INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A Connecticut Town & City Compendium
Compiled from the year 2012 issues of Connecticut Town & City
June 2013

Dear CCM Member,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town & City Compendium – our 26th 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) 498-3025; or email kmaloney@ccm-ct.org.

Good Reading!

Sincerely,

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

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Volunteers Work With Town to Build Handicapped-Accessible

The Rotary Club in Enfield is working with the Town Council to build a handicapped-accessible playground that officials say may open as soon as next year. Rotary members say the club wants to build a playground and park designed for children and family members with disabilities in a space that is “centrally located and as visible as possible, in a place where there is a lot of activity.”

The playground is expected to cost about $300,000 and will feature play structures designed for children with physical disabilities including specialty swings, slides, ramps, raised platforms, and a smooth, rubbery ground that wheelchairs can be pushed over. It will also include a pavilion and benches. The town is providing the property and it will maintain the new facility.

The Rotary has hosted several community fundraisers since kicking off the project in June 2010 and recently learned that a local company is donating $250,000 to the project – which quickly moved the effort from the planning stages to full speed ahead.

Old School Becomes New Community Center, Town Offices

It is out with the old and in with the new in North Branford where a project to convert a former elementary school into a new community center will also help the town consolidate two town offices.

The adaptive reuse of the former Stanley T. Williams elementary school will include designing restrooms in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the renovation of former classrooms for use as fitness rooms, offices, and senior center spaces.

Engineering and architectural work has already been contracted and the firm is in the process of determining the best cooling system for the new spaces and designing aesthetic improvements to portable classrooms on the site.

The portable units were constructed in the 1990s and need upgrades that include interior painting, carpeting, ADA entrances, expanded door widths, and modifications to the rooftop unit for heating and cooling.

Town staff and Rotary members have identified several possible locations including two former schools and a space behind the Enfield Public Library. Mayor Scott Kaupin has directed town staff to work with the Rotary to identify the best home for the playground and has asked where the Rotary wants to build the playground, since the group is paying for the project.

Ed Palomba, Rotary project manager, says Rotary members prefer the library because of its central location. While the adjacent Eli Whitney School already has a playground with some handicapped-accessible equipment, it is not open after school, on weekends, or while school is not in session.

According to the project timeline, construction could begin in 2012. Councilwoman Carol Hall, who serves on the council’s leisure services subcommittee, pledged to “do our best to fast-track it for you.”

Councilman Patrick Crowley supports any location the Rotary chooses. “Wherever they want it, as far as I’m con-
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.

Dolores McArdle, who has lived in Bozrah for 55 years, said the new building and green will improve the town. She said the farmers market has been a huge success.

“Right now, there’s no meeting place,” McArdle said. “The Town Hall is too small, and the upstairs couldn’t be used because it wasn’t handicap-accessible.”

That’s all about to change, now that the Bozrah community has given new life to an old landmark.

The bard is back: Stratford opens Shakespeare Theater

For the first time since the 1980s, a troupe of professional actors took the stage of Stratford’s historic Shakespeare Theater for a May 17 performance of “Romeo and Juliet.”

The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival theater group performed the bard’s famous and well-loved play on a make-shift stage for students from Stratford and Bunnell high schools—the first theatergoers to enjoy a Shakespeare performance inside the venerable building in nearly three decades.

Katherine Hepburn, Christopher Plummer, James Earl Jones, Hal Holbrook, Jessica Tandy, and Christopher Walken are some of the Hollywood A-listers to have appeared on the Stratford stage but the most recent performance was also one of the most significant.

“The Bard is back,” said Edward Goodrich of the Stratford Arts Commission. “This was the first real performance inside the theater in maybe 25 years. We kept our promise about Shakespeare. We battled our way back into the theater. Things are going to start to move pretty fast from here.”

Built in 1955, the town-owned theater once drew talent from big-name actors and directors including John Houseman and Zoe Caldwell. The glory days ended when the theater closed upon the death of a wealthy local man who had long supported the theater financially. The building has stood vacant since it closed in the mid-1980s.

Matt Catalano, a town councilman who has been a driving force behind the theater’s most recent revival attempt, says this time will be different.

Proponents of the planned revival hope theatergoers will rejuvenate the local economy through increased spending on food, shopping, and lodging.

The town council in 2010 hired a business management firm to assess and recommend a nonprofit business plan and fundraising program for the theater. When completed, the five-phase study will recommend ways to make the theater financially viable.
Recreation paradise in Canterbury

Canterbury is turning a state-owned park it leases for a dollar a year into a recreation paradise – complete with ice skating rink – thanks to a state STEAP grant and the efforts of the town’s recreation commission which developed the re-imagined plan for the park.

In addition to building an ice skating facility the size of a full hockey rink on a T-ball field that is not being used, the project will relocate a playscape that currently sits adjacent to the senior league field to a safer spot. Security lights will also be installed in the park.

The effort comes after recreation commission members offered to take a more active role in advancing recreation projects in town.

“We met with the rec commission on various issues,” First Selectman Brian Sear said. “They felt underutilized. They wanted to do more than just mow lawns and empty port-a-potties. I told them to come up with ideas, and I’ll do what I can do make those happen. The upgrades to Manship Park will create a facility for people of all ages that can be used for all four seasons.”

Recreation Commission Chair Jim Glennon said that work at Manship Park – which he called a dream come true – will begin immediately.

“There are definitely some safety and security issues, that’s why the security lights — we’ve had some vandalism out there,” he said. “I’m so excited. We’re going to be able to make it a family-friendly environment. It’s just really good news.”

Resident Nancy Duvall said she and her two children used to frequent Manship Park when one of the children played soccer, but have not visited as much since.

“Putting in an ice rink would help the park,” Duvall said. “My kids would go there more.”

Main Street landmarks to get “extreme makeovers”

With one stately structure after another lining its Main Street and occupying a place on the Nation Register of Historic Places, Old Wethersfield is about as iconic a stretch of colonial New England as you can get.

Now three historic landmarks along the rows of homes and buildings that front Main Street are set to get much-needed makeovers once a plan for their future use is developed with help from a state historic preservation grant.

Wethersfield was one of 10 towns to receive a state grant which will be used to design a sales and marketing plan to revive the Simeon Belden House, the Masonic temple, and some underutilized buildings of the historic Comstock & Ferre Seed Company, all located on Main Street.

“When we did the Old Wethersfield Master Plan there were recommendations relating to vacant, underused properties and clearly these were identified for further analysis,” said Town Planner Peter Gillespie explaining why the town applied to revitalize these particular sites.

Wethersfield officials are currently working with the sites’ owners and preservation officials to identify strategies to revitalize the properties and will choose a consulting firm to manage the plan development process.

A stakeholders committee of local groups and individuals will weigh in on different ideas for the properties. The committee includes representatives from the town’s Tourism Commission, Historic District Commission, Historical Society, Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum, Chamber of Commerce, Shopkeepers Association and others.

Wethersfield residents will also have a number of opportunities to provide input throughout the process. A few underused Comstock & Ferre outbuildings will remain with the heritage seed company, but will be revived to meet its needs.

The Masonic Temple building, which has been up for sale for about a decade, and the Belden House, built in 1767, will see very new futures based on local input.

“This is about what the community wants to see happen here,” said Helen Higgins, executive director of the CT Trust for Historic Preservation, the non-profit partner of the Department of Economic and Community Development, which funded the grants.

“Wethersfield is a key area for state tourism,” Higgins said. “But it’s not just about that, this is important for the community itself. These buildings should not just be sitting there underused and vacant – there are many ways they can be used.”
Clinton surveys local historic properties

During the dog days of summer, through the majesty of the fall foliage season and into the first frosty hints of the winter to come, “two guys with cameras” have been strolling the streets of Clinton with clipboards and cameras, taking photographs of historic homes and structures as part of a project by the historic district commission project to survey historic properties in town.

The two architectural historians were hired by the historic district commission to complete a survey that was begun nearly two years ago. Once the photographic survey is complete, the commission will be able to determine how best to protect and preserve the town’s historic treasures.

The visual record of Clinton’s outstanding older homes was funded in part by a state grant and focuses on the 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century homes in town. Local officials say the survey will also provide a helpful guide for Clinton’s celebration of its 350th anniversary in 2013.

The first part of the survey project inventoried about 140 homes in town. The second phase is covering an additional 150 homes and structures, and every house that is older than 1940 will be included.

Clinton Historic District Commissioner Megan Stine said the purpose of the survey is to have detailed records of what properties in town are historic.

“This is something that the State encourages towns to do in order to have a catalogue of all of the historical assets so that if you get to the next stage, which is trying to make sure you preserve our history and preserve our historic buildings, then we have a catalogue on it to do so,” Stine said. “That helps if you try and create a new historic district or if you’re trying to put into place any kind of regulation or zoning concern.”

Stine said the surveying will take until February of next year. Once completed, phase three of the project will assess what measures should be taken to best protect and preserve the town’s historic treasures.

East Lyme targets 17th century house for preservation

The Samuel Smith property in East Lyme is a 17th-century farmhouse largely unchanged by the passage of time. The 1685 house, with its hand-hewn wood beams and original door handles, still has its original well and an 1812 outhouse, both in use until about 30 years ago.

The fourth oldest house in East Lyme is pretty much in its original state according to local historians. The kitchen or “buttery” now includes modern appliances and an indoor bathroom was eventually installed, but otherwise the house remains as it was built.

The land it sits on is 17 acres of pristine farmland so untouched by development that three purported Indian graves remain undisturbed.

Now, the East Lyme Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources and the town’s Historic Properties Commission have both recommended purchasing the property in order to preserve it.

The house includes two additions and behind an ell that was constructed in 1812 is an 1812 five-hole privy which the Henry Ford Museum tried, and failed, to acquire in the 1930s.

The property is invaluable as a “teaching product,” said Arthur Carlson, chairman of the Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources, and the acquisition would be a two-for since the property also abuts 800 feet on Bride Brook and sits on 7 acres of an aquifer that feeds the town’s public water system.

Purchasing the property in order to preserve it would protect the aquifer and recharge area in the Bride Lake watershed. If the land was subdivided into housing lots, the addition of impervious surface would contribute to water pollution and polluted runoff.

“The property is a gem for both its natural and cultural resources and to preserve it for the community is a positive step to the future quality of life in your town,” said Nicolas Bellantoni, State Archaeologist.

A tour of the house reveals such architecturally significant features as feather-edge paneling, cased summer beams, and beaded joists. Stairs lead to a downstairs cellar, which houses the summer kitchen fireplace. The wooden wall by the cellar door has been smoothed by centuries of hands placed there to steady trips downstairs.

Upstairs, visitors can make out “$4.47 sheep” in white chalk – currency in pounds and pence pertaining to the price of flax, wool, and sheep – and suggesting the owners during that pre-Revolutionary time must have had a loom set up in the loft.

“These are the original beams. You can see the original paint. They maintained it just as a residence and did not make any improvements,” Carlson said. “All these features remained because the house was occupied by ‘working people’ who never had the money to refine it.”
Church targeted for preservation earns historic designation

Montville took a big step toward preserving one of its historical treasures when the town’s Center Congregational Church was recently accepted to the state’s Register of Historic Places.

The church, which dates to before the town existed, was founded in 1722 as a grant to the inhabitants of the North Parish of New London.

The current church building, which occupies a prominent spot in the town’s historic center, was built in 1847 and has undergone no major changes since that time.

The designation on the state’s Register of Historic Places will allow the town to pursue historic grants it hopes will help restore the church. The town acquired the church last year in a quit-claim deed.

The parishioners intended to sell the church and a sister property in the 1990s until an examination of the original deed showed it precluded the sale of the church to a private owner. It became vacant, began to experience leaks and parts of the building fell into disrepair.

The town acquired the church in May 2011 and since taking over the property, the town’s public works department and members of the town historical society have performed some of the needed maintenance – but much remains to be done.

The church has no plumbing and is in need of some fairly extensive repairs including new shingles for the roof.

Town Historian Jon Chase said the residents who have worked to save the church, “share a belief that this building can be a great benefit to future generations of the town.”

In addition to working on repair projects, the historical society also paid about $1,000 for the application to the state Register of Historic Places.

“In this case it was fairly clear from our initial review of the property that the church itself was historically and architecturally significant,” said Daniel Forrest, the state’s deputy historic preservation officer. “It is fairly unusual for a church of that age to maintain as many of its original features and design elements as it has.”

The listing on the state Register of Historic Places also is a necessity for the church to be considered for the national register. That could lead to additional grant opportunities.

Town officials say possibilities for the church in the future include being used to expand a local library or as a landmark on a driving tour of the town.

Putnam may soon be going to the dogs

Putnam may soon be going to the dogs, now that a campaign to raise funds for a proposed dog park has been announced.

Putnam recreation director Willie Bousquet said the $12,000 to $15,000 dog park – which will be funded by donations – will be built near the parking lot for the local farmers market.

The location for the new park is now wooded, but it will be partially cleared to enable the dog park and to extend the walking trail along the Quinebaug River.

Officials said they hope to see the park open by Memorial Day 2013.

The park will be open to all local residents as well as to dog lovers in the region – when it opens, it will be the only dog park between Worcester, Massachusetts and Norwich.

One of the first donations came from the family of former Putnam Mayor Michael Duffy.

Duffy “was an animal lover, and a big supporter of the community and events in Putnam,” said Duffy’s daughter-in-law Valerie Duffy of Putnam. It was a cause he would have liked, she said.

In addition, the local Lions Club is investigating matching grant programs that could reduce the donations required by half.

The sign marking the future dog park is a giant metal dog statue with a bone cut out of its middle that was part of an art installation in a local Putnam park two years ago. The town was given two of the dog statues for permanent installation in town.
Town workshops boost economic development

Officials in Seymour are conducting a series of workshops with business owners, residents, and local department heads to gain input on ways to boost economic development in the town.

The first workshop was held in April at town hall for downtown merchants. The session was “an opportunity for the key stakeholders to bring ideas, concerns and questions to the table,” said Seymour Economic Development Director Fred Messore.

A second workshop in May offered the public an opportunity to share their views on ways to lift their local economy.

First Selectman Kurt Miller was pleased that business owners and residents took advantage of the workshops and participated in the planning process for the town’s future.

“We were excited to provide the opportunity to involve residents in a public discussion of our downtown and enhancing its vitality,” said Miller. “This process will help the town chart its course for meaningful economic development.”

The workshops were planned by the Economic Development Commission after the town hired a Connecticut-based consulting firm to help Seymour update its plan of economic development, which is more than five years old.

He said the first stage of downtown investments pay dividends. The workshops were designed to help identify courses of action with the greatest relevance or impact. In addition, a questionnaire has been sent to all town department heads and board and commission members to gain their input as well.

“The workshops and planning process are designed to help identify issues important to Seymour residents,” Messore said. “They will provide a basis for guiding future economic development efforts over the next few years.”

Once all the data from business owners, residents, and town officials is collected, the consulting firm will start updating the plan.

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.

“The town has done remarkably well weathering the economic downturn in 2008,” said Louis Perillo, Southington’s economic development coordinator, giving credit to the community’s comprehensive approach to renewing the downtown.

Perillo attributed the interest in downtown not just to the aesthetic improvements, but also to the annual Italian-American and Apple Harvest festivals and the town’s portion of the Rails to Trails biking and hiking path that crosses nearby. “These 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.”
Hartford schools’ unique funding model is working

Hartford has broken tradition in the way it distributes education money — and that’s a good thing, education officials say.

Under student-based budgeting, a funding model that only Hartford has implemented in Connecticut, projected enrollment and the needs of individual students determine how much money goes to each school.

