has been in the planning stages for more than 11 years. Phillip Lodewick called the project "a truly collective effort," and Mansfield Mayor Elizabeth Paterson said that "our destination is in sight."

The Storrs Center project will include approximately 290 apartments in addition to new retail, restaurant and office development within a planned community of pedestrian walkways, green spaces and conservation areas.

"It is one of the most exciting public/private initiatives in the state," said Governor Malloy. "This project does all the right things: it maximizes the value of the University of Connecticut, puts people to work and creates a town center to enhance the quality of life around a great university."

"This is an investment in our community, our university and in our young people," said President Herbst. "With the addition of the new technology complex and enhancements to the medical center, the only missing piece was a vibrant downtown and town square."

Scheduled to be completed in 2012 and 2013, respectively, the first two phases of Storrs Center will include commercial and residential offerings. The new apartments, shops, offices and restaurants are within easy walking distance of the University of Connecticut main campus.

The first two phases will include approximately 290 studios and one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartments. Each apartment will include a private laundry, faux-wood floors, stainless steel appliances, granite countertops and the latest internet technology, among other high-end features.

The retail and commercial space will be owned and managed by the Storrs Center Alliance. In phases one and two, a number of local and national businesses are leasing portions of the 70,000 square feet on the street level of the mixed-use buildings.

Work on the foundations for the first building of phase one is already underway, as is work on the foundations for the second two buildings as well as phase one utilities work.

With a strong focus on sustainable building practices, the fully built project footprint will occupy only about 17 acres of a 47-acre site. Much of the site will be preserved as open space and designated as a conservation area. Storrs Center will eventually include approximately 700 residential units; 160,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space; 30,000 square feet of office space; 5,000 square feet of civic uses and several outdoor civic spaces.

Public-Private Effort Saves New Milford Landmark

New Milford has given new life to a neglected local landmark by selling it to entrepreneurs who value it for its architectural pedigree and as a place to expand their business. Local voters unanimously approved the purchase at a town meeting in January.

The brick and limestone building built in 1917 – one of the few surviving Georgian Revival style buildings in town – was first opened as a telephone company and then housed town offices including the Parks and Recreation department. At one time, the long, narrow building with decorative cornices and a parapet across from Town Hall was used as a community center. It is now boarded up and in disrepair.

The buyers are the owners of a locally operated high-end furnishings business that sells to museum stores and specialty retailers — including the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Barney’s, and Ralph Lauren, as well as to architects and designers. They are refurbishing the property and plan to expand their thriving business, which they now operate from a lower storefront just down the street from the town-owned property.

Part of the new, expanded store will include a designer product exhibition gallery and design library that will be open to the public.

Patricia Greenspan of the New Milford Trust for Historic Preservation said the sale is a "golden opportunity" to preserve a piece of history while also adding to the downtown's economic vitality.

"Many of us have loved it and hoped it would be put to a good use," she said. "It is a fine example of civic architecture."

The buyers have stipulated that they intend to preserve the structure’s architectural character and have set aside $250,000 to conduct an environmental cleanup, prior to the commencement of the restoration work on the building.

The buyers have also agreed to allow the town to continue to use the northeastern parking lot for daytime municipal use.

Town Council member Ray O’Brien said that during his 18 terms on the council the building “has been a town office building or has been empty.” Its sale would eliminate the town’s responsibility for it, provide employment and add to the tax rolls—“a win-win-win,” he said.
State, Salem work to remove beaver dam flood hazards

Water over roads from flooding caused by blocked culverts is a safety hazard for drivers and a headache for town officials. In Salem, it has been a recurring problem that exposes the town to liability in the event of an accident.

In the most recent flooding incident, the culprits were beavers who blocked a pair of drainage culverts that run underneath Rattlesnake Ledge Road.

Salem officials have decided to move forward with a decidedly low-tech solution—they have hired a trapper to remove beavers and they are working with the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection on a long-term solution to keep the animals away permanently.

“I don’t want people to think we’re eradicating every beaver we can. But when it’s a safety issue, we have to act on it,” said First Selectman Kevin Lyden.

It is not a problem confined to Salem: in 2009, the DEEP received 226 beaver-related complaints from 105 towns across the state.

The beaver trapping season ends March 31, so Salem had to seek permission from the DEEP to trap the animals. Out-of-season trapping permits are approved only under specific conditions such as when beavers constitute a “threat to public health and safety,” or if the beavers are known to be carrying insects, diseases, or parasites harmful to the environment.

Last year, DEEP issued a total of 87 out-of-season permits and 149 beavers were captured across the state.

DEEP wants to limit the amount of out-of-season trapping because of the tremendous wildlife habitat beavers create but part of the long-term fix includes making the area unattractive, undesirable, and inaccessible to the beavers’ activities.

Salem officials say there are several areas in town that are susceptible to beaver damage including locations on Salem Ridge Drive North and Sullivan and Witter roads, and that unless the areas are addressed the beavers will continue to return.

Some residents of Rattlesnake Ledge Road have dealt with beavers on their property for years.

In neighboring Sprague, First Selectman Cathy Osten said localized flooding from beavers has occurred in areas near Main Street, in the Hanover section, and on Scotland Road but that most beaver activity in Sprague has been in undeveloped areas—so far.

Milford Citizens Police Academy is high tech

A member of the Milford Citizens Police Academy class waits for a cue to enter a simulated crime scene. Detective Frank Gall sits behind, operating the computer program that projects interactive scenarios on a screen while Sgt. Vaughan Dumas coaches the students.

Gall controls the reactions of the characters in the mini-movies and students stand in front, holding a real service pistol that has a laser pointer instead of a firing pin. If a student fires and hits the wrong person, the laser beam is red; if the weapon was used correctly, the beam is green.

The student enters the scene and tries to calm down a distraught woman who just pulled out a knife behind a convenience store. Now a customer offers to help, saying she is a nurse and can talk to the woman. The student wants to avoid a hostage situation—he tells the nurse to stay away and then pulls out his gun. The woman on the screen backs down and no one is hurt.

Moments later, another student walked into a domestic dispute that was about to boil over. She took out her 9 mm Sig Sauer and let the angry man in the house see it. As he approached, she shouted several warnings... and then fired. The filmed sequence ended with the angry man’s contorted red face on the screen so close that it appeared to be just inches from the student’s face.

Next door, another training room holds two driving simulators that look like they belong in a giant video arcade. Three screens project a 360-degree view of street scenery including stores, homes, and construction equipment. The simulator’s pedals and steering wheel react like those on a real patrol car and can be adjusted to make it feel like anything the trainers want, like a fire truck for example.
Griswold is one of the first towns in southeastern Connecticut to try crime-fighting strategies developed by the Community Anti Drug Coalition of America.

The Coalition is a national group that trains local grassroots organizations - known as community anti-drug coalitions - in strategies to address local substance abuse problems.

The group strengthens the ability of local communities to make their towns and cities drug-free by tailoring programs and strategies to a community’s unique issues and circumstances.

Griswold is targeting areas that have a history of trouble or illegal activity and will try the undercover “shoulder tap” strategies developed by the Virginia-based Coalition.

Shoulder tap programs use an underage decoy, under the direct supervision of law enforcement officers, to solicit adults to buy the underage decoy alcohol. Any person seen furnishing alcohol to the minor decoy is then arrested.

Publicity about enforcement programs and arrests is an important part of raising awareness about the problem in the community.

The program is being funded by a $2,400 local prevention grant from the Southeastern Regional Action Council, which says Griswold is the first in the organization’s 20-town territory to develop a program based on Coalition strategies.

The prevention grants can be used for a variety of prevention activities and this year the town undertook a survey to identify local areas of concern.

One area identified in the survey is the borough’s skate park on Hill Street. The grant will pay for increased surveillance in the park area, including the option of undercover stakeouts.

The skate park was rebuilt and equipped with surveillance cameras monitored by the resident state trooper’s office just over a year ago.

The grant will also pay to create a neighborhood watch aimed specifically at drug and alcohol use by teens in the Hill Street area. It also will pay for the resident state trooper’s office to work with teens to investigate the sale of alcohol and tobacco products to minors.

The Community Anti Drug Coalition of America represents 5,000 community drug prevention organizations across the country.

Donations fund Fairfield K-9 Unit

The Fairfield Police Department is going to the dogs -- without going to the taxpayers for more money.

The Town’s new police dog program will provide the department with an important crime-fighting resource that will be funded entirely with donations, including $10,000 from General Electric and $6,000 from People's United Bank.

The initial costs for starting the K-9 unit, including acquiring a dog, training and equipment, food and veterinary care, are estimated at $15,758 – a number already covered by donations.

Police officials expect the recurring costs of $1,030 to also be covered by donations. In addition, local veterinarian Dr. Joan Poster has agreed to donate her services and provide medications and vaccines at a discount.

