INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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

2014
June 2014

Dear CCM Member,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town & City Compendium – our 27th 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 Managing Editor Kevin Maloney at (203) 498-3025; or email kmaloney@ccm-ct.org.

Good Reading!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC AMENITIES</td>
<td>1-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td>13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENERGY</td>
<td>15-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>17-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNANCE</td>
<td>26-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEALTH</td>
<td>35-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOUSING</td>
<td>38-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTER-GOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION</td>
<td>40-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION</td>
<td>41-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC SAFETY</td>
<td>43-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL COOPERATION</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL SAFETY</td>
<td>53-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENIORS</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNOLOGY</td>
<td>56-57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSPORTATION</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLUNTEERS</td>
<td>59-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUTH</td>
<td>67-69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cycling heritage a reason to celebrate in Ansonia

Celebrating the birth of the bicycle in Ansonia meant pedaling back through history just the way Pierre Lallement did it almost 150 years ago.

The transplanted Frenchman was living in Ansonia when he invented the pedal bicycle in 1865. To commemorate the milestone and the city’s cycling heritage, Ansonia’s Cultural Commission and the Economic Development Commission co-sponsored the third annual Pierre Lallement Festival this spring.

“It’s all about cycling and taking advantage of our roots and our history,” said Vinnie Scarlata, chairman of Ansonia’s Economic Development Commission. Scarlata said Ansonia has branded itself “Home of the Bicycle.”

The festival draws people to Main Street to enjoy the bike-themed activities, as well as music, food and the fellowship of other cyclists and local folks taking part in some good-old fashioned fun.

Lallement took his inaugural spin from Ansonia to New Haven – a trip of about 12 miles. The highlight of the festival featured members of the region’s bicycle clubs pedaling from the New Haven Green into Woodbridge, Seymour and finally into Ansonia. They got a police escort down Main Street and were greeted by a cheering crowd and music at their final stop: Veterans Park on Main Street.

“It’s just such a great connection that we have with New Haven bicycle enthusiasts,” said Judy Nicolari, Cultural Commission chairwoman.

Mayor James Della Volpe led a ceremony honoring Lallement, proclaiming the day the “Festival of Pierre Lallement Day” in Ansonia.

Storrs Center has gone from the drawing board to drawing crowds

Ever since the Town of Mansfield entered into a development agreement in January 2011, this public-private financed development along Route 195, the main artery through the University of Connecticut, continues to transform the heart of Storrs. The 45-acre area has evolved from a few tiny strip malls to a showcase of specialty shops, restaurants, and residential units, with much more to come.

Over the next three years there will be about 800 apartments and condos, a new UConn Co-Op bookstore, and a grocery store. The project leveraged about $200 million in private investments and $25 million in public funds.

The town is a key member of the Mansfield Downtown Partnership, a non-profit organization that has been working with master developer Leyland Alliance in creating a mixed-use, pedestrian oriented downtown. Other members of the partnership include UConn, businesses, and residents. There’s real excitement in town that this massive project has now moved from blueprint to reality.

For nearly a decade, the town has held an annual Festival on the Green, but the most recent festival had something special to celebrate – Storrs Center was finally taking shape.

“I looked across the street and finally after nine years, we had something to look at,” said Mansfield Mayor Elizabeth Paterson. “There is something being built there. It isn’t just a vision anymore. It’s happening.”

What eventually will happen for Mansfield is a robust boost from the new economic development. The town’s fiscal analysis for 2012 estimated the grand list will increase by four percent as Storrs Center activity becomes the largest taxpayer.

Just as it plays a big part on campus, basketball has found a big place in Storrs Center. Hall-of-Fame Coach Geno Auriemma has opened an upscale Italian eatery in the center of the first phase. Geno’s is one of the most popular draws there.

“This will be the place to be in Storrs Center,” Paterson said Tuesday. “From the beginning of this project, we had a vision to be unique, to be a place of destination. Geno’s will help us accomplish that.”

Town officials are optimistic that attractions like Geno’s, the ease of parking, broad walkways and a wide variety of things to do will all combine to bring visitors from far and wide to Storrs – and just as importantly, keep generations of Mansfield residents close to home.
Sometimes history is worth standing up for, and that is exactly what several civic-minded Southington residents did recently to help save the historic Olney house from the wrecking ball.