The new model directs money to principals based on a per-pupil formula that considers a student’s grade level, test scores, special education needs, and English Language Learner status.

In the 2010-11 year, for example, a high-achieving eighth-grader would generate $7,759 for a school. For a high school freshman who scored poorly and is learning English, a school received $11,648 to spend to improve achievement.

A recent report found that the budgeting system has made funding more equitable and has raised accountability for principals.

Public Impact, an education policy and consulting firm in North Carolina, analyzed budget data and interviewed current principals who experienced the shift to the new model in 2008.

Their report on student-based budgeting in Hartford considers the current system a “radical break” from the district’s former way of establishing budgets, in which schools mainly received money based on size and historical staffing levels.

Hartford administrators said the old way of budgeting resulted in significant spending gaps within the district, with some schools receiving less money even though they had a high population of students with more needs.

Hartford School Superintendent Christina Kishimoto said she welcomed the report’s findings. She believes they show one aspect of the city’s overall reform efforts, which include “principal empowerment” and directing 75 percent of funds to schools. The remaining 25 percent goes to central office expenses, such as transportation.

Allan Taylor, chairman of the State Board of Education, said the funding model fits “perfectly” with some large districts, but would not necessarily be needed in communities with only a few neighborhood schools. He also commended Hartford’s willingness to cooperate with an outside report.

Baltimore, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle are among the school systems nationwide that use a form of student-based budgeting.

“Tutoring club” approved in West Hartford center

A former real estate office near West Hartford Center will soon be a learning center for middle and high school students, after the town council approved an application to convert the building — originally a library — into a tutoring center.

“L.O.L. Club” owner Aldith Richards told the council she was inspired to start an education center when looking for ways to help her 17-year-old son, who she said was struggling at his high school.

“He needed more help than what the school could allow,” she said. Richards found that Sylvan Learning Centers were too expensive, and hiring a private tutor at $45 an hour was unsustainable.

The tutoring club will be broken into classrooms, each focusing on a different subject, with a teacher and a teacher’s aide. Parents will pay $100 a week for a membership that allows their student to visit as many times as needed in a week, or $25 to drop in.

The center will also run educational programming on the weekends.

In her application testimony, Richards said she wanted to provide a place for teens to “hang out” on weekends to keep them from congregating on the streets of Blue Back Square and the town center.

But the council decided that since the application was for an educational center, it would approve the facility for educational programming only for now, including some weekend hours.

Since the application did not include data on weekend staffing, parking or projected attendance, the council said Richards could come back when she had a plan for “teen center” use.

Richards discussed her motives for the new venture during the public hearing. “I want this to be the kind of club where you’re going to be proud to know that this is in your town,” she said.
Three Connecticut towns among 100 best places for youth

Hamden, Norwalk, and Waterbury rank among the best places in the country for young people to live, according to a competition held by America’s Promise Alliance. The Alliance is comprised of more than 400 national partners, and the organization’s top priority is ending the high school dropout crisis.

The 100 Best Communities for Young People competition is part of the Alliance’s “Grad Nation” campaign and the Connecticut communities were recognized for their dedication to providing healthy, safe and caring environments for young people as well as their commitment to seeing that more students graduate from high school.

The goal of Grad Nation is to raise the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020, with no school graduating fewer than 80 percent of its students on time.

Each year, America’s Promise recognizes 100 communities who work to increase graduation rates and demonstrate their commitment to Five Promises: Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, Effective Education, and Opportunities to Help Others.

All three Connecticut municipalities are multiple winners:

- Hamden’s graduation rate is 86.2 percent and this is the second time Hamden has made the list.
- Hamden was recognized for several community programs, including The Educational Care Collaborative, Hamden’s Partnership for Young Children and The Hamden Positive Choices campaign.
- Norwalk – with a graduation rate of 79.2 percent – has been on the list three times.
- Norwalk was recognized for programs including The Early Learning and Literacy Initiative; BEE Healthy, which raises awareness about childhood obesity through public engagement and community outreach; The Mayor’s Summer Jobs; and The Youth Service Bureau.
- Waterbury’s graduation rate is 83.6 percent and the Brass City is also a three-time winner.
- Among the programs Waterbury was recognized for are The Waterbury Bridge to Success Partnership, The Parents are Great Educators program, The Waterbury Youth Council, and Girls Inc. of Southwestern Connecticut, which offers summer and after-school programs that provide young girls with strategies to overcome social, intellectual and economic challenges while helping empower them for the future.
Cheshire's school district is putting its money where its technology is in order to keep pace with 21st century innovations that are changing the way teachers teach their students.

The mission of Cheshire's education technology plan is to "support the effective and efficient use of technology to enhance student engagement, information access, productivity, and growth in academic skills and concepts."

This year, the town is advancing that plan by investing in three school technology improvement projects:

• its district-wide 21st century classroom initiative;
• critical technology infrastructure upgrades in the schools; and
• a “one-to-one computing” program to support the school district's “bring your own device to school” initiative.

The 21st century classroom initiative will help the school district purchase 60 additional Smart boards. After the purchase, all but 60 classrooms in the entire district will be equipped with a Smart board, now considered a “must-have” in teacher-student classroom interaction.

The change of medium — from chalk board to Smart board — brings changes in teaching methods, with professional development in the school district focusing more and more on bringing teachers up to date on teaching approaches that revolve around the use of new technology.

“Our focus this year is professional development of teachers,” Assistant School Superintendent Scott Detrick said.

Cheshire's one-to-one computing initiative will allow teachers to purchase personal devices as part of the bring your own device to school program. The initiative, currently in a testing phase at a Cheshire middle school and the high school, will allow students to bring their wireless devices to school for educational purposes.

The purchase of these devices for teachers means that teachers will be able to loan them to students who do not have their own or may have left one at home on a given day.

Finally, the technology infrastructure improvements involve the equipment in data closets in the town’s schools. Officials say ventilation issues, coupled with the fact that most of the technology infrastructure in the district is about 20 years old, could lead to a system failure.

Detrick said Cheshire needs to adjust the way technology is utilized because of societal changes.

“The way kids learn, and the way they live in a sense is based around technology,” he said. “A couple years ago, they only used these devices outside of school. We need to marry the two together.”
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.

“Our main philosophy is to grow more engineers in this country,” said Play-Well Connecticut enrichment coordinator, Andrew Escalera. “We find the best way to do that is to get them exposed to engineering at an early age.”

Many Play-Well classes use LEGOS, but they are not affiliated with the toy company in any way. “One of the really great benefits to our program, and why it’s so successful,” Escalera continued, “is the way that we teach.

“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 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 Caro-line 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.

“Early childhood education is a quintessential illustration of the adage ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,’” LaFleur said.
Solar panels at landfill will generate power and revenues for town

Groton is installing solar panels at the town’s landfill to generate renewable energy and bring dollars into the town’s coffers.

The Town recently signed a letter of intent with Borrego Solar, a Massachusetts energy company, to build and install a ground-mounted solar facility capable of generating between one and five megawatts of electricity in partnership or under contract with Connecticut Light & Power.

Borrego will lease space at the landfill from the town for up to 20 years and will pay up to $25,000 annually for each megawatt of the system’s capacity. A 3-megawatt system could produce as much as $75,000 per year for the town.

Borrego will either keep the energy credits the system earns or sell them to CL&P, which would own and distribute the power. If Borrego does not share ownership with CL&P, it will contract with the company to manage and maintain the system.

Amy McDonough, the project manager for Borrego, said landfills are ideal locations for solar projects and that the company has installed systems in landfills in other communities, including several in Massachusetts.

The company says about 5 acres of open space is needed for the solar panels to function at their best.

Workshop helps small businesses save on energy costs

The town of Stafford, the Tolland County Chamber of Commerce, and the Stafford Energy Advisory Committee recently conducted a free workshop for small businesses to help them learn about “Energize Connecticut’s” energy-saving programs.

Energize Connecticut promotes home weatherization and business sustainability to save Connecticut ratepayers money and energy.

The workshop was designed to familiarize small business owners with programs and incentives that can help businesses make energy-saving improvements. Several small businesses were on hand to share their stories about the energy and money they saved through participation in energy-efficiency programs.

One of the key programs highlighted at the workshop was the Small Business Energy Advantage (SBEA) program, which offers comprehensive, cost-effective, turnkey energy-saving products and services to small businesses that do not have the time, resources, or in-house expertise necessary to reduce their energy use.

Each SBEA project starts with a free, no obligation energy assessment performed by a CL&P-authorized, licensed contractor. The assessment provides the small business owner with a description of all possible energy efficiency measures, the associated costs, estimated energy savings, and a menu of the program incentives and financing options that are available to help implement these measures.

In addition to hosting the workshop, Stafford also recently signed the new Clean Energy Communities pledge, a statewide initiative that provides incentives to Connecticut municipalities to improve energy efficiency and promote the use of renewable energy.

Through the program, Stafford has pledged to reduce its municipal building energy consumption by 20 percent by 2018, and to voluntarily purchase 20 percent of its municipal electrical needs from clean renewable sources by 2018.

Energy-saving project at sewage-treatment plant will also save money

The Fairfield Board of Finance recently approved an allocation from the town’s Water Pollution Authority’s reserve fund to improve energy efficiency at the local sewage-treatment plant.

Fairfield joins a growing number of communities that are paying for energy improvements at municipally-owned facilities through the energy and cost savings achieved by technological upgrades.

Public Works Director Richard White said the no-interest loan dollars would be used along with a combination grant/no-interest loan from United Illuminating to purchase a new variable speed blower that supplies oxygen to the treatment plant’s tanks.

White said the no-interest loan will be repaid within three years – thanks to the energy savings provided by the new blower. He estimated that the new equipment will save the town about $103,000 annually at the treatment plant.

As to whether there might be opportunities in the future for similar kinds of funding, White lauded the efforts of his assistant Ed Boman. “The credit goes to Ed, who has continually chased down grants,” White said. “He’s put together more than $1 million worth of projects and he keeps looking for every opportunity.”

Earlier in the summer, Fairfield approved spending $50,000 in grants to study the feasibility and cost benefits of installing a wind turbine on the town landfill. If the feasibility study pans out, the turbine would provide electricity to the town’s fire training center, the sewage-treatment plant, the conservation building, the animal control facility and the public works garage.
Partnership Preserves Open Space in Preston

Preston has partnered with the Avalonia Land Trust to acquire two vacant lots on Lake of Isles Road near the North Stonington border which will add 30 acres to the more than 200 existing acres of contiguous open space in Preston and North Stonington.

The 30-acre purchase was a three-way deal involving the trust, the former owners, and the town of Preston, which had started tax foreclosure proceedings on the land.

Last spring, Selectman Timothy Bowles proposed to the full board that rather than foreclose, the town could offer the land to Avalonia because it abutted other land preserved by the trust.

The win-win plan called for the land trust to obtain the property at no cost from the former owner and then pay the town the total back taxes of $20,586 and now the 30-acre wooded, rocky, and in some places, wet terrain bears the name “the Green Wood Tract of Songbird Preserve.”

Margaret Gibson, Avalonia Preston Town Committee chairwoman, has walked the land in years past to reach other landlocked Avalonia preserve property. The new parcels allow the trust to provide public access to open space land for hiking, photography, and dog walks and parking will be provided off Lake of Isles Road.

“What we have here is the classic emerald necklace,” Gibson said, “pieces of land that have been bought or given in fee simple that would link up like the beads in a necklace and form a contiguous wildlife corridor.”

First Selectman Robert Congdon said it was a situation where “all the pieces fell into place” and thanked Selectman Bowles for proposing the idea.

The new preserve land is attached to the Green Falls Five preserve, which connects to the Songbird Preserve and then to the Mains Brook Preserve and the Mitchell and Reed preserves. The Mitchell and Reed preserves each have more than 100 acres.

Avalonia volunteers have already walked the property and marked its boundaries and plan to walk the land with a forester to lay out trails. They are not yet sure if the trail from the new tract can be connected physically to the other preserves because of extensive wetlands near the western property border.

“They all connect on paper,” Gibson said. “It might end up with a southerly trail and a northern trail.”

Former Easton dairy farm is now open space

The cows may be gone, but there are still horses, dogs, birds and butterflies – because one of the last two working dairy farms in Easton is now serving the community in a new way as open space.

Randall’s Farm Nature Preserve, a 34-acre expanse of meadows, wetlands and forests, is now open to the public and offers trails for hiking, dog walking and other outdoor activities including horseback riding, if riders request permission in advance.

Princie Falkenhagen, president of the Aspetuck Land Trust which manages the property, said that the opening of the preserve was an important moment in the fight to preserve open space in the region.

“It goes towards preserving the rural and agrarian characteristics that Easton cares so much about,” she said. “Now this vista will be here forever.”

Since the property originally served as one of the last two working dairy farms in town, many of the trails wind through fields and pastures once used for grazing.
Switching to single stream recycling saves Bridgeport money

In Bridgeport, going green means saving greenbacks. City residents started recycling cardboard, newspapers, and plastics after single stream recycling was introduced at the beginning of November.

City officials say the more residents recycle, the lower their property taxes will be. Bridgeport pays $65 a ton for the trash it sends to the incinerator – roughly 60,000 tons a year, according to the city’s budget manager, Paul Catino. Last year the city paid $3.8 million in trash-burning fees.

“We want our residents to think of this when they’re standing in front of their trash cans,” Catino said. “They can either pay $65 to throw it away or recycle it for free. If we diverted just 10 percent of what we threw away last year, we would have saved $380,000.”

Bridgeport could even take in revenue from the resale of certain recyclable commodities, like cardboard, under the contract it has with regional authority overseeing the recycling program.

Residents can put most cartons – as well as magazines, glass, egg cartons, plastics and non-toxic aerosol cans – in blue recycle bins. Each blue bin has a bar code that is scanned each time it is emptied. The city has partnered with Recyclebank, a company that administers a recycling rewards program.

Bridgeport residents can set up a free Recyclebank account online or over the phone. The city’s total recycled tonnage is calculated at the end of every pickup and every household with a bin scanned that day gets points based on the total tonnage.

The points can be redeemed for rewards at both national and local retailers, such as national chain restaurants as well as downtown Bridgeport restaurants, but residents do not have to have a Recyclebank account to recycle.

Single-stream recycling also has health benefits as less trash burned means fewer toxic chemicals released into the air.

The city will also save money in workers’ compensation costs. Under the old recycling system, collectors had to bend down to pick up bins of newspaper and plastics, resulting in back injuries. The blue bins are picked up by automatic lifts.

City officials say workers’ compensation costs can exceed a couple of million dollars, representing the potential for “astronomical savings.” In addition, single-stream recycling is picked up in the same trucks as regular trash, allowing the city to sell its old recycling trucks and streamline the fleet.

The city is also planning to expand its composting program by opening a composting facility to handle food waste, fats, oil, and grease. The city already composts about 5,500 tons of yard waste a year.
Meriden master trail plan seeks connectivity

Meriden officials have a vision of a city with trails, parks and green spaces threaded together by a linear trail running along local ponds, brooks and schools.

Completion of the linear trail along Harbor Brook and extensions around the city is the ultimate goal said Associate City Engineer Howard Weissberg, who outlined the master concept at a July meeting of the City’s planning commission.

Weissberg traced the Linear Trail as it moves from the Meriden-Cheshire town line, to the Quinnipiac Trail, and then along Hanover Pond and Sodom Brook to Platt High School.

“Our goal is to connect parks and to connect schools throughout the city,” Weissberg said.

The next two phases would bring the trail to Meriden’s downtown Hub site. As part of the city’s flood-control project along Harbor Brook, the trail would eventually extend to Falcon Field, City Engineer Robert Bass said.