Sgt. Andre Velez of the Norwalk Police Department's K-9 unit said a lot of training is involved for the dog and handler, but that such training is needed to make the unit a success. Norwalk has four dogs and they have already helped the department recoup more than $1.9 million in drug forfeiture money. Velez said police dogs are also a wonderful way to bond with the community, adding that the schoolchildren in Norwalk donated four bulletproof vests for that city's dogs.

"It's another tool," Velez said. "I can't tell you how many times we've gone to a call and not had to deploy the dog" because the suspects will simply give up or stop resisting when a dog appears on the scene, adding to officers' safety.

Fairfield Police Commission Chairman Don Kleber, a retired FBI agent, said he has had a number of experiences with police dogs, all of them positive. "They've been a real asset to the communities and the law enforcement that they serve."

Fairfield Police officials said a committee will be set up to select the department's K-9 officer. The committee would be made up of officers from the department and certified handlers.
Hartford, Norwalk, and Vernon were among the eighteen Connecticut towns during the first week of August to hold National Night Out Against Crime events that aim to strengthen the bond between police and the community in the effort to keep neighborhoods safe.

In Hartford, about 250 residents of the Upper Albany neighborhood joined police and firefighters on a warm evening at the YMCA at one of several National Night Out Against Crime events held in the city.

Hartford’s community-building events – like those in other towns – featured free entertainment and food as well as discussions about building stronger police-community partnerships against crime and drug use.

Speakers at the YMCA included teens from a summer youth employment program who urged youths to avoid drugs, alcohol and violence and local police and fire representatives who shared safety tips.

As public safety workers talked with community residents, teens played basketball and young kids ran through sprinklers and jumped in an inflatable bounce house.

"It’s about building connections with the community where it’s not around a crisis," said Andrea Comer, coordinator of Hartford’s Weed and Seed crime-fighting program. "It’s an opportunity to connect with young people and make them more willing to interact, more willing to inform us of crimes and to help solve crimes when they do occur."

In Norwalk, Police Department officials said “Norwalk’s Night Out Against Crime” was held to send the message that the community will not stand for crime and drugs. The yearly event drew about 100 people.

In Vernon, the local National Night Out celebration was held in the downtown Rockville section of town.

The Rockville Community Alliance, the Parks and Recreation Department, and the Police Department sponsored the event which featured dozens of booths and giveaways, free food, bounce houses, children’s activities and live music and entertainment.

The first National Night Out in 1984 was celebrated in 400 communities in 23 states. In 2010, 15,000 communities from all 50 states, U.S. territories and Canadian cities participated. It is sponsored by the National Association of Town Watch, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting local anti-crime efforts.

When the event was first introduced, residents typically marked the event by leaving their front porch lights on and erecting makeshift vigils. The event has evolved over time and communities now host cookouts, festivals and other activities to raise awareness of community anti-crime programs.

---

**East Haven police hold open house to boost community relations**

The East Haven police department recently hosted an open house that offered a behind-the-scenes glimpse of public safety operations, including tours of holding cells, the mobile command center and a variety of different types of weapons. About 125 residents attended the four-hour session.

The police union and Mayor Joseph Maturo Jr. organized the station’s first-ever open house to strengthen community relations and the mayor said the town plans to hold another open house in the late spring or summer.

Outside in the P.D. parking lot, resident Joan Weber said she came to the open house to see people she knows who work in the department and “to see if police work is as exciting as it is on television.”

Nearby, 11-year-old Joe Milano sat on a police motorcycle, while others inspected dive team equipment, checked out squad cars and took tours of the building.

Joe said he is interested in a career in weaponry design for the military. “I learned about the dive team and saw inside the police department, the command center, and what they use for taking down the bad guys.”

Inside, police officers offered visitors DARE shirts, pins and rulers and refreshments, and took groups through the dispatch and control center, sally port, fingerprinting and DUI test area, briefing room, and detective and youth bureaus.

Many were curious to see the holding cells with their toilets, benches and phones. One visitor got stuck inside momentarily, provoking a laugh from her tour mates.

In the briefing room, police officials answered questions and urged visitors to follow the motto, “See something, say something.”

Town officials were pleased with the response to the event and said it helped accomplish their goal of giving residents an idea of what officers do on their shifts, how they handle various situations and the tools they use to fight crime and protect the community.
Wilton improves emergency response communication by adding social media

Better communication will be the focal point of Wilton’s emergency response for future disasters.

Fire Chief Paul Milositz, who serves as the town’s emergency management director, said the town’s Code Red calling system and the town website will continue to be the cornerstones of emergency communications, but that the town has also started to disseminate emergency information through social media.

“The town has a presence on Facebook. We set up a Facebook shortly after Irene,” Milositz said. Now the town is exploring setting up a Twitter account as well.

The primary communication tool will continue to be the town’s website, which can be updated every 15 minutes and contains a ticker displaying pertinent information.

If residents cannot get online, the town hotline has the same information as the website. The hotline – which was established after Irene – received 678 calls during the late-October snowstorm.

“The messages are updated with the same information online, so the information is the same across the board,” Milositz said.

Posting information in public areas like stores, the community center, the Wilton Library, the Wilton Family Y and Town Hall, will continue.

The Code Red robocalls will continue as well, but only in an emergency situation, defined as an emergency that “has or will overwhelm the town with the current resources the town has.” During the snowstorm, Code Red calls provided daily updates to residents at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.

In order to make sure Code Red calls can reach as many people as possible, the town launched a sign-up campaign.

Officials also cautioned residents to make sure they prepare for storms themselves by having a week’s worth of food, emergency supplies and other essentials.

Milositz said the key to successful emergency communications is that they be comprehensive. “We’re throwing as many tentacles out there as possible to keep in touch with residents.”

Norwalk fire boat will detect explosives

Norwalk is shopping for a high-tech fire boat with all the bells and whistles – including, of course, the ability to detect chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive threats.

Armed with a Critical Infrastructure Grant Award under the FEMA Port Security Program, the fire department has issued a formal request for proposals to fire boat manufacturers and expects that design and construction will be completed by late summer.

The grant award is part of a comprehensive Area Maritime Protection Plan of which the Fire Department has been an active participant. The Plan provides resources for coastal communities to develop their capabilities to respond with other agencies to marine emergencies in their local jurisdictions and in Long Island Sound. More than 20 Norwalk fire personnel are trained to operate the city’s current 24-foot fire boat which was commissioned in 2007.

“The Norwalk Fire Department developed a marine firefighting capability over the past several years in response to the development of Norwalk’s shoreline and the busy recreational and commercial harbor,” Fire Chief McCarthy said, “a capability that firefighters and marine division police officers worked together to achieve.”

The type of regional response and coordination supported by the grant was demonstrated in the US Airways crash-landing in the Hudson River in 2009. The cities of New Haven, Bridgeport, Fairfield, and Greenwich have received grants for similar cooperative activities.
Greenwich trains special response unit

Inside an old and empty three-story house in Greenwich, dead leaves crunched under foot as members of the police department's Special Response Unit entered the front hall. Before them, a narrow staircase led to the second floor. To the right, bare white walls stretched down the dark hall.

The first floor was cluttered with a ragged mop, a dusty bucket, a frayed extension cord – items not forgotten, just left behind. The aging house had plenty of winding hallways, sharp corners, and closets that angle into the connecting rooms – everything you need to conduct a police training exercise.

Outfitted with helmets, vests and simulated ammo in their weapons, eight of the Special Response Unit's 12 members worked through a variety of scenarios that tested their ability to clear rooms, deal with a barricaded subject and navigate an unfamiliar residence.

"We look for opportunities to set up realistic scenarios," said SRU's Sgt. John Thorme, explaining that the unit is involved in a variety of duties, from serving high-risk warrants to handling individuals who barricade themselves in buildings.

Thorme said the training first involved a lot of room clearing and then a scenario with an unknown suspect in the house. You're training your men to have a decision-making process.

Unit members fired plastic bullets to add realism to the training scenarios.

The Special Response Unit was formed in 1980 and includes a hostage negotiation team. Included in the unit's training regimen are sessions once or twice a month at various field locations in Greenwich.

Police alerted neighbors to the training via the reverse 911 system. Morgan Murray, co-owner of Tulips of Greenwich, adjacent to the unoccupied house, said the unit's members weren't at all disruptive. "It was pretty low key, actually," Murray said.

In addition to leaving a phone message at the store, police officials alerted nearby residents and businesses of the training session by delivering a letter explaining what was going to happen and what to expect. Signs were also posted in the front of the property that police training was in progress.

First Selectman Peter Tesei called the SRU a vital part of the overall public safety scheme in town and said that in addition to dealing with individuals who might be a threat to themselves, the unit can also deal with threats against the town's high-profile residents."I'm very proud of the quality of their work and their training," he said.

New signs will pinpoint accident locations

“You can't get there from here,” has been a tough road for emergency responders in Manchester where the often-confusing ramps and roadways where I-84, I-291, and I-384 all converge in the corner of town make it hard for motorists to give their precise locations to dispatchers.