Built by Revolutionary War veteran Samuel Andrews, the 213-year-old Federal-style brick house was later the home of renowned 19th Century geography textbook and atlas author Jesse Olney for more than 20 years.

Fern Wildman-Schrier, president of the Southington Historical Society, said the house is part of the Southington Historic Trust, Southington YMCA work together to preserve a piece of the past Center Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Most recently, it was used for apartments.

Its current owner, the Southington YMCA, bought the North Main Street building last year as part of an expansion project. The plan included razing the house to make way for a new parking lot, which did not go over well with many citizens and the local historical society. For several days last summer, four people took turns standing in front of the house after a demolition permit had been issued. Eventually, the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation got involved and gained a court order to temporarily halt demolition plans.

“We don’t see this as a fight to save it from demolition; we see it as an effort to revitalize it,” said Helen Higgins, the Trust’s executive director.

This spring, the YMCA and the Trust reached an agreement that will have them working together to find grants to help pay for $200,000 to $300,000 in renovations. The YMCA also will provide liability insurance for building.

“We respect their mission and what they try to do,” YMCA Director John Myers said of the Trust’s efforts to save the Olney house. “We have our mission as well and need to keep in mind our 9,400 current members as well as future members.”

The agreement, Myers said, “preserves the house and allows us to get on with a real exciting time for the Southington YMCA.” The YMCA expansion plans include a 10,000-square-foot expansion and renovations to the pool and locker rooms.

Southington Historical Society member Liz Kopec, one of the four people who “stood” their ground last summer in front of the Olney house, was delighted to hear of the agreement.

“That’s excellent! I had hoped it was an option,” Kopec said. “I know that the YMCA can find a good use for it.”

After more than 200 years and a civic showdown over history, the house named for a man whose atlases were best-sellers in their time, will still have a place on the Southington map.

“It’s a win-win for everybody,” said the Historical Society’s Wildman-Schrier.

**Making strides: Brookfield promotes pedestrian friendly development**

It will have all the feel of quintessential New England. Four Corners in Brookfield is on target to be the “walk” of the town.

First Selectman Bill Davidson said plans for a new streetscape include sidewalks, lighting, benches and curb cuts. The streetscape will complement the town’s pedestrian-friendly residential and commercial development plans and help to create a “walkable village.”

Davidson said the Four Corners area is going to start to have a different look over the next three years, and within five years it would “look really different.”

“Big things are really happening at Four Corners, but it just hasn’t come out of the ground yet,” he said.

To ensure the village is true to the area’s Colonial roots, the town Zoning Commission is developing regulations to establish a New England theme for the Four Corners.

Supporters have longed for this 175-acre section of town to become more than just a place to gas up or pass through. They envision it as a distinct destination that attracts visitors for dining, shopping, entertainment, culture and the scenic beauty of the Still River.

This spring the town was awarded a $5 million state grant to help fund affordable housing developments in Four Corners. So far, the town has approved two major residential complexes. The south end of the village will be home to 72 apartments and 13 condominium units, while the north end will feature 100 apartments.

There are also plans for a mixed-use residential and commercial complex dubbed “Brookfield Village” and a redesign of a building to replicate a New England-style barn.

Town officials say building the walkable village will be done in phases. The construction of the residential and commercial complex will step off this spring.

“Four Corners is turning itself around from dormant to exciting in a very short period of time,” Davidson said.
Audubon survey will identify hiking, biking options in Orange

Options for outdoor enthusiasts in Orange may become vastly expanded once a survey of a 376-acre natural preserve is completed by the Audubon Society. The Town enlisted the help of the Audubon Society to survey the town-owned tract with the goal of expanding local recreation options.

The Turkey Hill preserve, purchased by the town in 2011 from the Hubbell Corporation, will be surveyed for the variety of species of plants, animals, and other critical flora and fauna that thrive in the area. The survey will also recommend the best places for hiking and biking trails. Some poorly marked hiking trails currently cross the property, which the Conservation Commission wants to see improved.

Conservation Commission member David Krauss said the Audubon Society will assess which areas “can best sustain” biking trails. The survey will take six months, so surveyors can observe how plants and animals exist over several seasons. The New England Mountain Bike Association has expressed interest in developing biking trails and has offered to maintain them for free.

The Turkey Hill preserve is the town’s largest open space site. An old growth core forest is dotted with ledges, ridges, vernal pools, gorges, streams, ponds, shallow waterways and a 100-foot hill that is steep but hike-able. The area is also populated by a wide variety of plant life and wildlife.