City Planner Dominic Caruso said the city has been “incredibly successful” at getting state and federal funds recently because of the planning that has taken place and officials say the city will continue to apply for funds.

While the main goal is to extend the trail along Harbor Brook, there are many smaller offshoots planned. “If we only get a small segment of money ... we’ll run with it,” Bass said. “Every time we are offered money, we will find a purpose for that money.”

Some of the funds are for Harbor Brook which needs about $25 million in improvements that include deepening, widening and straightening the channel. Bass said the city recently obtained permits from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in order to begin improvements to the brook and to continue the trail.

Groups spend summer cleaning up Mystic and Pawcatuck rivers

It’s not exactly a day at the beach. For the last few months, through the dog days of summer, Stonington-based Clean Up Sound and Harbors has been part of a cooperative effort involving several environmental groups to clean up the Mystic and Pawcatuck rivers and the ocean shore from Noank to Westerly, Rhode Island.

Clean the Bay, a Rhode Island nonprofit organization that works to remove large debris from waterways and shoreline areas, is leading the effort to remove debris such as abandoned boats, pieces of dock, tires and other items from these waters.

They are being assisted by Save the Bay and Stonington’s Clean Up Sound, which organized volunteers for shoreside cleanup and helped to identify larger items to be removed.

In addition, Nine harbormasters from Noank to Westerly have been helping Clean the Bay identify the locations of debris.

All the groups say the debris not only poses a threat to maritime safety and water quality but can also hurt the local economy and tourism.

Clean the Bay has undertaken four similar operations in Rhode Island and Massachusetts removed 1,750 tons of debris. In this latest effort, Clean the Bay has been getting assisted by Save the Bay and Stonington-based Clean Up Sound and Harbors.

The effort was funded with a federal grant received by Clean the Bay which was combined with matching in-kind contributions from the groups, the towns and local businesses, such as marinas. The towns of Groton and Stonington offered to help dispose of the debris.

Clean The Bay’s executive director, Kent Dresser, said he already has started using the organization’s 30-foot boat - which can access water as shallow as 1 foot - to remove debris. He said the work will continue through August along the length of the Mystic River, up the Pawcatuck River and along the shoreline from Noank to Westerly.

CUSH, meanwhile, is organizing shoreline cleanups and will be posting information at www.cushinc.org.

Wendy Mackie, the outgoing executive director of Clean the Bay who now heads the Rhode Island Marine Trades Association, said Clean the Bay decided to expand its efforts into Connecticut so it could compete for new grants while still staying close to its base in Bristol, R.I.

She said NOAA sees Clean the Bay’s marine debris removal work as a model project that it would like to see replicated in other places.

NOAA has provided grants totaling $683,000 for five of Clean the Bay’s debris removal projects.

During Thursday’s press conference, state and local officials praised the project and the cooperation between the different organizations.

Mackie said the issue of marine debris has become a mainstream topic of late that has been featured in television shows and national news programs.

“It not only damages coastal nursery habitat for fish but endangers human life when boaters come in contact with it,” said Bryan Deangelis, a NOAA fisheries biologist.

Dave Prescott, the South County coastkeeper for Save the Bay, said clean ocean water “is the greatest legacy we can leave our children and future generations. Partnerships like this bring us closer to our goal every day.”
A prime parcel of land fronting the Shepaug River in Washington and Litchfield has been protected forever after a local developer partnered with the Litchfield Land Trust to preserve it.

The 80 acres of preserved land includes more than 3,000 feet of direct riverfront access. It is part of a 283-acre parcel being developed as residential housing by the developer who transferred the waterfront piece to the Litchfield Land Trust to protect it in perpetuity.

The land trust says it will establish hiking trails through the wooded tract. The property is adjacent to approximately 1,000 acres of protected watershed property owned by the city of Waterbury. The acquisition adds to the trust’s holdings of approximately 900 acres in Litchfield, with another 1,200 acres held in conservation easements.

On the remaining land, the developer will construct a 20-home subdivision called Shepaug Crossing.

Members of the town’s planning and zoning and inland wetlands commissions said they were pleased the land would be preserved and that they worked with the developer during the approval process. Officials estimate the value of the donated land at between $750,000 and $850,000.

“It’s a win for the town, a win for the developer, and a win for the people of the state of Connecticut,” said Jim Hiltz, who is working with the developer to market the subdivision.

Alan Temkin, a partner in the development, said that his “strong personal interest in open space preservation” is shared by his partner, Chris Wilson, a philanthropist who has a love of the Shepaug River.

Temkin said it has been Wilson’s vision for several years to create a beautiful New England community and, at the same time, preserve some of the land along the Shepaug shoreline as a wildlife corridor.

“We could have created about 32 lots at Shepaug Crossing, but we chose to create 20 magnificent home sites instead, opting to protect the land that directly fronts the Shepaug River,” Mr. Temkin said.

Lot sizes at Shepaug Crossing will range from 3.5 to more than 20 acres.

The homes will be in close proximity to cultural and dining venues in Kent, New Preston, and Litchfield and Washington village centers, as well as several private schools.
Cooperative effort preserves 30 acres of forest in Environment

Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

Connecticut Conference of Municipalities

Mayor Pat Murphy looks forward to seeing the Century Brass mill building in New Milford dismantled and removed – and that day is drawing closer with the recent award to the town of a $60,000 brownfields grant from the State to assess clean-up options for the 72-acre site.

Brownfields are diamonds in the rough, often in areas strategically important to redevelopment efforts in towns big and small. They are defined as “real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.”

The benefits of cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties include protecting the environment, reducing blight, and removing development pressures from greenspaces and working lands.

To Mayor Murphy, the grant means progress is on the horizon.

“The grant is for an assessment to figure out the cost of taking the building down,” she said. “We had DEEP deputy commissioner Macky McCleary out at the site last fall and he recommended applying for this grant to get up-to-date figures.”

The solar energy will serve the town’s five largest energy consumers, including Branford High School, the future public works department garage, and streetlights.

Building solar energy fields on landfills is not a new concept, said David Goldberg of the state Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority, but “it is a consideration of good use of land, which otherwise would likely not be used for viable alternatives.”

Landfills are particularly suited to solar installations because solar panels require a large area without shade.

Goldberg said the number of solar energy projects in municipalities has been increasing. “It’s cleaner energy,” he said. “There are opportunities where there are economic value, but also educational value and increased public awareness for clean energy.”

New Milford assessing Century Brass mill cleanup

Meriden is currently reviewing proposals to build a solar energy field on the city’s former landfill. The winning plan will install solar panels on three acres of the old landfill and will add Meriden to a growing list of communities installing solar panels on municipal infrastructure including schools, public works buildings and increasingly, landfills.

The solar panels in Meriden will generate renewable photovoltaic energy, which could save Meriden $50,000 to $60,000 per year in energy costs. The energy will be sold to the city at a reduced rate to run the neighboring water pollution control facility. The rate could be as low as two cents per kilowatt hour, while the city currently buys electricity at 7.45 cents per kilowatt hour.

Across the state, many other communities looking for clean and cheaper energy have installed or are planning to install solar panels on their landfills including Branford, North Haven, Groton, and Hartford. And Meriden officials learned of the potential for a solar energy farm in part because a similar solar energy farm is being constructed on five acres on a landfill in Middletown.

Branford recently approved a plan to cover three acres on the southern part of its nearly 20-acre landfill with solar panels. Like Meriden, Branford is looking for a company to install, operate, and maintain the equipment at no cost to the town, with the owner of the solar panels getting tax credits and then selling the town electricity at a reduced rate.

The Branford project will produce between 0.6 and 1 megawatt, which will save about $15,000 on energy each year. The solar energy will serve the town’s five largest energy consumers, including Branford High School, the future public works department garage, and streetlights.

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Sun shines on Meriden and Branford landfills
Greenwich program oils and foils geese population growth

Even if you enjoy watching a flock of Canada geese gather for a stroll across your lawn, chances are you’re not quite as fond of cleaning up after the party. That’s because those majestic birds leave behind something less than majestic – up to 2 pounds of fecal matter per goose per day.

“If you know geese, they have droppings everywhere they walk, every step they take they drop again,” said Scott Stewart.

Stewart, the ranger at the Boy Scouts of America’s 250-acre site in town, recently attended training led by the Greenwich Conservation Department on controlling the geese population with a method called “egg oiling.” The oiling method, which is approved by the Humane Society of the United States, stops development at an early stage by cutting off oxygen in the egg.

The town started oiling Canada geese eggs in 2006. A simple water test determines if an egg can be oiled. Floating eggs mean there is oxygen inside and embryonic development has begun. The town does not oil those eggs. Eggs that sink have no oxygen in them and are coated with corn oil.

Canada geese used to migrate annually from Canada and the northern parts of the United States to southern states in the fall and return to their northern homes in the spring. Greenwich was a stopover for the geese as they rested on their journeys.

But that changed in 1918 with a new federal law that prohibited the killing of a number of bird species. One provision required hunting clubs that used captured geese as live decoys to set them free.

“Those geese had to be released out to the wild and they had never learned to fly,” said town Conservation Director Denise Savageau. “They kind of became the breeding stock of what we call the resident geese.”

The resident geese began to appear in Greenwich in the early 1920s and the numbers increased with each passing decade. In 1933, birders in the Greenwich area counted 37 geese during a one-day Christmas bird count. In 1955, the number grew to 173, while in 1965, the birders counted 840 geese.

Those numbers shot up in the 1970s, which Savageau attributes to freshly cut lawns on carefully tended suburban plots.

“The goal of the oiling program is keep the population from growing,” Savageau. “The method is definitely effective.”

Pristine plot preserved as open space in Bethlehem

A rural 31-acre parcel has been preserved as open space in Bethlehem by the Bethlehem Land Trust.

The unspoiled plot is filled with sugar maples and seasonal springs and streams which feed the property’s portion of Wood Creek. There are remnants of an old dam and a waterwheel in the waterway, but there are no houses on the land. It was purchased in 1998 by a pair of local residents – the Canfields – who instantly fell in love with its woody character and historic charm.

“I walked 200 feet into the property and said I’d buy it,” said Earl Canfield, noting that the land reminded him of the natural beauty of his childhood West Virginia.

Since the Canfields hoped the land would never be developed and since it fit perfectly with the land trust’s goal to protect sensitive habitats and provide access for the public, the parties were able to come to an agreement.

“We looked at various factors and picked out four or five properties, and this piece is stunning,” said Mary Hawvermale, president of the Bethlehem Land Trust. “There’s a waterfall, a dam, the potential for trails, and an area for people to park.”

In the spring, trails will be blazed on what will now be known as the Canfield Preserve.

With the Canfield Preserve purchase, the land trust now holds 338 acres and is targeting additional sensitive properties. As part of its mission to protect land and water resources, the trust provides information and assistance to land owners on all options available to them for protection of their undeveloped lands.
Pension fund flush, Bristol plans to invest in companies

Bristol’s pension plan is so deeply in the black that city officials plan to attract new companies and promote economic development by investing in companies willing to set up shop in the city.

“We just never invest in our own backyard and that should probably change,” said T.J. Barnes, chairman of the city’s Retirement Board and the city’s treasurer.

Barnes said the initial investment would amount to $4 million but could be higher or lower depending on how big a share of the city’s overall investments are allocated for stocks.

City Councilor Ken Cockayne said that putting a modest amount of the pension money into local investments could help the city’s tax base grow.

“We’re only investing in our own future” by putting cash into city businesses,” he said.

The city’s pension liabilities total $210 million which is less than half the city’s pension fund of about $580 million.

What Barnes called “one of the best funded pension plans in the state or country” stands in sharp contrast to those of many companies, municipalities, and states that have lowered or eliminated pension contributions to save money.

Bristol plans to invest in the companies it hopes to attract, either by purchasing stock or otherwise obtaining a stake that could eventually pay dividends. The City already invests in all sorts of equity funds, real estate and more as a part of the Retirement Board’s effort to diversify its portfolio in the hope that it will continue to grow larger as the years roll on.

“We want to make investments as an investor rather than as a government entity giving away money,” Barnes said.

The first step is hiring a consultant to vet potential companies to receive city investments, a process that could start before the end of the year.

Barnes credits Bristol’s success building up its pension fund to two factors. The City started early, in 1978, allowing it to take advantage of stock market run-ups in the 1980s and 1990s. The pension fund also has made strategic moves, such as selling stock in real estate in 2007 before the sector’s collapse and turning to more conservative investments.

“We’re not the norm. We’re definitely the exception here in Bristol,” Barnes said.

Westport moving to defined-contribution pensions

Westport plans to adopt its first defined-contribution retirement savings plan for town employees.

The plan would cover non-union and public works employees hired after Jan. 1, 2012. New non-union employees would have to allocate at least 3.5 percent of their annual base salaries to a defined-contribution plan, an amount that would then be matched by the town.

While 3.5 percent represents the minimum employee contribution, non-union hires can make additional allocations in half-percent increments which could bring their total defined-contribution plan contributions to as much as 7 percent of their annual salaries.

The town would also match the optional, higher contributions, meaning that non-union town employees could contribute as much as 14 percent of their annual base salaries to their retirement savings accounts.

“The town has been pushing very strongly to move as much as we can to a defined-contribution plan as quickly as we can,” said town finance chairman Jeff Wieser.

“The goal is to get away from a defined-benefit plan onto a defined-contribution plan," instead of the pensions that have been standard for most municipal employees’ retirement.

Over the past year, town officials have been working to implement defined-contribution plans for new town employees. In February, the town approved the elimination of pensions and post-retirement health-care benefits for new non-union employees.

In April, the town accepted new contract terms for the town’s public works union that were decided by a state arbitration panel. The state arbitrators’ ruling called for newly hired public works employees to join a defined-contribution plan.

The state arbitrators called for public works employees to direct 5 percent of their annual base salaries to a defined-contribution plan. But unlike non-union hires, new public works employees will not be able to make additional voluntary contributions that would be matched by the town.
Wilton Selectmen Walk the Walk on Energy Audits

Members of the Wilton’s Board of Selectmen have recently gotten energy audits done on their homes to save on heating costs and to encourage their neighbors to follow their lead.

“The selectmen have been discussing ways of getting homeowners to sign up for home energy audits,” said Selectman Hal Clark. “The Wilton Energy Commission has been very successful as advisors to building projects in town. The Board of Education has cut its energy consumption, but the big one is residential.”

The town’s Energy Commission and Wilton Go Green, a non-profit for the promotion of sustainable initiatives, began encouraging home energy audits a few years ago but after a period of initial success, the number of residents getting the audits slowed. Some residents, including Selectman Richard Creeth, had concerns about the way some of the audits were performed when the initiative was first launched.

“I personally know of at least a couple other people who were not satisfied with their audit,” Creeth said. “That’s why this time around we’re making sure the companies doing the audits have a really good reputation.”

“With all the Selectmen doing it in their personal homes, we hope it might start up all the residents,” said Second Selectman Susan Bruschi.

The goal is to reduce the town’s carbon footprint and promote the idea that Wilton is a town that cares about the environment and sustainability.

Clark said the desire to make Wilton more environmentally friendly was an economic decision. Using too much energy hurts the economy, the balance of trade and the environment. Clark hopes to demonstrate to businesses that what is good for the environment is also good for the local economy.

Plainfield trains its sights on eliminating blight

Plainfield First Selectman Paul Sweet is developing a proposal to beef up the town’s anti-blight ordinance and he says that blight is one of the most common and loudest complaints from local residents.

Sweet says it an issue of town pride, as well as one spurred by resident complaints. Routine problems include neighboring properties with overflowing trash or too much junk in the yard and Sweet says he doesn’t have “many mechanisms to deal with something like that.”

The new proposal will represent the second time in a decade that the town has considered the issue.