That is about to change. After ten years on the drawing board, Manchester’s proposed emergency system to pinpoint accident locations on the highways surrounding the town has been approved by state and federal authorities.

Under the plan, Manchester will erect between 150 and 300 color- and number-coded signs in problem areas for motorists to use to report their locations to 911 dispatchers.

In the past, Manchester dispatchers have sent responders from two fire departments – by different routes – to cover all possibilities with the hope that one of them will find the person needing help quickly.

The program would be the first of its kind in the state and could be repeated at other complicated roadways, such as the notorious Waterbury “mix-master” where a variety of state and interstate highways meet.

Manchester officials say the system is needed because motorists who have been in an accident, need medical help, or are reporting a car on fire in certain areas are often not sure of their exact location, making it difficult for dispatchers to send responders to the right location.

Particularly troublesome are the access roads and multiple exit and entrance ramps where I-291 joins I-84 and I-384. Another problem area is I-84 westbound at exits 60 and 62 where the access road runs for several miles and has exits to two different highways and West Middle Turnpike.

Reporting the location incorrectly — which can be unavoidable under stressful circumstances — often delays the response. Emergency responders reach most accident scenes in an average of three minutes, but that can be doubled or tripled when dealing with the mash-up of roads in those areas.

The new locator system, with multiple locator signs throughout problem areas, should help solve the problem because people calling for help will be able to identify exactly where they are.
There’s gold in them there hills (of trash)

The old saying that “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure” is certainly true in East Hartford. Since implementing a biweekly, single-stream recycling program last July, the town has seen a substantial savings in the cost of garbage removal.

Residents are recycling more under the new system and by the end of 2010, East Hartford had saved an estimated $80,000. During the last six months of the year, residents reduced their non-recyclable trash by nearly 14 percent while increasing their recyclable materials by almost 73 percent.

Every ton of recyclable material that is extracted from non-recyclable trash saves money for the town.

East Hartford pays $69 per ton to the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority to dispose of its non-recyclable trash in Hartford, while it pays a local trash hauler $19.92 per unit for removal of recyclables.

With 16,500 units in town, the cost is $328,680. East Hartford had anticipated a 2 percent increase in removal fees every year, but the city now believes that may be averted by the ever-increasing amount of recyclable trash. If residents maintain the volume of trash that they are currently recycling, it will allow East Hartford to negotiate a lower price per unit with the hauler.

One of the main reasons recycling has increased dramatically is due to the bins themselves.

Before the new system started, residents used orange 5-gallon bins. The new 95-gallon containers hold much more and make recycling much easier for most residents. Adding to the ease of the new system, there is no requirement to bundle newspapers or cut up cardboard like residents had to do with the smaller bins.

The Public Works Department also has begun to crush and haul away its own scrap metal. In the past, East Hartford contracted to have a firm come in and perform this task. Now the town itself has to crush scrap metal, but it is financially worth the effort – all the metal is taken to a private firm in East Hartford where it is processed. In year 2012, East Hartford netted $35,000.

Plainville finds cost- and energy-efficient boiler replacement

It sounds too good to be true, but Plainville has found a way to replace the boiler and the chiller at its Middle School for free.

Both heating components have exceeded their useful life and are having mechanical problems. The chiller, which has a life expectancy of 10-15 years, is 19 years old and leaking coolant. Maintenance would be expensive and replacement – at more than $1 million – is out of the question in this tight budget season according to local officials.

But Plainville has found a solution that will cost the town nothing and will save energy – a result other municipalities may consider as they try to find ways to do more with less.

SourceOne, a Boston-based company, is installing a new energy-efficient boiler and chiller with the cost of the units being paid by the money saved through lower utility bills. If the bills don’t drop enough to pay the total cost, SourceOne will make up the difference. Once the boiler and chiller are paid for with the energy-efficiency savings, the district will own them.

The town’s Clean Energy Task Force recommended SourceOne. The company will do an investment-grade energy audit at the school and formulate a plan. The units will go out to bid like all town projects, but SourceOne will pay for the machinery and installation and monitor energy use.

The town will also explore the possibility of installing a co-generator at the high school which would run on natural gas and provide power for the school.

As a cost-saving measure, the school board decided last year to not heat the pool from April through August and summer programs at the pool were cancelled because the water was too cold. Since hot water is a byproduct of the co-generation process, using it to heat the pool would help maximize the project’s benefit.
Regional Revaluation Collaborative will cut costs, increase efficiency

Eleven of the twelve towns in the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments have made history by forming Connecticut’s first regional revaluation collaborative. After more than two years of work, all of the contracts have been signed and the group is officially in business.

The collaborative needed a special act from the State Legislature to form the regional group, which it received in 2009. Public Act 09-60 allowed “any two or more towns” to enter into an agreement to “establish a regional revaluation program.” Since then, the group has worked through the challenge of dealing with 11 towns and 11 attorneys.

Participants believe all the work will be well worth the effort. The agreement will save money for every member municipality and it locks in their revaluation costs for a five-year period – costs that will be well below the market price for similar kinds of service. The collaborative will save a total of more than $500,000 during the next five years by having regional revaluations.

In addition to cost savings, the regional agreement allows for 50 percent of participating towns’ properties to be inspected every five years. Municipalities do full inspections every decade by law and updates at the midway point that don’t involve visual inspections.

The idea is catching on: while Sprague is not a member of the Northeast Council, the Council recently voted to allow them to enter the program. First Selectman Cathy Osten estimates joining the program will save the town $30,000.

The first revaluation work was accomplished in Ashford and Woodstock. In Ashford, some revaluation workers were located within town hall, as opposed to off-site as in previous years, so communication was easier.

Robert Viens, chairman of the Northeastern Council, said the regional effort is an example of why initiatives should begin at the local rather than the state level.

While the revaluation collaborative is expected to save each town thousands, the state-mandated regionalization of the probate court system is actually projected to be more costly to towns. In Putnam, for example, probate costs are expected to double.

“Successes always come from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down,” Viens said.

Revaluations are not the only function the Northeastern Council has tackled – the group has also regionalized paramedic intercept, animal control, and town engineer services.

Towns, Merchants Brand Together in Northwest Corner

The nine towns represented by the Northwest Connecticut Regional Planning Collaborative are putting their best collective face forward with uniform, simple signage that takes advantage of the area’s historic charm and reinforces the similar character of small New England villages.

The Regional Planning Collaborative has already held signage workshops with merchants in several towns, including Norfolk, Salisbury, Sharon and Cornwall – and there are more to follow. The goal is to help the towns replace downtown visual clutter with cohesive signage as part of an effort to bring more foot and tourism traffic to the northwest corner.

“When you come in to Canaan, it’s not just Canaan. It’s Salisbury, it’s Norfolk,” said Jocelyn Ayer of the Collaborative.

The deliberately simple signs recently approved for Salisbury were based on the idea that a unified look for area signage could help towns in northwestern Connecticut join forces to pull tourists to the area.

Simplicity was also the key for the design proposed for Norfolk – signs with just three categories: “café,” “shopping” and “parking.” Those generic categories avoid overwhelming visitors and their clean and simple design was intended to reflect the historic atmosphere of Norfolk. Another advantage of generic signs is that they do not have to be changed when a business opens or changes hands.

A business and tourism challenge for Norfolk is the seasonal nature of the local population. Many residents have second homes in Norfolk and visit only on the weekend. The signs are part of the effort to encourage them to patronize local businesses and help boost downtown merchants.

“One way to do that is to introduce them to all the great things we have here,” Ayer said.

Bella Erder, the owner of a jewelry store in downtown Norfolk, compared the downtown area to high streets in her native England, saying that in Norfolk there is not as much a sense of those streets.

“You don’t see a bank, you don’t see a post office, you don’t see a shop front,” she said.

Because many streets with shops and businesses are off the main thoroughfare, the signs are intended to direct visitors who might otherwise drive right by, unaware of their existence. Signs serving a similar purpose have been well received in Salisbury.

The signage workshops have provided feedback that has helped towns apply their neighbors’ experiences to their own unique situations. For example, informational kiosks on the town green were discussed by Sharon’s business community, but not pursued because they did not believe people would stop at the green to look at them. Norfolk’s situation was just the opposite – since stopping at the town green in Norfolk would be illegal, the idea of kiosks was quickly dismissed.
To make progress toward energy independence, save on electricity costs, and make the environment cleaner, 14 Connecticut towns are taking it to the streets, one house at a time.

Energy conservation begins at home. That’s the message of the Neighbor to Neighbor Energy Challenge – a three-year program that encourages homeowners to get energy audits to find out where their homes are leaking energy and then to make improvements necessary to keep the energy inside where it’s supposed to be.

“People say in this economy, it’s not the time to do this work,” said Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi. “Now is the time. Now more than ever.”

Ridgefield is one of 14 towns selected to participate in the Challenge, which is being funded by a $4.17 million federal stimulus grant. The goal is to get at least 10 percent of homeowners in each of the participating towns to reduce their energy use by 20 percent, resulting in an estimated $150 million in energy savings.