The property is open to residents. The town installed a driveway last year and is completing a gravel parking lot. The town bought the 376-acre site in 2011 for $7.1 million. The private Orange Land Trust is paying for the $6,400 survey.

Wallingford legacy rooted in new town garden

“A garden to walk in and immensity to dream in...a few flowers at his feet and above him the stars.” – Victor Hugo

Providing inspiration to countless poets and philosophers, gardens have long been special patches of heaven on earth.

The Town of Wallingford is putting down some very special roots with the help of a local garden club and civic groups. The Robert Wallace Park will be the future home of Wallingford’s “Legacy Gardens,” a living tribute to the many nationalities that settled in the town since its founding.

“We wanted it to be special,” said John Gawlak, parks and recreation director.

The $12,000 project is expected to get underway this fall and when finished, the five-acre grass lot will be transformed into a celebration of cultural diversity, complete with benches and plaques.

The Wallingford Garden Club is helping design the type of plants best suited for the site and Gawlak said the club is “very enthusiastic” about the project. Town officials say civic organizations that have been in existence for at least 35 years can donate a plaque to the garden.

The Hungarian community, which began settling in town in the late 1900s is one of the groups eager to showcase its roots. The Hungarian Community Club is interested in donating one or two plaques to the garden, according to Balazs Somogyi, a Community Club board member.

The beautification project will feature perennials that will bloom spring, summer and fall and will also help breathe new life into the heavily used Wallace Park, considered the gateway to Wallingford because of its proximity to Route 15.

“The park has gotten a little ragged and this is a great opportunity to clean it up,” said Parks and Recreation Commission Chairman David Gelo. “This is something that is needed and something that we can all be proud of.” The park is a popular spot for youth soccer and young families with strollers – a generation with their futures ahead of them. Town officials are hopeful that Legacy Gardens will help bring a beautiful awareness of all those who came before.
A new take on an old bridge makes North Stonington whole again

The destructive spring flooding of 2010 not only washed out a historic town bridge, but it also cut the town in half across Main Street. Now, $2 million and three years later, this rural town of about 5,300 has a new bridge and its main thoroughfare back.

“We’ll finally be able to go back and forth on the old route,” said Town Clerk Norma Holliday.

The double stone arch Town Hall Bridge, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, stood the test of time for an estimated 200 years or so. But it was no match for the rocks, stumps and other debris that came crashing down the swollen Shunock Brook on March 30, 2010. “It’s a beautiful little stream that turns into a monster,” said First Selectman Nicholas Mullane.

And it created a monster of a detour for three years. Motorists who wanted to drive from one end of Main Street to the other had to drive out of the village, travel down Route 2, and then return to the village using the other side of Main Street. Even the annual Memorial Day parade had to be rerouted.

Because of its historic significance, there was more cost and complexity involved. There had to be an archaeological dig. Historical societies on the local, state and federal levels all had to weigh in on the design approval. One of the biggest issues was whether to restore the bridge to its double-arch design or build a single-arch span. In the end, a single, bigger arch proved to have more capacity for high storm waters and cost a little less to build. Mullane said the project came in about $100,000 under budget.

The town commemorated the reopening with a ribbon-cutting ceremony this spring. The town’s oldest citizen, 104-year-old Anna Colt, a longtime figure in the town’s Historical Society, was given ribbon-cutting honors. She definitely liked what she saw. “It looks very much like the original bridge,” she said. “A little more sturdy.”

Stamford playground a bright reminder of young life lost

Jesse McCord Lewis spent his final moments saving lives. When a gunman entered his Sandy Hook Elementary School class on December 14, 2012, Jesse screamed to his classmates to run as the weapon jammed. Six children fled to safety. The bright 6-year-old who loved horses, soccer and yellow toy ducks died along with 25 others that day.

The city of Stamford is honoring the child by building a playground in his memory and the heartfelt gesture is one his mother welcomes and needs. “I would just love to be able on a sad day to drive to Jesse’s playground and watch kids play and find happiness there,” said Scarlett Lewis.

Started by the nonprofit Sandy Ground Project that bears the slogan “Where Angels Play,” the playground is one 26 being built honoring victims of the Sandy Hook tragedy in the tri-state region. Stamford officials found it a fitting way to remember those lost in Newtown.

“I think it is just beautiful that they try to and have wove in each child’s unique personality and each adult’s unique personality into the playgrounds,” Lewis said.