In 2002-03, an effort to adopt an anti-blight ordinance was initiated by the town, but residents rejected it at a town meeting and many people thought the proposal was too comprehensive.

Sweet says he is creating a policy that is clear, that deals with residential issues, and is “not a 10-page document.”

The town is not looking to set lawn lengths or require residents with peeling paint to get out the rollers and brushes. He wants to deal with overflowing garbage, furniture left in the yard by previous a tenant and similar eyesores, and potential health hazards.

Sweet said a local resident recently approached him with the idea of trying to gain approval for a blight ordinance again, saying the idea is about encouraging residents to take pride in their properties.

During the next step toward finalizing the proposal, the town will examine similar regulations in other towns and define what constitutes blight in Plainfield. After a draft plan approved by the selectmen, it will be presented to residents at a public hearing and a town meeting.
Town leaders discuss vibrant downtowns at forum

Thriving downtown areas are magnets for businesses, restaurants, entertainment, and the arts – and making them vibrant often involves restoring faded historic gems that need polishing as old mill or manufacturing sites are put into new use.

Revitalized downtowns mean more profits for businesses, more tax revenue for towns, and more convenience for residents for shopping and dining.

But proposals to revitalize downtown areas, or change zoning regulations, are sometimes met with resistance. At a recent symposium in Cromwell, local land use officials shared their experiences with difficulties they have encountered, and some of the ways to overcome them.

Hiram Peck, planning director for the town of Simsbury, Adam Turner, Colchester's town planner and Carl Fortuna, first selectman of Old Saybrook were among the municipal stakeholders who participated before an audience that included many town officials.

Both Peck and Turner strongly recommended that municipalities use the charrette process – a series of workshop meetings – to involve the community in a discussion of conceptual plans for development.

"Make sure people are comfortable in order to make sure they know what the issues are. Be transparent," Peck said.

People see what's there and what isn't," Turner said. "The charrette is a good way to do it. The charrette is not a project, it is your vision for the community. It's there that you learn about construction, the desire for a project, the infrastructure."

Turner said Colchester land use officials looked at agricultural, residential, and the downtown zoning when revamping the town's regulations, and then changed some regulations to reflect the ideas in the plan of development.

"Downtown zoning did not allow housing, but if you look at Colchester's downtown, we always had apartments above the stores. But the more recent codes only allowed for single use zoning," he said. "We looked at mixed-use commercial uses to bring people downtown. We drafted new regulations allowing it."

Turner also suggested that it is in a town's best interest to have plans in place before a developer or builder comes along.

"The key for towns is to be ready when opportunity comes to them," Turner said. "Developers are not going to spend money unless they have some predictability. If the bar keeps moving, they're going to go away."

The symposium was sponsored by the Liberty Bank Foundation and hosted by the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce's Affordable Housing Committee.

Wallingford to expand its business district

The Wallingford economic development commission is proposing to extend a "limited business district" in the Yalesville section of town to an almost half-mile section of Route 68 with the twin goals of attracting small business to the primarily residential corridor and preserving the historic homes that populate it.

As part of the district, residential properties would be rezoned to allow limited commercial use – primarily office space. Members of the commission envision small business owners buying some of the older homes and using them for insurance, real estate, law or other firms.

"A lot of the houses are historic homes built in the late 1800s and early 1900s and since Route 68 is a busy road, it's an opportunity to maintain the character of these homes and put them to use," acting Town Planner Kacie Costello said.

The area being proposed for an extension of the district has a number of homes, as well as public buildings and businesses, including the Yalesville branch of the Wallingford Library, Yalesville Elementary School, two churches, a restaurant and Yalesville Veterinary Hospital. The homes could remain residential even if the change is approved – but could also be converted to business use.

Local officials say the proposal would be a logical extension of the current zone.

"That zone is already created – it seems like a natural fit, given the style of the houses and because this stretch already has a variety of businesses on it," economic development commission member Jim Wolfe said.

Wolfe is lifetime resident of Wallingford and a 20-year resident of Yalesville. He said he thought the extension would be a good idea after reviewing zoning maps in an attempt to look for ways to improve the town.

The original Yalesville "limited business district" was created about two decades ago. The district requires property owners to maintain the architectural feel of surrounding structures. Improvements must be of a similar design to avoid changing the area or making it appear overly industrial or commercial.

Wolfe said the district has made an impact, citing condominiums built on Main Street that have used existing structures instead of new build, and other new businesses.

"There's been a lot of improvement in the last five years. It's been incredible for Yalesville — it's kind of changed the community. You have people walking on a daily basis, the stores have changed," Wolfe said.

Rezoning the swath of Route 68 would not allow for new commercial buildings. "The intention is to save the integrity of the street and the homes in an economically viable fashion," Wolfe said.
Fairfield gains concessions in new nurse contract

The Town of Fairfield has negotiated a new contract with public health nurses that provides a 6.25 percent pay increase over the four-year agreement—but it no longer covers new nurses in the town pension plan, it increases their insurance co-pays and premium contributions, and it gives the town more flexibility in making nursing assignments.

"It's not dissimilar to the dispatchers' contract," labor lawyer Patrick McHale said. "It is analogous and in most ways identical to the changes negotiated recently for the employees of the town's Emergency Communications Center."

In the future, newly hired nurses will get retirement coverage through a 401a defined-contribution plan rather than be covered by the town's traditional pension plan.

The new agreement—which covers 35 nurses—also gives the town more flexibility to assign nurses based on their education, skills, and experience, rather than based only on seniority. Paid sick days are also reduced, depending on years of service.

There are no retroactive pay raises in the new agreement, but the nurses will receive a 4 percent raise upon finalization of the contract. They will receive another 2.25 percent increase on July 1, 2013.

Currently, the nurses pay a flat $31 per week toward health insurance premiums, whether the coverage is for a single person, couple, or family. That would change under the new pact, with the employees paying 12 percent of the premium cost, depending on the level of benefits they receive.

"For those with two-person or family coverage, that's a significant increase they've agreed to," McHale said. McHale praised the union members for their cooperation, saying they recognized "the financial realities we're dealing with. We're hoping the other unions we have remaining will follow suit."

Guilford uses surplus to raise credit rating

Guilford has deposited its 2012 budget surplus of around $1 million to boost its savings account, which for the first time in a long time is now at the level recommended by credit-rating agencies.

Local officials say the fiscal year ended in the black June 30th thanks to a winter without much snow, the merging of the engineering and public works departments, holding down overtime costs, and keeping a close eye on spending.

According to First Selectman Joseph Mazza, this is the third year in a row the town has had money left at the end of the year.

While the majority of the surplus came from the town side of the budget, the school district returned about $96,000.

Superintendent of Schools Paul Freeman said the savings are the result of spending less than expected in medical costs, electricity, and special education transportation.

Medical expenses stayed under budget due to negotiations, while electricity costs were reduced through “lower rates and conservation efforts,” Freeman said. The town also received a favorable bid on its transportation contract.

The unreserved fund balance, also known as the town savings account, has reached $4.14 million, according to Finance Director Sheila Villano.

Credit-rating agencies typically give a town a better grade if it maintains a general fund balance of at least 5 percent of the annual budget and Guilford’s new balance is equal to 5.2 percent of the budget.

Since the credit agencies’ ratings influence the interest rate municipalities pay when selling bonds, a better rating makes for lower interest payments.

One reason for the growing surplus is a policy the local selectmen passed in 2010 which prohibited the use of surplus funds to help balance the budget — formerly a commonplace practice — so that the account would have a chance to grow.

“We’re definitely on the right track and going in the right direction,” Mazza said.
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 taxpayers 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 Saturday’s to address the growing problem. “The cost to pay him overtime will be offset by the fines we will receive,” O’Brien said.

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;
- exterior paint that is significantly chipped or faded;
- interior paint that is significantly chipped or faded;
- 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.

“Blight isn’t just symbolic,” O’Brien said. “It hurts business and it’s a real quality-of-life issue for the tenants.”

Plainville to merge town and school finance departments

The Plainville town council has approved a merger between the town and school finance departments following a consultant’s report citing a number of benefits including saving money and making financial records more accessible.

The merger is expected to save at least $50,000 to $80,000 over five years in overtime and other costs and it will allow for cross-training so employees can fill in for each other. Merging the two departments will also make the Board of Education’s spending records more accessible for town and education officials since the records will now be in one place.

A consulting firm the town hired earlier this year to study the idea of combining the finance functions recommended the merger based on a variety of benefits.

Since the town has four employees in its finance and human resources departments and the school district has five, there is not enough staff to provide backup and there has been only limited cross-training. That means that if an employee leaves suddenly or is unable to work, some tasks might not get accomplished.

The consultants said merging the functions will be easier because the town and school district departments both use the same finance and payroll system. Another advantage of sharing services is that the town and school district will be able to take advantage of employees’ skill sets so they can work together in a unified environment.

The new shared services finance department could be implemented within three months. Combining their processes is expected to take three to six months. Merging the entire finance system into one database would be completed over the next year.

“There has been discussion about combining these departments for a few years,” town council chair Kathy Pugliese said. “It will bring both departments together. It’s for the betterment of Plainville.”
Southington to fight blight with new ordinance

The Southington Town Council is addressing the problem of junk vehicles and other eyesores in town by crafting changes to its existing blight policy which officials say lacks the bite to fight the blight.

After hearing complaints from residents about junk vehicles in local neighborhoods, the town council plans to strengthen the existing anti-blight ordinance and has formed a subcommittee to conduct an in-depth review and recommend changes.

“We’re getting some feedback from people that the existing blight ordinance doesn’t have enough teeth,” said Cheryl Lounsbury, chairwoman of the council’s ordinance committee. “People clean it up for three or four days and then it goes back to its original state.”

Committee members are reviewing the policies of surrounding towns for ideas on how to strengthen the ordinance in Southington. Lounsbury said additional measures are needed to combat blight.

“It could be a heavier fine, it could be repeated occurrences, but it will definitely be something,” she said.

After reviewing pictures of car parts and other metal junk on local properties, she said “it was almost like a junkyard and it affects the land values of the people around them.”

Councilor Dawn Miceli cited a specific property where the owner has 10 to 15 cars in various states of disrepair on his property and the problem has been going on for three years.

The town says there are six to eight properties in town in a similar state and Miceli said it is too easy for property owners to dodge the existing blight ordinance.

“People learn the ins and outs of your ordinances,” Miceli said. “Currently there’s no reason for the person not to go back to what he or she was doing.”

Naugatuck puts bite in ethics code

Officials in Naugatuck have proposed revisions to the borough’s code of ethics, which has not been updated since it was adopted 26 years ago. The Board of Mayor and Burgesses held a public hearing in May to gain input on the revised code and corresponding penalties.

Formal ethics complaints over the years have been so rare that whenever one was filed, the borough clerk would have to call around to determine who was still on the Board of Ethics, said Chairman Fred Valente.

“There was no incentive for people to follow a code of ethics, because it didn’t have any teeth,” Valente said. “It essentially told you, ‘If you do wrong, that’s bad.’”

The purpose of the revisions is to “avoid the loss of trust and to maintain and increase the confidence of our citizens in the integrity and fairness of their government” and the revised code provides that ethics violations may result in “suspension, removal from office or other disciplinary action” including restitution of “any pecuniary benefits received because of the violations committed.”

Local officials said at the public hearing that they thought some ethics requirements for borough employees, officials, contractors, and consultants could be stricter.

The proposed code allows employees, officials, and their families to accept gifts valued at a maximum of $100 from people interested in doing business with the borough. Gifts valued at more than $100 are not considered “de minimus” and are prohibited.

Other changes include providing the Board of Ethics with subpoena power, empowering it to make binding advisory opinions, and requiring all borough officials who have any knowledge of a violation to disclose it without reprisal.

The new code also requires the confidentiality of complaints that are found to include no violation of the ethics code and it requires the Board to issue a finding within five days after a hearing on a complaint. In addition, the code provides guidance on conflicts of interest, the use of town vehicles and equipment, and a prohibition on discrimination or favoritism in hiring.
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.
Expired and unused prescriptions from old illnesses or injuries are more than just extra clutter in your medicine chest. They also represent a health hazard because an alarming number of young people in many communities are known to have experimented with these prescription medicines.

A recent study by the Enfield Together Coalition (ETC) found that a low of 4.2 percent of sixth-graders to a high of 21.3 percent of high school seniors in town have experimented with prescription drugs.

ETC works to assess the extent of substance use in the community and to develop ways to reduce the use of alcohol and drugs by Enfield youth. ETC includes members from Enfield Youth Services, East of the River Action for Substance Abuse Elimination, the town’s Youth Advisory Council, parents, school personnel, the town council, the police department, members of faith communities, and business owners.

“Prescription drug use is a problem in the town and it is very important to take all necessary steps to prevent these drugs from getting into the hands of youth,” said Christina Turner, Enfield Youth Services’ prevention coordinator.

One of those “necessary steps” was the launch by ETC and the Enfield police department of a “no questions asked” prescription drop-box program to raise awareness about the issue of prescription medicine abuse and to provide town residents with a place to bring old medications to ensure they do not fall into the wrong hands.

The drop-box is located at the Enfield police department and is available 24 hours a day. When an individual drops off his or her unused or expired prescriptions, the drop-box has a marker to black out his or her name to ensure anonymity before the town disposes of the medications.

The ETC study showed that nearly 10 percent of Enfield middle school and high school students reported using a prescription drug without a doctor’s orders to feel good or get high. Others reported trying the drugs to self-medicate, cope with stress or pain, or deal with sleeping problems.
Plans are under way to develop a community garden in Putnam to try to teach the importance of a healthy lifestyle

Putnam economic and community development director Delpha Very said the town is working with the Northeastern Connecticut Food Policy Council and a $22,000 grant from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection on a community garden initiative.

Very said the community garden will give Putnam residents the chance to grow their own fresh 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.

Putnam resident Shirley O’Connell thinks the community garden is also a way to help those who may not be able to afford fresh fruits and vegetables.

“For those who are low income or maybe just lost their job, in the spring they can plant,” she said. “It’s also good because it will show kids how to grow the stuff they are eating.”
American Legion creates housing for homeless veterans

Last month, more than a dozen homeless veterans in Jewett City finally had a place to call home thanks to the American Legion. A local legion post has been working for a decade on a unique project to create not transitional, but permanent supportive housing in their community.

“This is like winning the lottery – it’s better than that, it really is,” said Jeff MacDonald, a 55 year-old Army veteran, after walking through one of the new apartments.

MacDonald is one of fifteen homeless veterans who will now occupy an apartment in the renovated American Legion Post. MacDonald said when he got the news, he cried. He has spent the last twenty-two years drifting from place to place and battling alcoholism along the way.

Jewett City’s Main Street area is quintessential New England and everything one could need is a short walk away – the perfect spot for supportive housing.

Resident and Navy veteran William Czmyr came up with the idea to help homeless veterans by creating apartments more than ten years ago.

“There are veterans out there that are having it kind of rough,” Czmyr said. “They are trying to get things back together. They came out of the military and somewhere along the line they made the wrong turn.”

The local Legion Post had surplus space so Czmyr organized a committee to raise money to renovate the building. From the beginning, the goal was to provide permanent supportive housing where veterans could stay as long as it took to become independent.

Jewett City’s rural location attracted the interest of the VA immediately. Dr. Laurie Harkness, Director of the VA in Connecticut said, “Homelessness is a problem in rural areas, in Southeast Connecticut as in many rural areas in America.”

The biggest challenge to ending homelessness for veterans remains in rural communities where the VA has had a harder time connecting with veterans and providing services. For example, it takes a veteran in Jewett City about an hour to get to one of Connecticut’s VA facilities/hospitals in New Haven and Hartford.