The program will help create new green jobs in the target communities and it offers towns rewards for getting more people to sign up for retrofits such as solar panels, solar-powered LED street lights, electric vehicle recharging stations, and other green products.

In addition to helping towns reduce energy waste and improve home comfort and safety, the Challenge also conducts workshops where residents can learn about available tax incentives, low-interest financing, and rebates for energy-saving upgrades.

The 14 towns participating in the Connecticut Challenge were grouped into four regional clusters:

- Bethany, Cheshire
- East Haddam, East Hampton, Glastonbury, Portland, Wethersfield
- Lebanon, Mansfield, Windham
- Ridgefield, Weston, Westport, and Wilton

"With small businesses suffering and people out of work, community energy savings programs are a sure way to create jobs and inject dollars back into our communities,” said Donna Hemmann, Mayor of Wethersfield. “I know our success will set a compelling example for the rest of the country.”

The Connecticut Neighbor to Neighbor Energy Challenge is being funded as part of the BetterBuildings initiative, whose mission is to create a self-sustaining building energy upgrade market. Neighbor to Neighbor is one of 41 state and local government programs that provide high quality energy improvements to homes and businesses across the nation.

Plainville and Southington create combined health district

Plainville and Southington are creating a new combined health district that officials expect to have in place by July.

The towns have been considering the formation of a combined health district as a way to qualify for more state funding and to share resources. Under the new district, Southington expects to better its budget by $100,000 through increased state funding and both towns plan to offer increased services by pooling staff and resources.

The individual health departments have worked closely together in the past with flu vaccination clinics and emergency planning efforts and representatives from both Plainville and Southington said they believe the district will run smoothly.

Chuck Motes, Southington’s health director, said the district will save money and enhance services for both towns.

“This means greater depth on your bench,” Motes said. “If either town develops a serious situation, both towns can bring in additional sanitarians to help out.”

Motes said many towns throughout the state have been successfully operating combined health districts since the 1960s and while the needs of each town are different, forming health districts have been beneficial to participating towns.

Plainville Town Council Vice-Chairman Christopher Wazorko said “This is a benefit for us to do more with what we currently have. We will have more resources.”

Both towns will have access to larger staff to address public health issues without additional costs. Each town will continue to keep the same employees in their offices but will now share services with each other.

Southington, with a population of about 42,000, has three sanitarians and Plainville, with about 17,000 people, has one and all four sanitarians will work for the new combined district.

The new district has filed the required paperwork with the state and is getting bylaws and regulations in place for a July 1 target date to start operations.
Police Chiefs Seek Regional Crime Unit

The chiefs of police from Wethersfield, Newington, Cromwell, Berlin and Rocky Hill are proposing the creation of a regional police squad to investigate serious crimes.

The Mid-State Regional Crime Scene Unit would cover all five communities and serve more than 110,000 residents.

“It’s going to provide better service to the communities overall,” said Newington Police Chief Richard Mulhall. “There will be more work performed on a regular basis, it will keep the skill level higher and have a cost benefit over the long term.”

The chiefs say the new unit will improve forensic evidence collection, timeliness, quality and accuracy in crime scene processing, enhanced technology systems and centralized police officer training, among other advancements.

The unit would also create a “mobile field unit” as a work station to house equipment and communications as well as provide officers with a place to conduct field work under any conditions.

While the five towns are by no means hotbeds of crime, each of them has experienced incidents in the past decade that required sophisticated police work, using current technologies that are expensive and hard to justify if not used on a daily basis.

Collectively, the five towns have made 6,400 arrests in the past two years for murder, rape, robbery, burglary, auto theft, larceny and assault – crimes that often require crime-scene processing and point to the need for providing officers with the tools they need to keep their communities safe.

The group has applied for a state Regional Performance Incentive grant to move the plan forward. “We think our proposal hits the right areas that the grant focuses on,” Mulhall said.

Officials said the initiative is a great example of the benefits of towns working together to solve problems and improve service for their residents.

The unit would allow the departments to improve their current capabilities, share personnel and resources, and process and document major crimes in a more professional manner, according to the grant proposal. The unit would also bring greater timeliness, quality and accuracy to crime-scene processing.

Supporters of the effort say the cooperative approach enables police departments to pool funds to buy sophisticated technology and creates an opportunity for sharing knowledge. And, they reason, since criminals don’t limit themselves to operating within a single town’s borders, why should the police?

The unit will consist of eight to 10 officers – between one and three from each town – and will be managed by the local chiefs of police. The team could be in service as early as September 2012.

Southeastern towns work together on disaster plan

Twenty towns in southeastern Connecticut are moving forward with a regional effort to improve future disaster response. In the wake of the two major weather events last year that crippled much of the state, the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Government recently conducted a public forum in order to hear from residents and business owners how the region can better prepare for natural hazards and disasters.

The forum was an opportunity for participants to offer suggestions for minimizing damages and costs to towns and residents in the event of a future disaster similar to Tropical Storm Irene or the freak October snowstorm.

Attendees were encouraged to share their accounts of dealing with Irene and the snowstorm’s aftermath – which included prolonged power outages, road closures and other hardships – with the idea that past experience can be the best teacher for learning how to improve future results. As well as hurricanes, snowstorms and floods, the plan also addresses other natural disaster such as wildfires and tornadoes.

The session was one of the initial steps being taken to update the region’s natural hazard mitigation plan, which is updated every five years and outlines the potential natural hazards in every town in the council of governments’ region.

For example, one section of the current plan identifies flooding as New London’s most significant potential hazard. It outlines residential and commercial areas that are prone to flooding and a number of prevention methods. The several-hundred-page plan provides similar information for all of the region’s towns and the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan Tribal Nations.

Seventy-five percent of the approximate $125,000 cost of the plan will be covered by a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the remaining cost will be paid by the council. FEMA requires plans to be updated before towns can apply for project mitigation grants. If a town applies for federal funds to flood-proof a building or to build a retaining wall to prevent flooding, it must present the natural hazard mitigation plan as a resource for FEMA to consult.

SCCOG Executive Director James S. Butler said it will take about a year to update the plan.
Rocky Hill project will bring shopping center, school improvements and a pond

Rocky Hill has authorized a local developer to proceed with a $40 million redevelopment of a vacant parcel near a busy town intersection easily accessed from I-91. The project – Town Center West – would increase the town's tax base and could create more than 300 jobs.

The developer has rights to 26.35 acres of land that the town is acquiring from Connecticut Light & Power Company because CL&P considers it surplus property. The developer has been working with Rocky Hill's redevelopment agency for more than a year on plans for a multi-use development with retail space, office space, a free-standing restaurant, and a free-standing bank.

Rocky Hill economic development director Ray Carpentino said a major retail tenant will anchor the development, which the town hopes will make the new center a shopping destination.

As part of the project, the developer also agreed to fund $600,000 worth of improvements to the high school that include replacing the crumbling front steps and adding a handicapped-accessible elevator.

Local officials say the redevelopment project will provide a major boost to the town's commercial tax base. It will also replace an environmental eyesore — a highly visible swamp fed solely by road runoff that fluctuates greatly in size and depth with the seasons — with a fully aerated pond. In addition, much of the wooded area surrounding the pond has been used for illegal dumping and that area will be cleaned up and landscaped.

The town acted as third-party in the CL&P real estate transaction by acquiring the surplus property and then transferring the rights to the developer.

Town, Land Trust Team Up to Preserve Open Space

East Lyme and The Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit group, have agreed to purchase 301 acres surrounding a local pond, a parcel Trust officials called “one of the more beautiful forests in the state and an important habitat.”

After the purchase is finalized, the Darrow Pond land will complete 3,800 acres of contiguous open space linking Camp Patakansett, the Yale University-owned Sheffield Scientific School, Ponderosa Park and Nehantic State Forest – making it one of the largest parcels of open space in Connecticut.

During the past 20 years, there have been proposals to develop the wooded 301 acres into a golf course and a 600-unit retirement community. Those plans that never advanced past the drawing board and today the Darrow Pond area is still a hilly forestland with impressive stands of oaks.

Under the agreement, the town will preserve most of the land as open space. The trust would buy the property for $4.15 million and then transfer it to the town for the same price after the closing date.

About 50 acres will be set aside for a water tower that will play an important role in the town's efforts to modernize its water supply. The remaining 250 acres will be preserved as open space suitable for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing, and for wildlife habitat.

"It's an opportunity the town should not pass up," said First Selectman Paul Formica. "We can't afford not to do it."

Formica said the Darrow Pond area rises at one point to an elevation of 260 feet, an ideal spot to build a tank to store between 1 million and 1.5 million gallons of water. The height would help create better water pressure.

The property's two wells - dug as part of the planned retirement community, but never used - would also be available to the town.