Construction is expected to start in the spring.

For more information: www.thesandygroundproject.org.
True community effort to renovate park

Thomaston’s effort to build an outdoor track and sports complex at a local park has been a true community venture involving the town government, volunteers, residents and local and state companies.

Proposed improvements for Nystrom’s Park include a six-lane track with an eight-lane straightaway circling a regulation-size soccer field. Nystrom’s Park would also see the addition of four tennis courts, a full-sized basketball court, enhancements to its beach area and other upgrades.

The plan got a boost last month when the fundraising team received a check for $21,491 from the insurance company ConnectiCare, raising the insurance company’s total donation to nearly $64,000.

“ConnectiCare has been a committed supporter of the Thomaston Track and Tennis Facility at Nystrom’s Park,” said Thomaston First Selectman Ed Mone.

The total project is estimated to cost $2.4 million and has been completely self-funded so far.

In addition to ConnectiCare, the facility has been supported financially through Connecticut’s Small Town Economic Assistance Program, private foundations and federal money.

An annual Triathlon in town and a local road race have also raised funds for the project. Thomaston Savings Bank has made multiple donations as well.

Donations like those received from ConnectiCare are crucial, Mone said. “Without them this plan would be nothing more than a vision in someone’s mind.”

Mone said many Thomaston residents hope to see construction get underway soon.

“The plan continues to move forward,” he said. “It is our hope that ConnectiCare’s generosity will become contagious and lead others to make considerable contributions as well. Depending on the pace of future fundraising, the project may be built in phases or the entire project could be built together.

Wilton doing its part to build scenic Norwalk River Valley Trail

Step-by-step, the 38-mile Norwalk River Valley Trail, which will run from Norwalk to Danbury when complete, is taking shape. Most recently those steps are marching through Wilton.

One of five towns along the proposed trail, Wilton has begun construction on a $325,000 half-mile demonstration section of the trail, the first step of the town’s eight-mile Wilton Center Loop. The Loop will have an east and west side that will circle around the Wilton Center area. Visitors will be able to hike, bike, walk and even ride horses, officials said. Local schools can also use part of the trail to conduct science lessons.

“This is pretty exciting, this is an important milestone,” First Selectman Bill Brennan said.

Patricia Sesto, Wilton’s Director of Environmental Affairs said private donations and grants will help pay for the first part of the Loop’s east side. She said supporters hope to raise at least $500,000 by year’s end.

“The community members have really been stepping up with some very generous support for us,” Sesto said. “It’s really important to get a demonstration section on the ground not only for Wilton and our own fundraising program, but for the NRVT as a whole.”

In addition to Wilton, the other communities on the trail are Norwalk, Ridgefield, Redding and Danbury. Part of the Wilton section will include a 2,000-foot long, 10-foot-wide boardwalk through a heavily forested area.

Selectman Hal Clark said the trail will travel past corporate offices and make people think they are deep inside a forest and away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. The full trail, when completed, will connect to rail stations, schools and offices and combine green transportation with recreational opportunities.

“They’re suddenly going to feel like they’re in New York City,” Clark said.
Norwich rallies behind “waterfront destination” harbor plan

Local government and business leaders in Norwich – along with fishermen, boaters and just plain lovers of the water – are working to make the city’s waterfront a destination for fishing and recreational boating, with canoeing trails, fishing tournaments, a fishing blog, live fish migration cameras and clean river banks.

From the 1830s throughout the rest of the century, Norwich’s location at the mouth of the Thames River made it a prosperous harbor and a shipping and mill town with a thriving economy and growing population.

Now a coalition of stakeholders are trying to go “back to the future” by investing in the city’s storied waterfront.

With state and local funding sources in short supply, the city’s Harbor Management commission plans to rely on grants, fundraisers and low-cost promotional efforts to boost Norwich Harbor as a waterfront destination.

For starters, the commission garnered a federal Long Island Sound Futures grant to produce laminated canoeing and kayaking river trails maps depicting river conditions, portage spots and features of note along the way. The grant also will pay for a display panel to be placed at the harbor-front Brown Memorial Park showing the canoe and kayak river routes.

The Harbor Commission’s effort began with a volunteer cleanup party at Brown Memorial Park, sponsored by Thayer’s Marine & RV and avid local fisherman Matt Creamer. Volunteers were dispatched to three locations - the harbor, the Greeneville Dam and the Yantic Falls area to pick up litter and clean the riverbanks and surrounding areas.