Legion officials say that is why they wanted to provide housing to veterans living in the eastern part of the state – because a homeless veteran looking for housing might end up being displaced from an area that they know.

VA housing vouchers will pay the rent for each veteran and VA caseworkers and medical staff will provide services to the men and women living in the building.

Dr. Harkness said Jewett City is a model for other communities. She said similar ideas come up often, but that Jewett City had an advantage not usually found in many communities.

“This is the first project I’ve ever been involved in where there was no ‘not in my back yard.’ Everybody supported it,” she said.
Three towns team up for pothole patching machine purchase

The towns of Plymouth, Bristol, and Plainville have made a joint application for a state grant to buy a state-of-the-art pothole patching machine that would be shared among the three municipalities.

The joint application to the State’s Inter-town Capital Equipment Purchase Incentive program is for a grant up to $150,000 to buy the pothole patcher. The Python 5000, manufactured by Python Manufacturing in Saskatchewan, Canada, will bring a variety of benefits to the three towns.

Tony Lorenzetti, Plymouth’s director of public works, said the equipment will be able to do more hot or cold permanent patching throughout the year. The driver can accomplish all aspects of the repairs from inside the vehicle, including blowing the debris out of the potholes, so there will be no need for traffic control or multiple work crews at the patching site.

Bristol would house the equipment and use it two days a week and one day each would be set aside for Plymouth and Plainville to use it. During weeks without holidays, one day a week would be reserved for maintenance and emergency repairs. The dealer that would maintain the machine is located in Willimantic.

If no maintenance is required on the day off, towns could request the machine for emergency repairs and pay only the additional operational costs. Bristol would supply the equipment operator and the other towns would pay Bristol for their share of the operational costs.

The multi-town agreement would be in effect for five years. Then the three municipalities could mutually agree to extend it or work out a way to dispose of the equipment and share the proceeds.

Towns join together to oppose new phosphorus limits

A coalition of municipalities opposing the State’s new phosphorus limits say that compliance with the new requirements will cost them millions of dollars in wastewater treatment plant upgrades. The group has been negotiating with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection in an effort to get the agency to ease the guidelines.

During the process, members of the coalition – which includes officials from Meriden, Wallingford, Southington and Danbury – have been following a court case in Massachusetts where similar phosphorus limits were being opposed.

Earlier this month, the town of Millbury, Massachusetts lost a court decision and will now need to reduce the phosphorus in its discharge, despite the fact that the cost of compliance will be about $200 million, and will add $5 million to annual operational costs.

Southington Town Manager Garry Brumback said the court ruling “is not the best news,” but the group still hopes negotiations with the DEEP are going to work out.

While the Connecticut and Massachusetts situations are similar, a major difference is that the Upper Blackstone region of which Millbury is a part is overseen by the federal EPA, while the Connecticut municipalities are challenging phosphorus limits set by the DEEP.

Meriden City Manager Lawrence J. Kendzior said the coalition wants “to find solutions to avoid litigation.”

“We continue to meet with and work with the DEEP to see if there’s room for agreement,” he said.

The coalition is also concentrating on the scientific aspect of phosphorus and its effects on waterways.

“The whole contention is that we work everything based on science,” said Meriden plant operations Superintendent Dennis Waz.

Coalition members are awaiting scientific guidance documents from the DEEP. Waz said the documents will help clarify how the department determined its phosphorous limits.

Opponents of the new limits believe the DEEP has not clearly defined the expected improvement in water quality that would be achieved as a result of its proposed significant reductions in phosphorous discharge.

Southington, Meriden and Wallingford have said they would have to spend an average of $56 million in capital improvements and more than $2 million in annual operating costs to reach the new phosphorus limits.
In 2007, Windham resident Ada Wolf donated 102 acres in Windham Center to Joshua’s Tract Conservation and Historic Trust and established a trust to provide for the management of the original land and possible additions of adjacent land.

Now her dream of preserving land in Windham Center continues to be fulfilled after her death with the trust’s purchase of 17 acres joining Wolf’s original land that will be placed under the stewardship of Joshua’s Tract.

“Thanks to Ada Wolf’s vision, her trust has the wherewithal to purchase this important greenway in Windham, and pass it on to the protective stewardship of Joshua’s Tract Conservation and Historic Trust,” said David Weston, senior trust officer of the Savings Institute, which maintains the trust.

The original 102 acres is mostly forested land highlighted by streams coursing through the woods and a 22-acre shallow pond known as Lake Marie.

Allison Burchell-Robinson, president of Joshua’s Tract, said the additional 17-acre parcel adds value to Wolf’s original donation. “It boasts a beautiful stream, mature trees, and several vernal pools,” she said. “We are thrilled to have it now under our protection.”

“From the town’s point of view, we’re pleased not only with the revenue from the sale, but also to know the land joins with the original Ada Wolf property, creating an even greater environmental asset within the Town of Windham,” Mayor Ernie Eldridge said.

Officials said the gift is unusual because land donations usually come directly from the land owner to Joshua’s Tract. This purchase was made by the trust and then donated to the conservation organization.

Joshua’s Tract protects more than 4,000 acres of conservation lands in Connecticut.

Land Gift Adds Wooded Open Space in Ridgefield

A recent land gift in Ridgefield has provided twenty six acres of steep wooded open space long coveted by town officials because the piece abuts both a state park and town open space – and together, the parcels create a 417-acre contiguous reserve of wooded hills and wetlands.

The new parcel backs up to the 386-acre Pierrepont State Park, providing an additional access to the state land. In addition, its western border lies partly along a four-plus acre parcel of town open space, which in turn abuts another 1.7-acre parcel of open space. The connection between the land tracts is environmentally important since large contiguous areas of undeveloped land are vital for wildlife habitat.

The land was donated by Albert and Charles Knapp, who inherited it from their mother who had lived in New York City and also owned a home on 16 acres near the donated parcel. The property will be known as the “Liebowitz-Knapp Sanctuary.”

As the long-time chair of the Conservation Commission, Ben Oko has known the strategic value of the tract for many years. “It’s just a special opportunity and a great piece of property,” Oko said. “The land is very nice, it’s steep, very rocky - actually some dramatic, strange rocky knolls in it, some intermittent streams running through it. It’s entirely wooded - it has a large wetland down by the road.”

First Selectman Rudy Marconi said, “it is a very valuable piece of property for the town to put into its open space inventory.”

Ridgefield now has about 22 percent of its total acres in open space, not counting its golf course and ball fields. If those are included, Ridgefield has 5,500 acres of open space – one quarter of the town.

Local residents at the town meeting that accepted the gift had all good things to say about the donation of the “Liebowitz-Knapp Sanctuary.”

“How often are you offered 26 acres of open space? It’s a great gift,” said resident Helen Dimos.
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.

“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 north-eastern 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.

Police, local businesses team up for kid safety

Local businesses in Cheshire are working with the police department to reward children who play safely.

The Cheshire Children’s Safety Awareness Program, started by the police department, rewards children who wear safety equipment.

Police officers issue “safety citations” to children who wear proper safety equipment when riding in a car, on a bicycle, skateboarding, or rollerblading.

“It’s mostly bike helmets,” said Sgt. Michael Strollo, the program coordinator.

Five local businesses will be providing the rewards, such as ice cream and pizza, when citations are redeemed.

“The citations are issued mainly by bike officers,” Strollo said. “When they see someone on the linear trail or in one of the parks, they’ll give away the citations, which can be redeemed at one of the businesses.”

The local businesses are happy to be involved. A local pizza shop is offering a free slice of pizza and can of soda to those who redeem a citation. A burger stand is offering a free ice cream cone for those who take safety precautions.

The business owners say it is a great program and that “it’s nice for the police to reward responsible parents and kids.”

Strollo said that unintentional injuries remain the leading cause of death among people 1 to 24 years old in the United States. Many deaths and injuries are preventable with the use of proper safety equipment, including helmets and seat belts.

The safety citations are handed out mostly on weekends, when bike officers are patrolling local trails and parks in town.

“Too many children involved in accidents have been seriously injured as a result of not wearing the proper safety equipment,” Strollo said. “Anything we can do to prevent these unnecessary injuries is worth the time and effort on our part to ensure the safety of our young people.”
**Public Safety**

**New Fire Training Center Gets Real**

There is no substitute for real-life experience and that’s especially true for people who put their lives on the line like firefighters. To complete the obstacle course at their new “Fireground Survival” training center, Bridgeport firefighters battle through situations that sound like scenes from an action movie: escaping between wall studs, crawling through a culvert and climbing headfirst out a window and onto a ladder.

The most difficult test involves escaping a dark tunnel of tangled wire, set up to simulate a home in which the ceiling has dropped to the floor, pulling electrical wires with it. The scenario re-creates an actual tragedy that occurred in 1994 when two Memphis, Tennessee firefighters perished after becoming entangled in cable television wires.

“After the smoke clears and we return to the house, it’s amazing to see all the stuff on the floor that we were tripping over,” said John Mazza of the department’s training division.

But Torrington officials say the new recommendations are unlikely to have much effect in their town.

“Torrington is probably a little bit on the cautious side,” said Torrington Zoning and Inland Wetlands officer Kim Barbieri. “If there’s a tree that’s close to a line that looks marginal, they’re more likely to remove it than trim it.”

Barbieri served on the Statewide Vegetative Management Task Force, part of DEEP.

Last year, Torrington spent about $400,000 on tree-related storm removal after the October snow storm, according to Public Works director and tree manager Jerry Rollett.

“Torrington is very aggressive in dealing with hazardous or potentially hazardous trees and removing them as soon as possible,” said Rollett.

Currently, Torrington does not replant trees it removes from alongside roads. Barbieri hopes that this practice will change.

“The budget is such that we haven’t been able to do much about replanting. Hopefully that will change in the future,” she said.

Because Torrington has been ahead of the curve on its trimming policies, Rollett hopes he doesn’t have to change his practices when new recommendations are finalized.

**Torrington Ahead of Curve on Tree Trimming**

The scenery in the northwest corner of Connecticut is beautiful, especially in autumn with foliage on trees that arch over roads that cut through the wooded landscape.

But as folks learned in the two destructive storms of 2011, the scenery carries a cost. The cleanup of roadside tree damage caused during storms is expensive, and now committees across the state are readying new recommendations about roadside tree care.

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Because Torrington has been ahead of the curve on its trimming policies, Rollett hopes he doesn’t have to change his practices when new recommendations are finalized.
The weather was a lot less severe than the kind they had come to prepare for when town officials in Manchester participated with local residents at a mid-December forum that focused on better preparation for future storms or weather emergencies.

With the belief that “to be forewarned is to be forearmed” against natural disasters like Storm Irene or the freak October snow storm that crippled Connecticut, officials conducted the “Hurricane and Severe Weather Preparedness Forum” at a local community center and broadcast it live on community access television.

Presenters included representatives of the town’s fire and emergency medical services department, police, emergency management, health, public works, and water and sewer departments.

Topics discussed at the forum included:
• How prepared are you and your family to deal with severe weather such as hurricanes, tornados, ice storms, flooding?
• What would you do if there was no electricity, phone service, water or sewer, gas – compounded by road closures?
• Could you access your daily and necessary medical supplies or medical facilities?
• How would you care for your elderly family members, children, pets, neighbors in need?

Manchester officials emphasized that being properly prepared is the one sure-fire action residents can take to cope with the unpredictable circumstances imposed by Mother Nature.

A “Go-Kit” (emergency preparedness kit) was offered as a door prize and individuals who could not attend the forum in person were able to participate by e-mailing questions in advance and by calling a dedicated line on the night of the forum.

For the past two years, the Stamford Police Department has been working with Project Lifesaver International to develop protocols to quickly locate and rescue missing adults and children who wander due to Alzheimer’s disease, autism, Down syndrome, dementia, and other related cognitive conditions.

In October, the Stamford Police Department made Project Lifesaver’s first documented rescue in Connecticut – and Stamford Police Officer Greg Rackozy, who made the rescue, said Project Lifesaver is the reason why he found the missing Stamford resident in less than 10 minutes.

“This was an elderly resident who has Alzheimer’s disease and has gone missing before,” said Rackozy. “The other time we had to find him, the department had around 15 officers out there looking for him for almost two hours. But since his family signed him up for Project Lifesaver, we only needed two officers and found him in under 10 minutes.”

Clients enrolled in the program wear a personalized wristband that has a tracking signal. The tracking signal is provided to the family of the client, the police dispatch center, and the officer assigned to the client. When the client goes missing, a specially trained search and rescue team from the police department searches the area with a mobile tracking system. Stamford Police Officer Jen Lynch said the search and rescue team is also specially trained to deal with the behaviors associated with the cognitive conditions that Project Lifesaver clients have. “A lot of the time, an elderly client will try to go to where they grew up,” Lynch said. “And because there is one individual officer assigned to each client, the officer becomes familiar with the client’s past and patterns of where they might wander. So, if they know where they grew up, that is a place that they might start looking for a missing client.”

Project Lifesaver International currently has more than 1,200 participating agencies across the U.S., Canada, and Australia and it has performed 2,439 searches in the last 11 years with no serious injuries or fatalities reported.

“We really hope that more police departments will start using this program – especially ones in our area,” Rackozy said. “That way, if we have a client who wanders as far as the town next to us, we can give that police department the client’s tracking signal and they can help us locate that person.”

To learn more about Project Lifesaver International, visit www.projectlifesaver.org.
Crime may not pay, but crime prevention certainly does. That’s the message from police officials and Mayor John DeStefano, Jr. in New Haven where crime statistics for the first half of 2011 show that the City’s new crime prevention policies are paying off.

Overall crime for the first six months of 2011 was down by about 9 percent from the same time period in 2010, and police officials said the drop in crime was largely due to a decrease in the number of sexual assaults, burglaries, and aggravated assaults.

Mayor DeStefano said around 70 percent of violent crime is the result of New Haven’s re-entry population, which typically has easy access to firearms and narcotics. New Haven police are working to address this issue by targeting street- and mid-level drug dealers through a partnership with federal agencies and the Connecticut Department of Corrections.

Officials said only those that engage in specific behaviors like narcotics dealing or gang activity are at high risk and that only a small percentage of New Haven neighborhoods represent the majority of city violence.

To complement the partnership and continue the fight against crime, the City is also rolling out some new initiatives: increasing the police department’s foot patrols and having officers patrol areas that district managers have selected as crime hot spots to increase police visibility in those areas; and training 12 officers to be on bike patrols, which will start in a few weeks with at least one patrol per day in each district.

In addition to patrolling more often, the department also plans to use more foot power to build a stronger relationship with New Haven residents.

“The key idea of policing the community is that the police and the community know each other,” Mayor DeStefano said. “If there’s not a level of trust, then it’s not possible to police effectively.”

Lee Cruz, a New Haven resident who works as the community outreach director for the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, said that there is evidence that a strong police-community relationship is the best way to reduce city crime.

“Police working with people in the community is what reduces violence,” Cruz said. “Crime is going to go down not only because police are there, but also because of the community presence.”

Lynn Smith, who works for START Community Bank, said she came to the meeting to show support for the department’s new plan.

“As a resident, I want to know who my local policeman is,” Smith said. “I think the police have taken the right steps to try and build a better relationship with the community, but the community has a responsibility to get involved too.”
Hamden calming traffic in three neighborhoods

The West Woods neighborhood in Hamden will be the third part of town to implement traffic calming measures. Consultants who recently completed plans for slowing things down in the Spring Glen and Whitneyville neighborhoods will now also study the West Woods neighborhood in the northern part of town.