Earlier this year, residents voted in a referendum to approve a $10.7 million plan to pipe in water from Lake Komomonoc, a reservoir owned by New London. The plan, called the regional water interconnection, would give the town an ample supply of water, especially during the summer months when residents are often ordered to conserve water.
Residents of West Haven’s Allingtown area want to see their neighborhood revitalized by new businesses, beautification efforts and new community development. Next-door neighbor University of New Haven wants the area to be more connected to the university and a better place to live and work.

A new community partnership – the Allingtown Neighborhood Development Coalition – will try to achieve both goals.

Announced by University of New Haven President Steven H. Kaplan and Mayor John M. Picard, the new group plans to apply for grants to address local issues including economic development, blighted properties, bulk-trash pickup and street lighting.

The coalition is the result of meetings over the past year between city and UNH officials and the mayor says the partnership will help the entire city and stimulate economic growth in Allingtown.

“I think over the next several years ... there’s going to be a real uptick in the Allingtown area,” Picard said.

Kaplan said his goal for the coalition is to turn the community around UNH into a “college town.”

“The objective is to better connect Allingtown with the university and to improve as much as we can the quality of life in Allingtown and the attractiveness for businesses to relocate here,” Kaplan said.

Kaplan said UNH is considering an expansion that could add office space, classroom buildings and off-campus housing in Allingtown and would be focused on street-scaping and working with local businesses to help them be more attractive to the UNH community.

In addition to Picard and Kaplan, the coalition includes local councilmen James O’Brien and Christopher Suggs; several UNH administrators; Allison Schieffelin, chief executive officer of The Lighting Quotient, a local business; and Brother James Branigan, president of Notre Dame High School.

O’Brien, who represents Allingtown, called the effort a “win-win” because UNH needs to expand and Allingtown needs an economic boost. He said he is optimistic that it will “improve life in the neighborhoods.”

“I hope it brings about some positive dialogue between the business community, the university and the city,” said O’Brien. “I think this particular coalition holds a lot of promise.”

---

The master plan for Jewett City’s streetscape project is being finalized and residents may see benches, planters and banners as soon as autumn. Local officials say the streetscape plan is an opportunity to reshape and define the downtown area and fit it into the bigger picture the town is painting as it undertakes a major revitalization project along the Main Street/Route 12 corridor.

Town planner Carl Fontneau says the streetscape plan is “a beginning of what will be lots of little pieces that will fit together. That's the important part. If it's done according to the guidelines of the plan, it will all fit together.”

The town has received $200,000 in state funding for the project and local officials believe the plan will make Jewett City stand out.

“We want to not only revitalize but to give the area a distinct character, a brand they call it,” Mikutel said. “When people come to Griswold and Jewett City, we want them to know they're in Jewett City, that we have something distinctive here. It's all about revitalization of downtown, drawing people downtown and making it a destination.”

Phase I will cost an estimated $56,950 to purchase items for Main Street such as benches, planters, bicycle racks and banners. The main concentration of items would be around both ends of what is considered downtown Jewett City, in order to help define the downtown area.

Keeping buildings close to the sidewalk will help enclose downtown and keep it attractive, rather than making it an unwelcoming experience for pedestrians who might otherwise walk past parking lots in front of buildings.

“One recommendation may be to have a village district to encompass the Main Street area, and to create a new zoning area,” Fontneau said. “We are considering designs that will help preserve the street line.”
Adaptive reuse of Norwalk school creates senior housing

The sale last month of the former Fitch Elementary School to private developers has paved the way for renovation of the building into an assisted-living facility for senior citizens.

In May 2010 the city approved plans by developer Maplewood at Strawberry Hill to convert the former school into an 84-unit congregate housing and assisted-living facility for the elderly.

But the property at that time was owned by Connecticut Community Bank and its sale to Maplewood at Strawberry Hill was contingent upon Zoning Commission approval of a formal development plan.

Now with both an approved plan and the recent sale in place, the developers will create a two-story, 67,100-square-foot facility out of the former school, including 47 memory-care units – primarily for persons with Alzheimer’s disease – and 37 traditional assisted-care living units.

The facility will also feature an atrium gathering room with a fieldstone fireplace, a library, full service dining and private dining rooms, an arts and crafts lounge, a country store, a full service wellness center, and a unique “Brain Gymnasium.”

A beauty parlor, pub lounge, multi-purpose room, rooftop Zen garden, and exterior courtyard will complete the amenities.

The project meets several local needs because the school property has suffered from disuse and neglect throughout much of the past decade.

Neighbors believe the building’s transformation from a vandal-stricken blight to much-needed elderly housing will improve both the neighborhood and area property values.

It has been vacant since the late 1990s and has suffered from vandalism both inside and out, illegal dumping, arson by a teenager who set fire to a stack of mattresses, and even a bombing by a resident of Weston, which required a response from the Stamford Bomb Squad and the FBI.

Maplewood at Strawberry Hill will lease rather than own the property. Aviv REIT, Inc., a real estate investment firm, is entering into a long-term lease with Maplewood at Strawberry Hill.

The developers believe the arrangement will be beneficial to the community because Aviv is skilled property management and Maplewood at Strawberry Hill is represented by individuals who already operate an assisted-living and memory-care facility for seniors in Danbury.

The school and 2.7-acre parcel on Strawberry Hill Avenue were sold for $2.6 million.

Manchester asks seniors and disabled “Are You Okay?”

The town of Manchester has initiated a new program designed to offer peace of mind to elderly and disabled persons and others who live alone and would like to be checked on daily.

An 85-year-old woman wants the independence of living alone in her home as well as the security of being monitored. The parents of a young person with physical disabilities want to know their son or daughter made it home safely after work.

Manchester’s “Are You OK?” program eases the concern of friends and family who may find it difficult to maintain consistent, reliable daily contact – and it brings a sense of comfort into the subscriber’s home.

That’s because contacting an elderly person or homebound individual on a regular basis helps assure their well-being and gives them a feeling of security.

The Manchester Police Department, Manchester Fire-Rescue-EMS, the Eighth Utilities District Fire Department, and the Manchester Housing Authority are working together to offer the program, which is a computerized telephone calling system that is operated free-of-charge by the police and fire departments in town.

The system calls participants at the same time of day, every single day, to check on their welfare. The subscriber decides what time of day or night to receive the call. If the subscriber does not answer the phone after several attempts in a row, the computer immediately notifies the dispatch center to send a police officer to the residence to check on the participant.

The computer stores subscriber names, numbers, and call times. The system runs 24/7 and automatically calls each person in the system at their pre-determined time. When the system hears a voice response on the phone it delivers a short pre-recorded message.

Local officials say about 15 people have already signed up for the program and that it is working very well.

Manchester Police Officer Stacey Forish says the new program is “free and simple and it gives the participants peace of mind and their families the sense of security of knowing that their loved ones are being checked on.”
Fairfield historic homes illustrated online

Learning new things about old places in Fairfield is easier now that a database – including facts and pictures of the town’s historic homes and properties – is available online. The database contains more than 1,000 addresses, color photographs, and descriptions of local properties that have historical and architectural significance.

Established in 1639 by British colonists, Fairfield’s changing periods of history are today illustrated by hundreds of historic properties that have been carefully preserved by private owners, heritage organizations, and town government. Now they not only dot Fairfield’s neighborhoods, they can be enjoyed in the dot.com neighborhood as well.

Online links provide map locations of these important historic properties and provide information about their historic and architectural value. Residents can locate a specific address and click on the house icon to get information on that property.

They can satisfy their curiosity about the old house on Mill Plain Road (built before 1884 and sold to a Southport harness maker) or discover that 2117 Fairfield Beach Road is one of the few turn-of-the-century houses still standing on the beach.

The new database can also be used by homeowners seeking information on their own houses – or by real estate agents, potential buyers, town planners, and others who have stake in making sure the town’s historic properties are preserved for the future.

The online inventory of historic properties was a collaborative effort between the town and the Fairfield Museum and History Center with help from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. The information was taken from a 1988 survey of Fairfield’s most important historic properties that was updated in 2009 when hundreds more properties were added, including several important examples of 20th century architecture.

Complete building surveys containing detailed information on each property, as well as additional resources on Fairfield’s architecture heritage, are available at the Fairfield Museum and History Center’s research library.

To access the new database, go to http://fairfieldct.org and click “historical properties.”

Newington offers new online record system

Newington has switched to a new, more customer-friendly service for residents and businesses to view town property records online.

While town real estate records have been available online for about five years, Newington is now using Vision Appraisal, the service used by a majority of towns in the state. The new system provides more detailed data sets and has easier to use software.

Having access to the most common system is helpful to business people who work in multiple towns, including lawyers, bankers, appraisers, and insurance and construction companies, and it is a useful resource for town residents. Property owners can do a search to see the sale prices of properties similar to theirs and the database includes a Taxpayer Information Site to help taxpayers better understand the revaluation process.

Site visitors will find a section that helps them understand how their property was assessed as well as a section that helps them prepare for a hearing if they want to contest the value of their property. Also included is an overview of a typical revaluation project and videos that cover the various steps involved in a revaluation.