The Harbor Commission is also planning fundraising activities with the hope of purchasing a harbor camera and to pay for other waterfront cosmetic improvements.

The city is also already on board: a new website already features a new fishing information center that will include waterfront events, fishing blogs and photos from local fishermen describing their experiences and best fishing spots.

In addition, the site may soon have a link to the live camera at the Greeneville Dam fish elevator – one more step along the way toward realizing the town’s vision of the harbor as a community asset, recreational outlet and tourist destination.

Wood from iconic trees to be used in new library

Seven oak trees – century-old icons in downtown Ridgefield that were taken down because they were deemed a safety threat – will be used in the construction of the new library and new theater they would have shaded.

The century-old oaks that once stood tall over Prospect Street may have been chopped down, but they are not leaving the neighborhood. In fact, library officials and the developer of the theater both say the wood will stay right on Prospect Street as part of their new buildings.

Usually the cut wood is transported to the highway department, where it is chipped and reused as mulch, according to First Selectman Rudy Marconi.

However, the oak in this case could be milled into floor planks, or used in some other form of lumber or trim.

“Reusing the wood is a fantastic idea,” said Valerie Jensen, who is building the Prospector Theater. “We are having them milled and we are going to reuse pieces of the trees in the theater.”

Library officials have similar intentions, but have not finalized a plan.

“There is a sentiment in town to use the trees in our construction of the new library,” library Director Chris Nolan said. “There’s no definitive plan, but they will be reused – now we just have to figure out how and where.”

And in a twist of an old cliché, it’s “what comes down, must go up,” as Nolan is also working on plans to plant new trees inside the stone wall fronting the library.

Marconi said the town hopes to plant new trees inside the stone wall, working within the parameters of the necessary safety codes.

“We don’t want to lose the historic streetscape that has been there for so many years,” said Mr. Marconi. “We’d rather have the process of replanting done quickly, but we will have to take our time and make sure that area is safe and stable for tree growth before any plan is set in motion.”
History, scenic beauty on display on Barkhamsted’s ‘Walk Through Time’

When Barkhamsted Historical Society officials tell you to “take a hike,” they mean it literally and in the most pleasant way possible.

A $150,000 Small Town Economic Assistance Program grant has been used over the past few years on a number of Historical Society projects, including upgrades to one of the historic gems of the People’s State Forest – the Squire’s Tavern, a Colonial homestead that traces back to the late 1700s.

Historical Society President Paul Hart said the grant was used for a new heating system, exterior paint and a lightning rod for the Tavern. There are also new interpretive kiosk signs and special ultra-violet protection windows to help preserve exhibits.

To show off the upgrades, the Historical Society held an inaugural “Walk Through Time” hike during the summer. The one-mile free hike covered the history of the Squire’s Tavern and the People’s Forest nature museum and guides set the scene for hikers to imagine what the land may have looked like in pre-Colonial times when Native Americans lived there.

Hart said the hike wasn’t what officials had originally set out to do. They had intended to use part of the grant to create a self-guided trail complete with descriptive signs along the way that would connect the park’s recreation center, the Squire’s Tavern, and nature museum. However, other projects took priority and, ultimately, the grant funds.

But Hart and associates didn’t miss a beat and took another tack.

“We thought, why don’t we do a hike?” Hart said. “We would combine the hike with a talk about what you would see at different points in time.” And the result was the “Walk Through Time,” which combined rich history of the region and natural beauty of the Peoples State Forest, site of the scenic West Branch of the Farmington River.

The public land was made possible by donations from a number of civic organizations in 1924. The Connecticut Forest and Park Association coordinated the donations to purchase the land and donate it to the people of Connecticut. The donations came in from groups such as Daughters of the American Revolution, the Connecticut Federation of Women’s Clubs and more.

Southington volunteers building a home for the arts

A cultural revolution is taking shape in Southington thanks to the efforts of some dedicated volunteers.

Local artist Mary DeCroce and Town Councilor Dawn Miceli have spearheaded a campaign to transform a vacant building that once housed the police and health departments into a cultural arts center. The renovations will include the installation of moveable walls for exhibits, a “black box” theater space for the performing arts, studios and classrooms.

DeCroce, chairwoman of nonprofit Southington Community Cultural Arts, said the few small areas in town where local artists can exhibit now include the town library, a small gallery in Plantsville, and the basement of the historical society.