The West Woods Neighborhood Association has sought the study for a long time. Association members, along with members of the Whitneyville and Spring Glen civic associations and town officials, are part of a steering committee working to identify sections of town that need safety improvements aimed at slowing down traffic.

The consultants, with input from Spring Glen and Whitneyville neighbors, have already created a plan for improvements in those sections of town. The South Central Regional Council of Governments funded the study of how to make things safer for pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles in the town’s east-west corridors.

The steering committee will now prioritize the recommended improvements from the east-west study for the Spring Glen and Whitneyville neighborhoods and the necessary traffic calming equipment will then be ordered and installed.

The West Woods study is the next step in Hamden’s plan to help residential areas with traffic problems, said Mayor Scott D. Jackson who lauded the constructive partnership with the neighborhood groups.

In various parts of town, speed humps and bike lanes already have been installed, especially at schools and intersections of the Farmington Canal linear trail. Speed compliance units also have been placed in various locations of town for periods of time to help address the issue.

New Haven plans cold case unit with help from retired cops

New Haven Police Chief Dean Esserman is planning to bring back retired detectives to serve with current detectives on a new cold case unit. He has been meeting with retired investigators since last fall to solicit ideas.

“I told them, ‘I’m here to tell you that New Haven is calling you,’” Esserman said. “We need to bring justice to those who are still waiting for it.”

He cited a historic Roman senator who said, “when Rome calls, no man’s life is his own.”

“There are hundreds of families over decades who are waiting for the New Haven police to call them and tell them that we are arresting the person we believe is responsible for the murder of their loved one,” he said.

Esserman said he hoped to bring back retired detectives part time and partner them with current detectives to tackle old cases.

He pointed to the December arrest in a 2004 double homicide. Two retired detectives came back to meet with the families, along with the detectives who secured the warrant, and Esserman described the meeting between the family and the detectives as “remarkable.”

Esserman said several retired detectives have expressed a willingness to serve on the squad and he is now exploring the logistics of bringing retired cops back part time to help investigate cases.

“There’s an old saying, ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way.’ I see the wills,” he said.

The plan for a new cold case unit comes at the same time that new statistics show crime in New Haven is sharply down. Both homicides and non-fatal shootings are significantly lower than last year.

“It’s a combination of things,” said Sgt. Al Vazquez, head of the major crimes unit. He pointed to collaboration with federal agencies, significant arrests of people police viewed as “menaces to society,” efforts to regain community trust, and cooperation and greater success in solving homicides.

He also said an added patrol presence has had an effect on deterrence by keeping the criminals off balance and cited the value of good, strong community policing. “When the police department engages the community, this is the result,” he said.
First responders practice search and rescue skills at cooperative drill

Several fire companies in Barkhamsted and New Hartford joined forces in July to test their marine rescue skills and cooperative skills at a local public beach. The drill brought together the New Hartford Fire Department, the Pleasant Valley Volunteer Fire Department, the Riverton Volunteer Fire Department, New Hartford Ambulance, the Barkhamsted Fire Department and other first responders for a mutual aid drill.

Officials emphasized that cooperation is key when it comes to first response and that the goal of the drill is to practice joint efforts that are already in place. “We work together all the time,” said Riverton deputy fire chief Norman Bird. “Water is a big deal in town.”

An area drowning last summer highlighted the importance of marine rescue operations at the time and water safety was still on the minds of the emergency personnel and lifeguards who gathered for the mock search and rescue which included boats, divers, and land crews sweeping the beaches for missing children.

Pleasant Valley Fire Department assistant chief Jim Shanley played the role of a despondent parent who did not know where his children were. Metropolitan District Commission personnel joined in the search eight minutes after lifeguards combed the area, in accordance with the exercise scenario.

Divers assisting in the search headed out to the deepest water first, calculating the odds of where a drowning victim might be located. After several minutes, the first “victim” – a large rock wrapped in a tee-shirt – had been found.

“The big thing is coordination,” Shanley said. “Coordination and communication.”

New Haven community policing to include house calls

Community policing has a number of key benefits: when police officers establish close contact with neighborhood residents, communications are improved, some adversarial relationships turn friendly, and police as well as those they protect feel like they are on the same team, working toward the same goal of creating safe places to live and raise their families.

The trust that community policing builds has already brought significant benefits in terms of crime tips and information. Now it will bring officers not only through resident’s neighborhoods, but also to their front doors. That’s because as part of its “boots on the ground” community policing effort in New Haven, local police will soon be making house calls.

Police Chief Dean Esserman has instructed his district supervisors to ask their walking beat patrolmen to start stopping at the homes of crime victims a day or so afterward — to check in on behalf of the department as a way of reaching out and making contact instead of waiting for a call.

The crimes usually involve property theft, which could be anything from burglaries to bike thefts. Detectives already follow up with victims of violence and their families, but since 80 percent of the incidents reported to police involve property crimes, Esserman saw an opportunity expand his department’s reach in a positive way.

When he was police chief in Providence, Esserman had student interns make follow-up phone calls to victims the day after an incident. But in New Haven, he wants that contact to be in person and by a police officer.

“Traditionally, if you call we came to take a report and it was a one-time visit,” Esserman said. “This time we’re not responding to a 911 call. You didn’t call us. We were just coming back to check in on you to see if there’s any services you need or if you have any more information to add.”
Bristol steps up fire safety training for youngsters

The Bristol fire department is planning to buy a fire safety trailer in an effort to educate youngsters most at risk in the community when a blaze breaks out.

The trailer will contain a mock bedroom, kitchen, and living room that will let children experience what it’s like when a fire breaks out. The kids will see smoke, feel the heat on door knobs, and otherwise get a sense of what it feels like.

Most importantly, they will also learn how to escape from potentially dire situations.

“The trailer will be a great educational tool,” said Fire Chief Jon Pose. He said the educational trailer, which would be taken around to schools and community events, might well save the life of a child.

National statistics show that young children are those most apt to perish in house fires because they don’t have the life skills yet to take the appropriate steps.

“That’s what this will teach them,” the fire chief said.

Don Goranson, a veteran fire commissioner, said the trailer will be purchased with memorial contributions, a donation by a local company, and community fund raising.

The memorial contributions were made in the name of Hap Barnes, a former industrialist who was a city fire commissioner for 36 years and a collector of fire equipment. His collection now makes up the Museum of Fire History in Bristol.

Goranson said the memorial donations for Barnes included a provision to purchase a piece of fire apparatus. He said commissioners thought about what to get in his name and decided they wanted something that would last, not something that might get burned up on its first day of service.

The idea of getting an educational trailer seemed perfect, Goranson said “because it would educate an entire generation of Bristol kids.”

The city also plans to share the trailer with neighboring communities to help boost fire safety in the region.

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.
Gun-Violence Task Force Cuts Hartford Shooting Deaths By 40 Percent

Last summer, Hartford officials launched an effort to fight gun violence and after a year-long effort, members of the Hartford shooting task force have reported that gun-related homicides have fallen by more than 40 percent and first-degree assaults with firearms dropped by nearly 30 percent.

Acting Police Chief James Rovella said the effort has been effective in targeting the city’s most violent criminals.

“I don’t look for hundreds and hundreds of arrests,” he said. “I look for those violent people that are impacting our city and our region on a daily basis.”

The shooting task force was created in July, 2011 to fight escalating gun violence in Hartford and since that time has made more than 214 felony arrests and more than 50 misdemeanor arrests while seizing 76 firearms.

The impact of the task force was immediate. When it was formed, shootings were up 14 percent over the previous year. In the six months after the task force started work, the number of shooting victims decreased rapidly and Hartford ended the year with 39 fewer shooting victims than the previous calendar year.

More than 35 people now serve on the task force including:

- 14 members of the Hartford Police Department;
- 10 employees of the Chief State’s Attorney’s office;
- two employees from the state’s Correction Department;
- two State troopers;
- two prosecutors from the Hartford State’s Attorney’s Office;
- one prosecutor from the Waterbury State’s Attorney’s Office;
- one detective each from the East Hartford, West Hartford and Manchester police departments;
- one adult probation officer from the State’s Judicial Department; and
- one special agent from the federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

Task Force members believe that violent crime can be preempted by tracking – and possibly trapping – certain known violent crimes, offenders and possible retaliatory shootings.

Data shows that a small number of Hartford residents are responsible for a large percentage of violence. By targeting as few as 100 to 200 active violent felons, officials believe the violent crime rate can be dramatically reduced.

When intelligence suggests that a particular person is at high risk for being a shooter, that person is targeted for surveillance, controlled buys and cold case investigation, as is the shooter’s potential victim.

City officials said that the police department’s major crimes unit, working with the shooting task force, has solved 67 percent of the homicides that occurred this year.

Rovella said 67 percent is “a staggering numbers, considering some of the national averages run around 20 percent and more locally, we’re around the averages of 40 percent.”

Task force member also noted that prior efforts to reduce gun violence, including a similar task force formed in 2008, were effective only until the effort was disbanded.

“These law enforcement efforts deterred crime while being implemented, but as soon as the effort ceased, the violent crime rates rose,” officials said. “Our goals have sustainability in mind.”
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.

Meriden begins “next generation of policing”

In Meriden, it’s lights, camera, action, and surveillance, now that live video is being streamed to police headquarters from security cameras installed throughout the city’s downtown area.

“This project has been a year in the making,” Lt. Sal Nesci said. “The company, Landon Technology, has been excellent to work with.”

A total of fifteen camera mounts were installed downtown. Of those, 14 have four cameras each to provide a 180-degree view. One of the installations, overlooking the train station, has a camera capable of panning, tilting, and zooming.

Since Landon Technology also installed security cameras at several Meriden Housing Authority buildings, the housing authority security system was integrated with the police department system. In total, police gained about 160 cameras, though many are part of the four-camera units.

In the police dispatch room, a large monitor mounted to a wall displays several feeds from the downtown cameras in a split-screen format. By clicking on one of the camera thumbnails, a single image will fill the screen. With another click, the monitor switches to the pan/tilt/zoom camera.

The zoom feature on some of the housing authority cameras can increase magnification by a factor of 32 times, enabling for example, the remote reading of an automobile license plate. The system also comes with applications enabling camera feeds to be viewed on a mobile device like an iPad or a smart phone.

Officials say the cameras help prevent crimes and help residents feel safer. They will also serve as an investigative tool for police and will allow them to monitor both pedestrian and vehicle traffic. In the future, cameras could be installed anywhere in town with a wireless connection to the system.

With an obvious focus on school security in the wake of the Newtown shootings, the police department’s system could be connected to cameras installed at city schools, allowing school cameras to feed directly into the police department.

The new system cost the department $68,000 for one pan/tilt/zoom camera and 14 other four-camera units. A federal grant covered $59,000 of the cost and asset forfeiture money covered an additional $9,000. Between the two funding sources, installing the cameras had no impact on the police department budget.

As the cameras were being installed, downtown business owners often approached members the installation team to thank them.

“I think we’re entering into the next generation of policing,” Police Chief Jeffrey Cossette said. “It’s a pretty impressive system.”
Changes to Killingly sewer plan will minimize downtown disruption

Killingly has modified the plans for a sewer replacement project in the downtown Danielson section of town to make the construction process less disruptive to surrounding businesses and customers.

Large infrastructure projects that close lanes, take parking, and otherwise ensnarl local traffic bring short-term pains that come with the long-term gains of upgrading systems to modern standards.

Killingly hopes the short-term pains will be shorter than usual.

Town Engineer Bruce Chimento said that instead of tearing up streets in front of stores along Main Street, workers will use manholes to introduce an epoxy lining into the failing 107-year-old clay sewer lines. By lining the pipes instead of replacing them, officials say the work will be finished faster.

In addition, most of the work will be performed at night – between approximately 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. – to accommodate the needs of local businesses and commerce.

In addition to the downtown portion of the project, sewer lines under other sections of Danielson will be dug up and fully replaced. Chimento said portions of two streets must be excavated because the pipes are either broken or root-infested. Other challenges include a sewer line that is flowing in the wrong direction – requiring a total replacement – and sections of two adjoining streets that also must be repaired.

Repairs on two streets were completed during last year’s construction season and work is expected to begin on the downtown sewer portion during the next couple of months.
Town's work together to target causes of flooding

As part of the longer-term recovery and planning process begun in the aftermath of Storm Irene, the towns of Derby, Seymour, Oxford, and Stratford – which border the Housatonic River – are working with members of the Connecticut congressional delegation to identify solutions to the major issues in the flood-prone area.

The local mayors and first selectmen recently met with U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal and U.S. Representatives Rosa L. DeLauro, D-3, and Chris Murphy, D-5, at Oxford Town Hall to discuss measures to remedy flooding that started along the Housatonic in March that was dramatically worsened by Storm Irene.

Federal and local leaders agreed on the need to band together to seek changes to policies and procedures of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and First Light, the company that operates the Stevenson Dam.

Rep. DeLauro encouraged leaders to contact lawmakers and FERC as a unified group. “We need to join forces and make collective effort to put serious pressure on the system and tell them we need their help,” she said.

Seymour First Selectman Paul Roy concurred that joining forces is the best way to get the attention of the federal government in providing some much-needed aid. “A regional approach is always better in getting what we need,” he said.

Derby Mayor Anthony Staffieri said FERC should amend its regulations to allow levels of the upper lakes and reservoirs to be lowered to the minimum. That change, he said, “would give the lower towns along the Housatonic a better chance to minimize flooding and go a long way toward resolving the regional flooding.”

“Derby lowered its two reservoirs well in advance of two torrential rainstorms last August and flooding was kept at bay,” he added.

Senator Blumenthal said he and Rep. DeLauro have been working with FERC and that they will continue to work with First Light to urge FERC so water levels in the river can be further reduced when needed.

Blumenthal said he and his fellow lawmakers are also working in a bipartisan effort to procure the funding necessary to fix the flooding problems and Rep. Murphy spoke of legislation he has introduced that would create a $100 million-per-year grant program to provide municipalities with the resources to create jobs and initiate pressing flood mitigation projects.

Northwestern Towns Plan Regional Animal Control Center

The towns of Torrington, Winsted, Norfolk, Colebrook, Goshen, Litchfield, Harwinton, Hartland, and New Hartford are planning to construct a regional animal control center to save money and provide more comprehensive regional coverage.

The effort started about a year ago when John Filchak, executive director of the Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, gave a presentation to the northwestern towns which highlighted a similar effort made by six towns in the Northeast corner of the state.

Torrington Mayor Ryan Bingham, who has spearheaded the effort, said the center would provide services to participating towns, many of which share control centers or rent space elsewhere. Most towns have an animal control officer who is paid an average of about $15,000 and is on call 24 hours per day, every day.

Officials believe a regional facility will also improve reliability by increasing the level of service. The goal is to have one facility that can accommodate all the cats and dogs in the area. Some towns currently rent space in neighboring facilities and some have been using space in town garages.

“Hopefully we will all be able to work together and share some of the costs of keeping one center open rather than several different ones,” Bingham said. A regional performance incentive grant will help fund the creation of a governance document and begin preliminary engineering documents.

“Any time we can regionalize any of our services, it will add value and it should add cost savings to the communities we serve,” Litchfield First Selectman Leo Paul, Jr. said. In his original presentation, Filchak said the goals of the regionalization were to provide timely, professional services to the towns that chose to participate. “We are saving our towns about $700,000 combined, annually,” Filchak said. “It really is a measurable, cost-effective opportunity.”

Filchak said the annual cost of the Northeast Corner program is about $150,000. One full-time program director works with two part-time animal control officers and volunteers. The facility is located on 8 acres in Dayville. About 20 dog runs are available at the location, which also operates a pet-food food bank.
REGIONAL & INTERMUNICIPAL COOPERATION

Housatonic flood towns seek warning system

In September of 2011, members of Connecticut’s congressional delegation met with officials of eight municipalities affected by severe flooding of the Housatonic River and pledged to seek solutions.