"I'm getting feedback now and the users like having the information online," Assessor S. Steve Juda said.

The online database supported by Vision Appraisal is updated on a monthly basis. The company provides full revaluations, valuation updates, cyclical property re-inspections, and full personal property appraisal and data collection services. They also offer complete data conversion services from any electronic or manual source and full digital imaging services along with CAMA based imaging software.

There is no cost to access the information on municipal websites and no login is needed.
Sun Shines on Solar Projects in Somers and East Lyme

The largest commercial solar projects ever approved in New England are moving forward in Somers and Lyme after winning the approval of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

The applications of the two towns were selected from a field of 21 proposals as part of a new competitive bidding process by the state to increase sources of renewable energy in Connecticut and drive down costs.

The solar power plants will provide as much as ten megawatts of renewable energy to Connecticut’s power grid. The two projects will each supply five megawatts and one megawatt can serve about 1,000 homes.

"The fact that 21 projects — representing 70 megawatts of clean renewable power — applied under this program is a clear sign that entrepreneurs and clean technology innovators are excited about the new approach Connecticut has taken," Gov. Dannel P. Malloy said.

Somers Solar Park will be developed by a Virginia-based company and could be in operation by November 2013. Plans call for ground-mounted solar photovoltaic panels to be located on 50 acres in town.

The East Lyme Solar Park, also using ground-mounted panels, will be built by a firm from East Lyme. Officials expect it to be producing energy by June 2014 on a local site that was previously targeted for residential development but has been vacant since 2008.

DEEP Commissioner Dan Esty said price was a key component in the selections because of the State’s commitment to closing the gap between the cost of renewable energy and power generated from fossil fuels. The 20-year average cost of the power from the two projects is expected to be 22.2 cents per kilowatt hour.

CL&P and UI are being required to buy an increasing amount of power that is generated from solar, wind and other renewable sources, lessening the dependence on power generated by fossil fuels such as coal and oil. By 2020, the share of renewable energy in Connecticut is projected to rise to 20 percent of total generation.

Residents can follow library construction on website

Ridgefield is transforming its library with an ambitious project to bring it into the 21st century through an expansion and renovation that will create a multi-level, energy efficient building with an open and flexible floor plan – and residents now have at their fingertips a comprehensive website to keep them up-to-date as the construction progresses.

The plan for the new Ridgefield library takes advantage of modern design and new technologies. Toddlers to seniors will have age-appropriate areas to enjoy books and programs of most interest to them. A new library commons is envisioned as a hub for lively exchange. And as well as traditional quiet reading rooms, there will be free and secure wireless service, plentiful workstations, and a technology resource center to support individual and group instruction.

Web site visitors can also ask questions about the plans for the new library, follow the project as it moves forward, read news releases about it, volunteer to help, and learn about attending or hosting an information session about the project.

New process in Milford streamlines permits

Milford has implemented a new, web-based permit application process that it hopes will end the “lines outside the building department and people sitting on metal chairs in the hallways that we have to live down,” in the words of town land use director Jocelyn Mathiasen.

Mathiasen was hired seven months ago to streamline a process that was causing long delays and missed opportunities for builders. Since that time several web-based solutions have been developed that will cut down the wait.

A new system similar to those used in restaurants and other businesses will allow builders and homeowners to request an appointment with an inspector online and receive a text message when the city official is available to meet. Called the Q-Less system, the software first confirms that a request has been received and then sends a second text message to the person’s cell phone when an inspector is available.

"People can wait at home or in the coffee shop down the street, and if they want to they can delay their appointment by 15 minutes,” Mathiasen said. “If they miss it, when they do come in they go to the head of the line."

The new software allows applicants to request, track, and receive permits online as well as to request inspections.

The town has also implemented other customer-friendly policies, including customer service training for all staff and a requirement that all e-mails and phone calls be returned within one day.

A second program, planned to be introduced this summer, will issue permits online for many small projects that do not require planning and zoning board approval. Milford will be the first city in Connecticut to use the UPermit system as it strives to turn a system “notorious for delays,” the land use director said, into an accessible, efficient process that helps get builders and others in to and out of the permit line as fast as possible.
Enfield uses technology to get feedback on transit center plans

Enfield is seeking public comment on the latest plans for the proposed Thompsonville Transit Center and has created an online portal on the town’s website for residents to submit their thoughts and ideas.

Local residents may now forward comments directly to the town’s community development office using an online form. Residents may simply type their comments and click “submit” and are not required to provide their names or email addresses. A copy of the Community Development Department’s presentation about the transit center to the Town Council also is available on the website.

The Thompsonville train station has already been selected to be a stop along the proposed commuter rail line running from New Haven to Hartford to Springfield – the first new commuter rail line proposed in Connecticut in many decades and a key north-south route that expects to eventually add a spur to Bradley International Airport.

The Thompsonville section of Enfield is part of the town’s historic district and local officials believe the new station will attract commuters and foot traffic to the area, which already features many small businesses.

The town’s transit center project has been in the works for more than a decade. When complete, it will include a bus and train station in the Thompsonville section. The town is currently designing the bus portion of the project and the state Department of Transportation is planning to construct the train station.

Construction on the bus portion could start in 2012 at an estimated cost of $2.9 million, with additional costs for acquiring property, remediation of environmental contamination and the development of off-site parking near the station.

Wilton pursuing fiber optic connection between public buildings

Wilton is pursuing a project to install conduits for fiber optic lines between some of its public buildings and is planning to save money on the initiative by taking advantage of trenching that will occur as part of a natural gas pipeline project.

The fiber optics link will connect the Wilton Library, the Town Hall and Wilton High School, allowing data sharing between the three buildings through a fiber optic connection, and eventually allowing those facilities an off-site data backup location.

The two-year, $2.2-million capital project includes the conduits, stringing the fiber optics, the terminations and hanging the redundant fiber. The conduits will be put underground along with the natural gas pipeline. In fiscal year 2013, the conduit and fiber would be laid, and in fiscal year 2014 the data link would be usable.

“One of the biggest parts of connecting is the trenching,” said town CFO Sandy Dennies. “This type of opportunity comes along once in a lifetime and it is an opportunity that comes along with the pipeline.”

“There has been a lot of discussion about the need to collaborate, especially with the Board of Education,” Dennies said. Currently, he said, departments based in the town hall complex cannot work together with the Board of Education because their computer systems are not connected.

The project will also accomplish a more direct line of communication to Miller-Driscoll School, whose location about 3 miles away makes it the only school away from the School Road “campus” of the Wilton Public Schools.

The fiber optics conduits will be laid with the natural gas pipes as the town also puts down sidewalks and curbs in Wilton Center with the help of a $200,000 STEEP grant. The project is expected to bring down costs for school facilities and make it less expensive to do business in town.

Local officials believe the final project will achieve significant energy cost savings – in the range of a 40 percent savings with a line running into the town center and the schools.
North Branford e-alert system has new twist

Tweeting about a town meeting? Yes, if you are registered with North Branford’s new electronic alert system. The new e-alert system uses phones, pagers, and e-mails to notify residents about natural disasters and other emergencies – and it can serve as a calendar of community and government events for those who sign up.

The State pays for all towns to send emergency notifications about incidents like missing children, evacuations, and weather disasters. North Branford decided to expand its system by including non-emergency announcements of referendums, events, and other government news.

The town is paying $4,000 out of its communications budget this year to send out the information about community and government events.

“The biggest benefit is being able to disseminate information to residents in the way they want information brought to them and at a very rapid pace,” Deputy Fire Chief Anthony Esposito said. “The emergency aspect of it has been used in several towns. During the flooding that occurred this past year and the hurricane threats, several towns sent out messages.”

Every home and business phone number is already in a database for emergency notification, so even if individuals opt not to register secondary phone numbers or contact information, they will still get emergency alerts on their home phones.

But if residents want to be alerted via cell or work phone, pager, or e-mail of emergencies or community events, they must register their information on the town’s website.

They can also specify which municipal announcements they want to receive or choose to receive none at all. For residents who have school-age children, the second part of the new alert program is similar to messages they receive from the school system.

Officials tested the Safer North Branford Alert Emergency Notification System in December and the program is now up and running. Towns and cities across the state have launched similar initiatives with the help of the state Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

Residents can register their contact information by visiting www.townofnorthbranfordct.com and clicking on “Sign up for Safer NB Alerts.”

Wilton Officials Laud New Chamber Website

The Wilton Chamber of Commerce recently launched a new website at www.wiltonchamber.com. The site provides easy navigation to information about doing business in Wilton and provides a host of local demographics useful to both residents and employers.

With the tagline, “Where Small Town Meets Big Business,” the site mentions that Wilton has been named a Money magazine "Best Place" and "Top 25 Earning Town." In addition, it profiles new Chamber members, spotlights legacy members, has a continuously updated event calendar, discloses key benefits more easily. Finally, we incorporated each of the critical fundamental elements into the website to offer a better experience for visitors, who can now easily find information on services provided by Chamber members, doing business in Wilton and upcoming events.”