Six months later, the weather was dry outside Oxford Town Hall as U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, aides to U.S. Representatives Rosa DeLauro, Jim Himes, and Chris Murphy, and officials of the eight towns met to discuss better ways of providing downstream safety and faster notification in advance of flood events.

Mayors from Milford to New Milford and beyond presented their concerns on what Blumenthal called a “regional problem” and officials noted that even towns not directly on the river are affected by flooding when power is lost or roads are closed.

Based on the session, the group will request a meeting with representatives of the Federal Energy Resource Commission and FirstLight Power. FirstLight owns Stevenson Dam, which spans the river between Monroe and Oxford. Local officials want to ensure that water levels behind the Stevenson Dam are lowered significantly ahead of heavy rain or snow melt.

“There are a number of issues that really require flexibility and assistance from FERC, such as water levels at Lake Zoar,” Blumenthal said.

Another key issue is FirstLight’s plan for faster notification to towns and residents. During the flooding, FirstLight “knew it was releasing water and provided no notice or insufficient notice to residents to evacuate,” Blumenthal said. It was determined that releasing water from the dam caused the flooding.

Since the September 2011 meeting, “FirstLight has worked with the towns and emergency management to come up with a better plan so there will be better notification in the event water is being released that could cause flooding,” he said. “So far, it hasn’t been used.”

The group will also approach the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers about conducting a comprehensive study of the river water flow.

Patricia Murphy, mayor of New Milford, said that without the help of the government, each town wouldn’t be able to solve the problem alone. “Regionally we have strength,” she said.

Bristol, Plainville, Plymouth, Burlington join forces for seniors

Senior citizens in Bristol, Plainville, Plymouth, and Burlington are benefiting from a partnership among police and social service agencies in their towns that is designed to better address their safety concerns.

TRIAD is a national model that brings together law enforcement, seniors, and social service organizations to improve the quality of life for seniors by providing social programs and by addressing their safety concerns.

The West Central Connecticut TRIAD program provides seniors in all four towns with valuable programs and information on a wide range of topics including how to protect themselves from scams and how to deal with storm preparedness.

A key advantage of TRIAD is that each town can cater to the needs of its own seniors while also drawing information and help from the larger group, said May Lynn Gagnon, Resource Development Director for the United Way of Central Connecticut, the lead organizing agency of the TRIAD program.

That effort evolved into a broader strategy to provide seniors with information to keep them safe both at home and on the streets.

The latest service enhancement came in May, when TRIAD kicked off a “Yellow Dot” program, giving police and emergency responders access to medical information if a car accident occurs.

When seniors sign up to participate in “Yellow Dot,” they are given a yellow dot to be placed on their car window. The dot lets emergency responders know that the car’s occupant has current medical information in the glove compartment.

It includes a list of medications and also a picture of the senior so responders can match the medical information with the senior.

Over the past several months, TRIAD has sponsored emergency preparedness training in Plymouth to discuss how to remain safe during inclement weather and a scam program in Plainville providing protective tips for seniors.

Future components of the West Central TRIAD program will include organizing kids to help seniors with lawn mowing and providing home safety information on issues like proper lighting and keeping hedges trimmed to ward off possible intruders.
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 Governments 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.
**New Haven Pilot Program Aims to Better Utilize**

For the next three months, people who park on a two-block section in downtown New Haven will not be able to pull up to parking meters that have any time remaining on them. That’s because the city has installed magnetic sensors in parking spaces as part of a pilot program designed to get a better sense of how many cars are parking in high-traffic areas of the downtown per day – and exactly how long they stay.

The temporary downside: because the sensors measure when a car leaves a space, any leftover time will be erased from the meter during the test period.

The long-term upside: after the 90-day pilot program with the sensors, the data can be used by the city to see if parking rates or times need to be adjusted, making it easier for residents and visitors to find parking appropriate to their planned length of stay.

The pilot sensors were provided by a private vendor and they were installed and are being used at no cost to the city. If the city chooses, the program could be expanded – at a cost – to other parts of New Haven.

Officials say the data will be useful in determining if certain areas should be one-hour parking or two-hour parking. If people are spending three hours in a one-hour parking spot, the city could choose to extend the length of time permitted.

The initiative is part of the city’s “dynamic parking” focus, designed to lessen rates for meters on the outskirts of the downtown area and install parking meters that accept credit cards.

As part of the pilot program, meters on another downtown street that currently have a half-hour maximum will have a new one-hour maximum, and the one-hour meters will be increased to two hours.

The information obtained through the pilot program also will help business owners because the city can adjust meter times for the average turnover, which can promote traffic to local businesses.

The goal of the pilot program is to determine if time limits on particular streets are appropriate and eventually, to develop an online application that will allow drivers to know the likelihood of finding an on-street parking space and where.

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**New technology lets residents pay taxes online**

Killingly residents may now pay their local taxes from the comfort of their own homes by using their credit or debit cards to pay current real estate, personal property, motor vehicle and sewer use bills online.

The town has been looking for ways to make paying bills easier for taxpayers but did not have the electronic systems needed to display, secure, process and store financial information.

Officials decided to go with a private vendor and a system that was selected because of its ease of use and security features. All the data collected are double encrypted and stored on secure servers. The data are not sold or released for any purpose other than to complete transactions with local taxpayers.

The system is secure because the only parties able to access account information will be the taxpayer and select town staff – and even then, not all portions of a resident’s account will be open even to authorized town staff.

All check routing numbers and credit card numbers are abbreviated and partially redacted. Payment histories will be saved for 18 months and transactions typically take between 48 and 72 hours to process.

The system is also completely free – there are no sign-up, subscription or transaction fees for the new online system. Residents can choose the auto-pay feature, which will automatically deduct payments on a bill’s due date. Taxpayers also can set up a payment schedule for specific bills.

Killingly residents saying paying their taxes has never been so easy – even if it still continues to hurt just as much.
Visitors to the Mary Hooker Environmental Sciences Magnet School in Hartford might be forgiven for thinking they have mistakenly entered Mystic Aquarium or perhaps the cross-town Connecticut Science Center. A waterfall cascades in the towering, sunlit lobby, the centerpiece of a 3,600-gallon indoor pond filled with dozens of orange and white speckled koi. Down the hall is an aquatics laboratory with 50 freshwater and salt water tanks that replicate conditions in Long Island Sound, the Connecticut River, and the Caribbean Sea – complete with oysters, a horseshoe crab, and other marine creatures. A short walk away is a planetarium with a 28-foot digital projection dome and right next door is the greenhouse where vegetables for students’ lunches are grown and harvested. Beyond the indoor pond is a butterfly vivarium where students and teachers raise insects and Monarch butterflies.

The vivarium and greenhouse use mulch made from the school’s cafeteria scraps, composted in outdoor earth bins. Starting in prekindergarten, students scrape their leftover food into compost buckets which are then transferred to the outside bins. The “all green” theme is just another day of classes for students at a school that was recently certified as LEED platinum, the highest national rating for eco-friendly buildings and the first public school in Connecticut to gain the award. The U.S. Green Building Council, the Washington, D.C. nonprofit coalition that administers the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design ranking system, says fewer than two dozen K-12 public and private schools in America are housed in “platinum,” energy-efficient buildings.

An architectural-engineering firm in Meriden designed the $42 million overhaul of the old neighborhood school and reused 99.7 percent of the walls, flooring, and roofing from the original 1952 building while adding 30,000 square feet. After the construction, the Mary Hooker School reopened as a new magnet school in 2010 with green features that will provide up to 43 percent worth of energy savings. The new pre-K to grade 8 school has 360 students, with space for 660, and the enrollment is split between city and suburban children.

Classrooms are equipped with solar sensors that control how much artificial light can be turned on to supplement the daylight. Expansive windows are designed to connect children to the outdoors when they’re inside. Even the electrical and furnace rooms in the basement have windows so students can see where their energy comes from. On the roof — white to reflect sunlight and keep the building cooler during the hot months — are solar panels and a weather station.

At least 35 percent of the building’s electricity usage is from renewable resources, and in the lobby an electronic kiosk provides continual live updates on the building’s energy consumption.

In today’s dot.com world, airline tickets, rental car confirmations, hotel reservations, store purchases, and even motor vehicle registrations can be arranged online – and now Ridgefield businesses can do all that electronically AND pay their local taxes.

By putting some of its forms online, the assessor’s office has reduced paperwork, saved the town money and kept things simple and easy for the 1,500 local business operators with equipment and furnishings taxed each year as personal property, including desks, chairs, calculators, computers, machinery, and equipment.

“Every year we send the same forms out to all the personal property taxpayers in town,” Ridgefield Assessor Al Garzi said. “This year through technology we were able to save the town a lot of money and make it easier for taxpayers.”

“Instead of sending each taxpayer all the different types of forms used to file this year’s business personal property equipment, with a return envelope, we sent them a card which told them to go to the Town of Ridgefield website, and on the website are all the forms.”

Savings come from reduced labor as well as lower paper, printing, and postage costs. In past years, seven different forms were mailed even though a particular business taxpayer might need only one or two of them.
Residents can view town meetings on Putnam’s website at no cost to town

Residents now have a new way to follow Putnam town government through a website that provides videos of local board meetings.

Board of Selectmen meetings will be available for viewing the day after they are conducted, and Mayor Pete Place said he hopes to provide similar viewing access to Board of Finance and Board of Education meetings in the future.

“This is another resource for the people who live here,” Place said. “And it didn’t cost the town a penny.”

The idea to record meetings has been discussed in Putnam for some time, but cost factors have historically prevented the initiative from moving forward. When the idea came up again last fall, a local information technology company – Savage Systems – offered to help out.

The company donated the necessary equipment, which cost about $250, and they will manage the website.

“We’re doing this for the people of Putnam,” said Eric Gould of Savage Systems, adding that he also hopes the service may catch on with other towns.

The mayor sees it as a win-win. Place is happy to be able to offer residents the ability to view meetings online. He said people have been looking forward to having the technology and he said because the recording equipment is portable, even meetings held outside of the selectmen’s chambers can easily be recorded.

Putnam resident Matthew Wester said, “I think it’s a great benefit for people who can’t make it to meetings.”

Clinton linking municipal buildings through fiber-optics

Clinton is switching to a fiber-optic network that will link its municipal buildings, enable police access to 150 security cameras, and potentially provide local business with access to the network – all while saving taxpayer dollars.

The project approved by the town is running fiber-optics lines to all municipal buildings and the computer equipment to use them. In addition to the greater speed of fiber-optic lines, First Selectman William Fritz said the system will allow the town and schools to use “voice over Internet protocol” for telephone service.

The town will lease the lines and equipment and pay an outside vendor to maintain the system. The lease arrangement will save the town nearly $22,000 a year. If the school system is switched to voice over Internet protocol telephone service, another $43,000 can be saved.

Pointing to the infrastructure difficulties created last year by Tropical Storm Irene, Fritz said the selectmen have been assured that downed lines can be restored within four hours.

“It’s a home run,” he said of the proposal, in terms of cost, speed of service, and maintenance.

The only town building not included in the system is the local library, which would have to use the town’s network, email, Internet, and finance system if it joins.

The project was funded by $500,000 that was part of $7 million in bonding approved last year to cover a number of municipal capital projects.
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 East 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.

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.”

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.
Stonington high school students and teachers are learning first-hand about the deep-blue sea in a way that is available to students in just five other locations in the country – live, aboard ship, and talking to the crew of the Nautilus – via video.

The Nautilus is the new 210-foot vessel being used by Titanic discoverer Robert Ballard who heads the Institute for Exploration at Mystic Aquarium.

As part of Ballard’s educational outreach program, computer equipment and flat screen monitors have been installed at Stonington High School – allowing students and teachers to watch expeditions aboard the Exploration Vessel Nautilus live, 24 hours a day.

The equipment also lets them talk to scientists aboard the ship and see the same images from the ship’s remotely operated underwater vehicles that the scientists are viewing.

Ballard’s “Exploration Command Centers” are part of his concept of telepresence, which allows scientists, educators, and students to participate in his expeditions live from their home, office, or school – providing the same kind of experience on shore as they would have on the ship.

Signals from the underwater vehicles are beamed from the ship to a satellite and then to Ballard’s Inner Space Center at the University of Rhode Island and finally sent via the Internet to remote locations like Stonington High School. The technology was initially developed so that experts on shore could provide their insight to Ballard as soon as he made a discovery.

During a recent use of the equipment, students spoke live with Katy Croff Bell, the chief scientist aboard the Nautilus, which was cruising off the coast of Italy exploring underwater volcanoes and the marine life that lives around them.

In a 15-minute conversation with Bell, which is done with an eight-second delay, the teachers asked questions about work being done to study bacteria found in the water and how much data is analyzed aboard the ship.

The installation of the equipment had no cost to the town and Sea Research Foundation, the parent organization of Mystic Aquarium, waived annual licensing fees totaling thousands of dollars a year. Sea Research President and CEO Stephen Coan said the program is an example of putting cutting edge technology to work.

“I credit the teachers here with being willing to try something new instead of going by the book,” he said.

Superintendent of Schools Leanne Masterjoseph said the goals of the school system and Sea Research Foundation are intertwined and she has been overwhelmed by the foundation’s generosity and desire “to make things better for our students.”

“We’re talking about bringing learning to life,” she said. “It’s a game changer.”
Volunteers retool mission to keep celebrating Bristol

After organizing a number of events to commemorate Bristol’s 225th anniversary last year, a seven-member volunteer committee changed its name and kept the fun going by bringing events to city that bring the community together.

“Last year we were the Bristol 225th Anniversary Committee,” said Tom LaPorte, one of the members. “Now we’re Team Bristol 2012.” During 2010, the committee organized a car show, Family Day at a local park, a fireworks display, and an event they dubbed the “Bristol Stomp,” which included a buffet dinner and an “oldies” dance.

This year the group has already held another car show and helped out at Pop Up Piazza, a downtown event that offered an array of entertainment, food and games – including six bands playing music ranging from jazz and funk to 1980s anthems, as well as local dance and theatrical groups performing numbers from their recent shows.

In addition, the event featured four muralists at work on a fence, artists painting benches for storefronts, the debut of an artists’ cafe, a temporary beer garden, more than 70 vendors and games like bocce, badminton, basketball toss and board games on tables.

Piazzas, famous in European cities, serve as the heartbeat of the community, said one of the organizers. “It is where people gather, socialize, relax and play” which made the piazza theme ideal for invigorating the downtown area.

Their final event for the year, Bristol Stomp II, was held in October. Linda DiMatteo, another team member, said last year’s dance was very popular and that the feedback after the event was “phenomenal.” Besides a buffet dinner and music from a deejay, the event included more than 30 raffle prizes from local businesses, including ESPN, Lake Compounce, Garnish Restaurant, Harvest Bakery, and the Bristol Press, which gave away a free subscription. There was even a free lunch with Mayor Art Ward.

After planning last year’s events, the committee members said they enjoyed it so much they wanted to continue. And this year as Team Bristol 2012, they plan to bring to town even more activities designed to enliven the community.

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 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 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 in Madison and they were given to the town by Wilcox’s granddaughter, arriving in boxes tied up neatly in packets.

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 a 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.
Colchester volunteers collect data on homeless

A small group of volunteers has started collecting data on the homeless and needy population in Colchester.

The Colchester Coalition to Combat Homelessness surveyed 12 people who recently attended one of the Coalition’s free community luncheons offered at a local church.

The anonymous survey was conducted by Erik Clevenger, director of housing for Reliance House, Inc., and David Pascua, housing supervisor for the Southeastern Mental Health Authority. Most of the respondents were town residents.