"Working in close collaboration with the Chamber, one of the town's goals has been to make Wilton Center an attractive destination to shop, dine, go to a movie or just stroll with family or friends," First Selectman Bill Brennan said. "Continuing infrastructure improvements support our economic development objectives, which have attracted new retail businesses and companies seeking quality office space in a vibrant community environment. The Chamber's new site supports these objectives in a visibly attractive and easy to navigate format."

"In designing the new site, we spent considerable time analyzing the structure to streamline navigation," Franklin said. "We then explored and evaluated the latest layouts and features that would enable people to learn about organizational functions and data specific to doing business in Wilton, provides detailed information on permits and regulations, and has links to the Chamber's social media sites."

Executive Director Torie Clancy collaborated with Chamber member Kelly Franklin of Wilton Web Design to develop the new site.

The Chamber set very clear goals for updated branding that reflects the town's bucolic setting, but also conveys Wilton's vibrant, progressive business community. Modern illustrations, typography and the green color scheme of the updated website suggest freshness, prosperity and organic growth—all positive attributes in promoting commerce.

The member directory contains links to Chamber members' websites and to Google Maps for directions.
Bethel train station parking expansion key to transit-oriented development

Bethel has an ambitious plan to expand its downtown area by targeting the area surrounding its train station for housing, commercial and retail development. The plan just got a jump start with a $750,000 state grant that will pave the way for a new 130-space addition to the existing parking lot.

The expansion will bring the total spaces to more than 300 on an adjoining property already owned by the state. The town issues about 250 parking permits annually for the train station and there are nearly 60 residents on a waiting list for the permits.

"I am keenly aware of the need to improve the train station facility and parking in downtown Bethel," said State Rep. David Scribner, a ranking member of the Legislature's Transportation Committee who represents Bethel.

Bethel First Selectman Matt Knickerbocker said the expanded parking is much needed and that it is the lynchpin of the town’s plan to develop a transit-oriented development (TOD) district around the station.

Knickerbocker said the Board of Selectmen is planning to apply for a state grant designed to encourage transit districts that could provide a minimum of $250,000 for planning and implementation of the proposal.

"My plan is to move forward with this as quickly as possible and educate the people about what a great benefit this would be to the town," he said.

Bethel planning official Steve Palmer said the TOD is essentially an extension of Bethel’s downtown and would allow residential and retail uses on industrial land that surrounds the station.

"The TOD is a strategy to enhance, improve and sustain the downtown area into the future," he said, noting that additional residential units in the downtown geared toward young professionals would benefit downtown businesses.
Neighbors helping neighbors is a way of life in many towns and it is a way of strengthening the fabric of the community that takes on special meaning when the neighbor being helped is serving on active duty in the military.

Many residents leaving for deployment also leave behind spouses and children who might need a helping hand while they are away. Their lawns need mowing, leaves need raking, and a babysitter might be needed for an appointment or an evening out.

Simsbury has launched a support network for the families of local men and women who are serving in the armed forces. If they need their driveways shoveled or gardens planted and weeded, military families can now turn to Simsbury’s Care and Love for Our Soldiers Everyday (C.L.O.S.E.).

Volunteers will help with spring cleaning or do other chores such as going to the grocery store. Individuals support the network by volunteering their time and talents. Businesses are participating by donating gift certificates, products, and services.

Founded by Caroline Granger and other students at Simsbury High School, the group is working with Deputy First Selectman John Hampton; Betty Forristall, Secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars; and Ed Pabich, a Simsbury veteran, to create a database of local men and women currently serving in the armed forces.

“We don’t know if there are six soldiers from Simsbury or 600,” Hampton said. “We want to identify them and let them know that help is there if they need it.”

Granger, who was inspired by a segment on Oprah to start the support team, worked with other members of C.L.O.S.E. to develop a variety of ways to assist service men and women and their families. In addition to all the services they provide, they make gift baskets that include items such as movie tickets, homemade treats, giftcards to restaurants, and gift certificates to a nail salon or spa.

The students also have plans for fundraisers to help with the costs of the program, including car washes and bake sales, and an idea for a golf tournament is in the works.

For senior citizens in Kent, Warren, and New Milford, the annual spring sprucing up this year included energy and accessibility improvements to their homes and work to make them more secure and watertight.

At a house in Kent, volunteers applied new paint on the windows, doors, and eaves as part of a project that included heating repairs and the replacement of rotted sills.

The improvements were made through the efforts of Rebuilding Together of Litchfield County, an affiliate of the national organization and one of more than 250 partners in rehabilitating the homes of older, low-income individuals.

“Our goal is to keep elderly homeowners dry and safe,” said Heidi Haug of Kent, one of the volunteers.

She said the sill and heating repairs were accomplished through a U.S.D.A. program that provided $7,500 which is the lifetime limit for funding under the program. Since there was still more work to do, volunteers drove from towns including Bantam, South Killingly, and Southwick, Massachusetts to scrape and paint.

Haug was one of four U.S.D.A. staff workers that comprised the eleven-member volunteer Rebuilding Together crew. Mary Rebehn, an area loan technician for U.S.D.A., said that the U.S.D.A. is involved in many areas that touch the lives of average Americans.

“We just approved a loan for a Kent farm,” she said, “and we have a lot of different branches that work with rural development. We also work with loans for the business community and with rural energy issues.”

As part of the volunteer team, a local business provided the paint and materials as well as their own time. Jennifer LaVoie-Tonnesen, owner of LaVoie Color and Design in Kent donated paint for the project and she and her brother, Benjamin, donated their services.

Rebuilding Together began with a small group of founding affiliates more than 30 years ago.

Today, the affiliate network has completed more than 100,000 homes across the nation with the help of 2.5 million volunteers.
Volunteers boost literacy in New London

"How are you this morning? I’m Janie from the Read to Grow program, and congratulations on your baby. Is this your first child?"

Volunteer Janie Butts Pressley has been greeting new mothers and families for more than a decade at Lawrence & Memorial hospital in New London, providing information, a sympathetic ear and a message about the importance of reading.

Read to Grow is a statewide, nonprofit program that helps parents develop their children's literacy and provides free books for kids. A book - the current selection is "Baby Day" - is included in a packet the new parents receive at the hospital from Read to Grow.

Pressley and Read to Grow, which promotes early literacy, are a match made in heaven. An elementary school teacher from 1968 until her retirement in 1998, Pressley understands the vital importance of reading.

Growing up in the sharecropping town of Nesmith, South Carolina, she developed a passion for the written word.

"The few books they had at the school's library, you couldn't take home," she said. "So everything I could get my hands on to read, I read. Sometimes, I was reading the same book over and over again. I've always had a love for reading."

Pressley sees her job as "planting the seed that the parents are the baby's first teacher - and that it's fun being the teacher" and that is expressed in her refrain to new mothers, "read to your baby, talk to your baby, sing to your baby."

Pressley recently outlined the program's benefits:

"As a retired elementary school teacher who believes that reading is the foundation for success and one who loved to read as a youngster, but didn't have any books to read at home, I believe this program is critical to our babies.

Once you have lost many good years of reading, you never catch up. The sight of a book, the touch of a book, constantly hearing Mama's voice through reading and storytelling not only helps the child develop appreciation for books, but he or she will enter school ready to continue to learn instead of beginning to learn.

"This program hooks them to books before they discover the passive life of television and videos. It is neat when I visit a child's home and she or he hands me a book and says, 'Read to me.' We have to get them to value books while they are young."
Residents, Businesses Grow Food for Local Pantries

Newtown’s fall harvest will bring good news – and fresh food – to nearby food pantries. Since April, more than 150 Newtown residents, town officials and local businesses have been working together to plant and cultivate rows of vegetables in the town’s 10,000-square-foot Victory Garden.

When the volunteers harvest the vegetables, they will donate them to local food pantries such as the Faith Food Pantry and the town’s social services department, said resident Harvey Pessin who created the garden to provide food for the hungry and a place for residents to hang out.

Pessin and his wife Brid Craddock, who designs gardens for a living, came up with the idea of a vegetable garden that would benefit local food pantries.

Pessin spoke to several town officials and community groups to get them on board with the idea and a local wholesale nursery donated about 900 starter plants to help the volunteers begin the gardens. Each team of volunteers is responsible for maintaining a row of vegetables.

While there are not many rules for participation, teams “must have a sign, and it has to be funny,” said Pessin. The signs, including the team’s name, are placed at the end of each row.

The Trinity Episcopal Church volunteer group named itself the “Trinity Trowelers,” and the C.H. Booth Library’s group calls itself the “Booth Babes.” Another group is named “The Garden Hoes.”

Some of the volunteers are experienced growers and have gardens at home, but gardeners with little or no experience are also welcome. Experienced gardeners often share their knowledge with novice growers and tools are also available at the Victory Garden.

Once the volunteers have harvested their plants, they plan to have a Harvest Festival in September.