“Two of the 12 we surveyed said, ‘yes, we are literally homeless,’” Pascua said. “One has been homeless more than one year, which HUD defines as chronically homeless.”

Two identified themselves as veterans, which Pascua said is “a huge deal because it opens them to a lot of resources.”

The coalition plans to present their results to town officials as well as local community groups like the Colchester Business Association and the Colchester Rotary. The volunteers hope the data will demonstrate that there is a need for more help and that additional resources will be made available.

The coalition of residents, social service professionals, and clergy formed more than a year ago after concerns surfaced about the number of unserved homeless people in town, particularly on cold nights.

Late last year, the group started offering free community lunches, which alternated between two churches in town. Since starting the luncheon program, visitors have become more comfortable attending the lunches over time.

“People are staying longer, they are talking with others,” one of the volunteers said. “In the beginning, they just ate and left.”

Wallingford tennis court now serving salad

Wallingford residents, students, and parents gathered on a Saturday morning a couple of months ago to turn a dilapidated tennis court at a local elementary school into a new community garden.

Sharlene Wong, director of food services for the Wallingford school system, first proposed the community garden idea a few years ago – but space, costs, and materials were obstacles.

The plan was rekindled by Scott May, local captain of Home Depot’s community outreach program. Home Depot donated building materials, including lumber and fencing, as well as equipment and labor.

The old tennis court now houses 24 garden beds in addition to three cold frames. Each of the 20 classrooms at the elementary school will have its own bed to grow vegetables including lettuce, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, carrots, and chard. The remaining four beds will be used in the fall to grow pumpkins.

The tennis court was not useable and now the fenced-in area provides safety to both the crops and the students. Safety guidelines from the federal Department of Agriculture say that having a fenced-in garden is the first step on the road to success.

A local fuel company donated much of the soil used to fill the garden boxes and local contracting companies provided equipment and manpower to make the garden a reality.

“I’m glad I can give back something to the community,” said Prestige Construction owner Miguel Castro, who helped build the gardening beds.

Other community members and organizations, such as the Meriden Starbucks and student volunteers from the Lyman Hall Vo-Ag program, will donate time to help maintain the garden in the summer when school is out of session.

Students planted the beds in May, providing them with hands-on opportunities to learn about nutrition and agriculture.
Close to urban din, community garden provides a quiet space

On a quiet road in the rural part of Berlin – far from the bustle of downtown or the teeming traffic of the Berlin Turnpike – is a tranquil sanctuary within Hatchery Brook Park.

Since 2009, a community garden spearheaded by resident Pat Bigelow has provided a quiet place for people who don’t have a garden plot or a place to grow produce, flowers and herbs.

Pat Bigelow, who helped set up a community garden at the University of Connecticut when she was a student, said when she heard the town was buying a large parcel of open space, she asked about creating a community garden there.

Jim Mahoney, the town’s economic development director, advised bringing the idea to the conservation commission – which in turn suggested Hatchery Brook Park as an alternative location for the community garden.

Bigelow soon assembled a coalition of volunteers to clean up the area and set up a fence to secure the space and keep out deer. The property is locked, but all plot owners have the combination and can go in at any time.

The 17,500-square-foot space is divided into 34 various-sized plots. Each gardener, family or group purchases a plot for a year and tends it themselves. The produce must be organic and no chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides are allowed. Gardeners also pitch in to maintain ornamental plantings near the entrance.

The gardeners can grow anything they want in their plot and the garden features a wide variety of vegetables, flowers and herbs.

Although most plots are rented by individuals and families, some non-profits also use them. The Berlin Senior Center has a plot as does a local anti-hunger group that donates produce to the Salvation Army and other agencies. Gardeners also donate their surpluses, placing them in a cooler for delivery.

“Pat Bigelow’s vision allowed the town to have this,” said Hellyn Riggins, town planner and director of development. “The gardeners share experiences, hang out and learn from each other.”

Griswold neighbors will keep eyes on crime

A neighborhood watch in Griswold’s Jewett City borough has been formed and the group will train its sights on the streets that surround the Veterans Memorial Park and the borough’s skate park and Little League fields. Those are all popular recreation spots for children and families – and they are all spots that have been plagued by vandalism in the past year.

The 14 people who attended the group’s first meeting represent “a good start,” resident State Trooper Adam Chittick said. “The goal is a safer and friendlier borough. We are trying to empower the community to take control and be our eyes and ears.”

Chittick and State Rep. Steven Mikutel, D-Griswold, urged each resident to bring one neighbor with them to the next meeting, when training will begin.

“You might get more people involved if you called up your neighbors personally and told them what you’re trying to accomplish,” Mikutel said. “A lot of people need that extra push to get off the couch.”

Chittick said a neighborhood watch can serve as a deterrent if speeders, vandals and loiterers know neighbors are watching and reporting.

Members would function only as the eyes and ears of police, and members are discouraged from actively involving themselves in crime enforcement. All participants will receive training in various areas, including signs of drug use, what to look for on patrol and when to call 911.

Among the residents helping to organize the watch is Alan Geer, a retired Jewett City police officer whose home overlooks the parks. Geer is police commissioner on the borough’s Board of Wardens and Burgess.

“In my police department days, we didn’t need a watch in such a small community because most of the officers lived and worked in the area,” Geer said. “The watch is neighbors looking out for neighbors. I wouldn’t want my property damaged, and I wouldn’t want anyone else’s damaged either. And as we get going, I think even more people will come on board. Many eyes are better than just a few eyes.”
VOLUNTEERS

Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

Connecticut Conference of Municipalities

A former sandpit in Plainville was transformed into a small habitat for wildlife when Tomasso Nature Park was donated to the town in 1989. Small ponds were dug, trees were planted, and nature took care of the rest. Now the park is home to a variety of wildlife including ducks, geese, a swan, and a Great Blue Heron. There are rumors that a bear and a bobcat may have dropped by for a visit at different times. Over time, the more the park reverted to a natural state, the more it succumbed to the ravages of nature as well. Trails became blocked and overgrown, tree limbs fell, and invasive plants, brought in by birds, ran amok.

Last year Susan Holcomb decided to start Friends of Tomasso Nature Park, which meets at the park on Saturday mornings, weather permitting – to tackle some of the chores bestowed upon them by Mother Nature.

"The bittersweet is a problem," Holcomb said Thursday at the park. "It envelops plants and kills them." Holcomb and the volunteers cleared piles of the invasive weeds last year. They saved many trees, including a small cedar that was covered by bittersweet.

"You could hardly see it," she said. "Now it’s starting to straighten up. It looks so good." The group also planted daffodils, which bloomed this spring.

This year, spring also brought a substantial to-do list, including some large branches that were felled during the October snowstorm and Tropical Storm Irene that required removal.

John Anglace, Alderman board president said the board recently passed a resolution that companies that leave unwanted telephone books on the curb without the property owner’s permission will face a $250 fine.

Plainville woman starts and leads nature park clean-up

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The public works department does some cleaning at the nature park when they have the time, but volunteers are still the driving force on clean-up projects. Younger volunteers are also involved and some Cub and Girl Scouts came to the park in April to pick up trash.

Over the winter, Holcomb saw a white swan in one of the marshes for the first time. When Holcomb visited the park a few months ago, the swan was still there – and now she now swims peacefully in the pond, along with the ducks and geese.

That’s really all the reward the Friends group needs. By dealing with the ravages of nature, they also get to enjoy its
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.”
West Hartford schools beef up bullying policy

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 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

Montville High School ‘steps up’ against bullying

More than 800 Montville High School students, peer mediators, and faculty are taking a stand against bullying.

Isaiah Holloway, a member of the football team, knows how it feels to be bullied.

“I remember when I was younger, I used to get picked on sometimes. I wasn’t as big or strong back then,” Holloway said. “Now I hear about all the stories about kids that don’t want to come to school anymore because they get bullied every day.”

In response, Holloway and his classmates attended a pledge event in which students agreed to stop bullying and promote respectful behavior toward their classmates.

Pledge participants signed a large canvas in the main foyer of the high school. Their names surround a slogan spelled out in block lettering: MHS Steps Up Against Bullying. Nearly 50 faculty members added their signatures as well. By taking the pledge, students also agreed to stop or report any instances of unfair treatment that they witness.

Montville’s event coincided with a state anti-bullying awareness initiative. Each student was given a bracelet with an orange bead as a reminder. The school’s colors are orange and black.

“This is something everyone can take part in,” senior Carlie Cave, 17, said after instructing a handful of students about the pledge. “It’s exciting to sign the canvas and have a bracelet. You have something to show for what you’ve done and what you support.”

Principal Chad Ellis suggested that students become more involved in anti-bullying efforts, and a variety of activities were developed to address the issue.

Nearly two-thirds of the student population - approximately 770 - took the pledge and the event accomplished a key goal of the organizers: to keep the bullying conversation going.
Bridgeport adopts youth curfew

Last month after a 15-year-old girl was shot and killed on her aunt’s front porch, the Bridgeport City Council adopted an ordinance requiring children younger than 18 to be off the streets by 11 p.m. on weeknights and midnight on Fridays and Saturdays.

Mayor Bill Finch signed the curfew ordinance a few days after the girl was shot in the head after a Sweet 16 party. “It’s not the whole solution,” Mayor Finch said. “But it’s another arrow in the quiver of our police department and that’s a good thing.”

The ordinance will allow police to ban anyone under 18 from being out in public during the curfew hours without a parent or legal guardian.

If minors are caught during restricted times, their parents can be fined from $25, $50 or $90 and the child could be reported to juvenile authorities. The council will review the ordinance’s effectiveness after six months.

The ban applies to private institutions that accommodate the public like stores, restaurants, theaters and bowling alleys.

Curfew exceptions include extracurricular activities sponsored by schools, churches and clubs, employment or education activities, religious activities and activities “involving the exercise of First Amendment rights of free speech and freedom of assembly.”

Minors can also break the curfew if they are on an errand for a parent or guardian and have a written note with the details.

Councilwoman Michelle Lyons said the ordinance will help keep troubled youth off the city’s streets.

Under the ordinance, police can also report juveniles who violate the curfew more than three times to the police chief as “a juvenile in need of supervision” and refer them to appropriate social and children services.

Bridgeport’s curfew ordinance was originally proposed by city officials in January after a 14-year-old was shot to death, also after attending a Sweet 16 party. City officials blamed the delay in enacting it on potential legal challenges from the American Civil Liberties Union.

David McGuire, a staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, said his group opposes the curfew. “This curfew looks like the easy way out politically, but it’s a huge mistake,” McGuire said. “It criminalizes innocent behavior and fails to address the real problem of violent crime.”

School uniform policy taking hold in West Haven

Last spring, the West Haven board of education approved a two-year school uniform pilot program for a local elementary school after Forest School administrators said they saw it as a way to improve school climate, emphasize a focus on academics, and eliminate competition among students for “who has the best clothes.”

Now that it is in place, West Haven school leaders have deemed the pilot uniform program a success, with nearly all students following the dress code, and only a handful needing financial assistance.

Of the school’s 471 students, only a few have not worn the new uniform to school and they are being offered help in buying the clothing, Principal Thomas Hunt said.

“We had a transition time before we started,” Hunt said. “We contacted families to see if they needed assistance because we had a lot of new kids coming, and they just needed some time to get situated and learn the program,” Hunt said. “As the days go by, the compliance is greater and greater.”

Hunt said he and Forest School’s governance council, which originally studied the pilot program concept, knew some families might need financial help to buy uniforms.

A sponsorship program is in place, but the school has not even had to use all the offers of help it has received, since only six families may need assistance. Ten teachers have promised to sponsor children, the school PTA donated $200, and two local businesses also offered financial support.

Hunt estimated that three days’ worth of uniforms costs about $55, and said that while some students wear the outfits for three or four days, sometimes they wear street clothes on the following day because their uniforms are being washed.

Asked whether the uniforms have affected the school environment, Hunt said he believes the staff is seeing a change in kids, adding that it has “a calming effect, almost.”

And while some parents previously worried about students losing their individuality with uniforms, administrators do not believe that is a problem, given the amount of color choices for polo shirts, jumpers, skirts, shorts, and pants.

The school will eventually compare data from last year, this year, and next year concerning grades and behavior issues to see what, if any, effect the uniform policy had on student per-
New Milford agency adapts to teens’ needs

The third floor of a former school in New Milford houses the official offices of the New Milford Youth Agency, but the reach of the youth-oriented organization extends far beyond their office space.

Founded in the mid-1970s, the agency has been providing positive opportunities for area youth for well over 30 years – and their mission continues to evolve.

On any given day, the town’s largest employer of teenagers sends youth counselors to its before and after school childcare programs in local schools. During the summer months, counselors run all-day camps.

The agency also offers opportunities for community service as well as day hikes, trailblazing and outdoor discovery programs.

A teen and community center called the Maxx holds regular events, including a catering program and Snaxx at The Maxx Mondays. Teens can hang out and play pool or video games and do homework with friends. The Maxx also is the meeting place for a new initiative between police and youth to build relationships, an effort that resulted in the construction of a new fishing dock in town.

On weekends, The Maxx is where teens can come for a supervised evening of dancing and music by local bands featuring jazz and funk and everything in between.

The Maxx has also become a place where local community groups can have meetings catered by agency youth. And during the October storm, it was an emergency shelter staffed by the agency’s youth volunteers.

“A group of kids were making meals for 150 people every day for a week,” Executive Director Mark Mankin said. “and the food service ignited an interest in developing a full culinary program for area youth.”

Mankin has led the agency for more than three decades and is proud of its legacy. Today, the agency offers 24 different programs.

Youth Advocate Stacey Kabasakalian said the agency is “constantly evolving into the next best thing.”

Last November, the agency studied its future at a revisioning session. Themes included parenting skill workshops and better communication about available opportunities and events.

In addition to social media, Mankin hopes to create a central website capable of hosting other sites to provide one-stop shopping for all of the community’s activities, including youth sports and town programs.

While the agency wants to adapt to changing needs, it also wants to follow its traditional recipe: accommodating local youth with experiences they can find nowhere else.

Guilford Anti-Drug Youth Coalition Builds on Success

Developmental Assets for Youth (DAY) in Guilford brings a true community team approach to its goal of helping youths avoid drugs and alcohol.

DAY was created by an existing community group that was already working to prevent drug use by youth. In February 2011, when the group expanded its membership to include mentors, town Youth and Family Services employees, local students, school administrators, and local residents, it renamed itself DAY.

With a bigger cross section of the town’s fabric involved in the issue, DAY used a 2009 survey distributed to students about their needs as part of an application for a federal grant – and now the group is being rewarded for its success with a $625,000 federal grant to be used over five years.

DAY was one of 87 groups selected from a national pool of 452 applicants to receive a grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The group plans to use the money to develop programs and activities, educate youths about effects of drugs and alcohol, and send student leaders to training and conferences on youth issues.

As part of the grant requirements, DAY will ask students to take a survey every two years to see if new efforts are making an impact. The survey measures students’ “developmental assets,” which include having role models, feeling valued by the community, participating in activities or service, and the ability to make good decisions.

DAY’s goal is to help students attain more developmental assets and prevent destructive behaviors. DAY members have already discussed ways to use the money: hire a disc jockey to play music on the Green or show movies at the library on early dismissal school days, help police enforce liquor and tobacco laws at local stores, sponsor contests for kids, or hold another talent show similar to the one held recently on the Green.

“We can’t clean up the world for them, but we can give them the tools to make good decisions ... so they can go anywhere and be safe and be healthy,” said interim Superintendent of Schools Anne Keene, who will help DAY with school initiatives.
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.

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