Since success breeds success, the gardeners plan to establish a garden committee and expand the Victory Garden by another 10,000 square feet next year. That would prevent the Victory Garden from having to put volunteers on a waiting list or turn them away.

Madison volunteers bring Civil War letters to life

A volunteer group in Madison is learning what day-to-day life was like during the Civil War by transcribing nearly 1,000 letters – written over the course of 60 years to a prominent town citizen, George Wilcox who lived from 1830-1928.

During the Civil War era, people wrote letters as part of daily life and the letters provide a remarkable picture of daily life in Civil War times for a well-known and well-to-do Northern family.

Since last summer, local volunteers, Bill Morrissey, Charlotte Neely, Nancy Farnam and Loma Corcoran, have been going through the letters, organizing them into plastic binders and then transcribing them onto a computer.

Most of the letters to Wilcox were from his older brother, Daniel Hand Wilcox, who had moved to Georgia upon his graduation from Yale College. The letters had been stored all these years in Wilcox’s home and they were given to the town by Wilcox’s granddaughter, arriving in boxes tied up neatly in packets.

“We get to read about the anxiety that Daniel felt, living in the South during the turbulent times of the Civil War.” Morrissey said. “I don’t think Daniel’s sympathies ever left the Union.

Daniel wrote about his unease with the election of Abraham Lincoln, because he didn’t think the South was going to accept him. After Lincoln’s assassination, he wrote moving letter which spoke of his grief and anxiety about what would happen to the country. "I fear the greatest disaster to the nation as a consequence," he wrote. "Andrew Johnson cannot fill Lincoln's place."

Volunteer Charlotte Neely said, "Because they wrote every day, you get so caught up in the story, and then after reading about their lives for a while, you come upon a letter that talks about that person dying, and it’s like you lost a friend. Really, it becomes so real."

Morrissey said he gets so engrossed that he often works on the project at home. "Once you get transcribing, you don't want to stop, you want to see what happens next," he said. "You see the personalities of the people. Remember, there was no telephone, so they sat down every day and just wrote the news to each other. It’s a wonderful record."
West Hartford schools have adopted a new beefed up anti-bullying policy that requires employees to quickly report harassment among students — even if the bullying takes place at the local mall, on Facebook or at other locations off school grounds.

The seven-page, state-mandated Safe School Climate Plan replaces the former, two-page bullying policy that prohibited students from intimidating others "on school grounds, on a school bus or at a school-sponsored activity."

The new plan specifically bans cyberbullying or any other threatening, off-campus behavior that creates a hostile environment at school or infringes on a student's rights.

School employees aware of bullying must verbally report the incidents within one school day and submit a written report within three days, according to the new policy. In addition, every year all educators must be trained "on the prevention, identification and response to bullying, and the prevention of and response to youth suicide."

School board member Terry Schmitt said, "Everybody wants to stop bullying. There isn't a person on this earth that's in favor of bullying — not even the bullies themselves, once you catch them and put them in a room and show them what they've done."

Bullying "clearly exists," board Chairman Bruce Putterman said. "And it is always a problem for the kid being bullied."

As part of the plan, the schools will conduct surveys, anti-bullying staff training and informational programs implemented by the school.

A safe school climate specialist will be appointed in each school, usually principals or other school staffers who will be responsible for the prevention and investigation of bullying in their schools. They will also meet twice a year with a district-wide coordinator to recommend any possible changes to the plan.

West Hartford's 10,000-student school system reported 30 documented cases of bullying during the 2010-11 school year, including 21 at the town's middle and high schools.

Based on a 2008 state law, schools must report the number of cases in an annual report to the state Department of Education. School staff must investigate all allegations of bullying, and when there is a verified case, invite the bully's and victim's parents to a meeting.

In recent years, school administrators have noted the emergence of online harassment as a component of school bullying and started an initiative called CyberCompass to educate parents and students on how to safely use the Internet.
New Colchester task force addresses bullying

Bullying has been in the national spotlight as a factor in several highly-publicized youth suicides and now a community-based task force in Colchester is trying to determine how widespread the problem is in their town.

The task force has distributed a survey asking residents and students about their experiences with bullying — whether as a victim or a witness. The survey will try to determine if bullying is occurring locally and, if so, what forms of harassment are taking place. It will be distributed to students in grades 5-12 and be available on the town’s website.

The bullying survey has the support of the Board of Education and school administration.

The task force’s work includes discussing programs and strategies to prevent bullying in schools and the community, as well as identifying forms of bullying including verbal, physical, social, and online. They meet monthly at the town’s youth center and representatives come from many different local groups including the Colchester Lions, Rotary, various churches, students, and residents.

Brian Currie is a student representative on the Colchester task force. He said cyber bullying — when tormentors can act anonymously — is one of the “really big” forms of harassment.

“The scary part is, it’s out there forever,” Currie said. Nationally, a growing number of young people are reporting that they have been victims of cyber bullying — defined as “the use of electronic devices to humiliate, harass, or even threaten another individual.”

Students who are bullied online at home are often uncomfortable about or even fearful of facing the cyber bully at school. When an off-campus incident causes a victim to feel threatened at school, it is disruptive of the educational process.

Colchester Public Schools have offered parents the following tips to help stop cyber bullying:

- Teach children never to respond to offensive or threatening email, and to share them with you.
- Talk regularly with your children about their online behavior.
- Save messages of serious concern and contact local law enforcement authorities, if appropriate, or the school resource officer.
- Filter or block unwanted messages.
- Contact your child’s school administrator if he or she is feeling threatened at school.

Collaborative program strengthens families

To help families build skills to make them stronger, Enfield is offering “Strengthening Families,” a seven-week program for families with children between the ages of 10 and 14 who want their families to “gear up” before the adolescent years start changing the family dynamic.

The program helps parents prepare for the peer pressure, grade pressure, and worries about getting along with others that the adolescent years bring and provides families with guidance on avoiding problems with drugs and alcohol and keeping family communication strong through the teen years.

“Strengthening Families” provides opportunities for the entire family to gather for a weekly dinner and offers concurrent group sessions for parents and youths, babysitting for younger siblings, and family sessions. The sessions are designed to strengthen the relationship between parents and their children through fun and interactive discussions, learning games, and activities including realistic videos, role-playing, and family projects.

Topics for discussion include using love and limits, having dreams and goals, making house rules, appreciating parents and caregivers, encouraging good behavior, handling conflict, and dealing with stress.

In addition to the seven-week “boot camp,” families participate throughout the year in reinforcement sessions and recreational and enrichment activities, including some that are planned by the youths and their parents.

The program is an evidence-based model developed by Iowa State University and is being offered in cooperation with Enfield Youth Services and the nonprofit Community Health Services with funding from the Positive Youth Development Initiative of the state Department of Children and Families.
Please send me additional copies of the 2012 issue:

☐ ___ copy(ies) of the 2012 compilation - 100 *Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments*

Please send me copies of the publications from prior years:

☐ ___ copy(ies) of the 2010 compilation - 111 *Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments*

☐ ___ copy(ies) of the 2011 compilation - 124 *Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments*

Payment:

☐ Check or Money Order (payable to CCM) is enclosed

☐ Credit Card (please circle)  

Card # ___________________________

Expiration Date ______________________  CVV Code ______________________

3 digit on back of card (MC, VISA, DISC)  4 Digit on front of card (AMEX)

Name on Card ___________________________

Billing Address ___________________________

City ___________________________ State __________ Zip ____________

Ship to:

Name ___________________________

Title ___________________________

Municipality/Organization ___________________________

Address ___________________________

City ___________________________ State __________ Zip ____________

Telephone ___________________________

Email ___________________________

Mail or Fax Order Form to:

*Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments*

CCM  
900 Chapel Street, 9th floor, New Haven CT 06510
Telephone 203-498-3000 • Fax 203-498-5829 • www.ccm-ct.org
The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) is Connecticut’s statewide association of towns and cities. CCM is an inclusionary organization that celebrates the commonalities between, and champions the interests of, urban, suburban and rural communities. CCM represents municipalities at the General Assembly, before the state executive branch and regulatory agencies, and in the courts. CCM provides member towns and cities with a wide array of other services, including management assistance, individualized inquiry service, assistance in municipal labor relations, technical assistance and training, policy development, research and analysis, publications, information programs, and service programs such as workers’ compensation and liability-automobile-property insurance, risk management, and energy cost-containment. Federal representation is provided by CCM in conjunction with the National League of Cities. CCM was founded in 1966.

CCM is governed by a Board of Directors, elected by the member municipalities, with due consideration given to geographical representation, municipalities of different sizes, and a balance of political parties. Numerous committees of municipal officials participate in the development of CCM policy and programs. CCM has offices in New Haven (headquarters) and in Hartford.

900 Chapel Street, 9th Floor
New Haven, Connecticut 06510-2807
Tel: (203) 498-3000
Fax: (203) 562-6314
E-mail: ccm@ccm-ct.org
Web Site: www.ccm-ct.org