Fundraising for the $1.2 million renovation project began at the start of the year. By summer the group was halfway to its goal, courtesy of $500,000 state grant.

“The state grant is a huge boost to the organizers’ aggressive fundraising deadline. The Town Council agreed to lease the building to the group for $1 a year for 20 years if 80 percent of the money is raised by July 2014. “It’s exciting beyond words,” DeCroce said of the grant. The group kicked off the fundraising campaign with an event held at the Governor’s Residence in Hartford. Organizers are pursuing several grants and have more fundraisers in the works.

Local businesses helped raise more $10,000 by purchasing unclaimed bicycles donated by police. The bikes were decorated by local artists and displayed in front of the businesses. They are then ridden in the town’s Apple Harvest Festival parade. A furniture store donated a roomful of furniture to be the grand prize in a raffle that DeCroce is hopeful will bring in $100,000. The community response, she said, has been very supportive.
In Brookfield, preserving history is a moving experience

The Town of Brookfield is learning that progress and preservation can go hand-in-hand. In a region rich in Revolutionary War history, municipal officials, historians and developers are working together to strike that perfect balance.

Preservation comes with its challenges, particularly the economics of restoring centuries-old buildings. But towns can meet those challenges by finding ways to incentivize and create programs that foster preservation, said Helen Higgins, executive director for the Connecticut Historic Preservation.

“Town governments might look for ways to stimulate investment, including abating taxes, or giving bonus densities for developers who rehabilitate historic structures,” Higgins said. “Municipalities can create bonuses, and the state has incentives, including tax credits and technical assistance.”

Brookfield’s Four Corners downtown is a case in point. The town is working to attract commercial development while preserving historic charm. Sometimes that means moving history along – literally.

Jacqueline Salame, the town’s historic district commission chairman, is also a historic preservation architect. Her business, Tour De Force Designs, has its office in a 1770s two-story homestead. Salame already moved it once – about 200 yards in 1974 – to save it from the wrecking ball as Route 7 was being extended. Now Salame has plans to move it again. This time it will be the cornerstone of the Four Corners revival. There are plans to turn the homestead into a mixed use of apartments and retail space.

“We have to preserve the best of what we have left,” said Salame, whose home is a 1760s farmhouse, one of 63 historic properties along Route 25. “If we don’t protect our history, we lose our direction for the future. Future generations won’t know where they came from.”

Making strides: Brookfield promotes pedestrian friendly development

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Town officials say building the walkable village will be done in phases. The construction of the residential and commercial complex will step off this spring.

“Four Corners is turning itself around from dormant to exciting in a very short period of time,” Davidson said.
Residents help town blaze new bike trail

When bicycle enthusiasts in New Milford celebrated the opening of a new bike trail that weaves its way through a pristine, wooded town-owned park, they concluded the ceremony by doing what comes naturally – they jumped on their bikes and explored the trail.

The trail will run along a one-mile stretch of the Housatonic River Trail and a grant is helping the Sega Meadows Park trail get new kiosks, benches, and hiking trails. In addition, gravel will be laid on the roadbed of an old maintenance road to create a path for walking and non-motorized biking.

The bike trail is the result of the efforts of the town parks and recreation department, the Boy Scouts, a local recreation association, and many volunteers and bike boosters who helped make the trail a reality.

“It’s wonderful to have the involvement of so many people in a positive project like this,” said Dan Calhoun, director of the town’s parks and recreation department, which oversees Sega Meadows.

The scouts helped out by clearing brush off the old maintenance road, putting up trail signs, and clearing an access area to a pond on the property for a fishing area.

Ivan Shifman, a member of an independent residents’ recreation association said his group picks a project or two every year to work on and support. “We put all of our fundraising activities into this new river trail this year,” he said.

Public works director Mike Zarba said upgrading the maintenance road at Sega Meadows is an exciting step in creating “the bike path I have long envisioned in the town.”

“It’s such a great place to ride your bike, bring your dog for a walk, just enjoy,” said assistant director of parks and recreation Eleanor Covelli, who also said the town is looking at how to make the area “even more accessible and provide amenities and new trails that loop and link.”

Bristol creating new downtown center on former mall site

Bristol officials are reviewing applications submitted by a Long Island developer for the first phase of a plan to revitalize a former mall site in the city center into a pedestrian-friendly, walkable downtown.

The developer – Renaissance Downtowns – is seeking approval for its first-phase site plan, as well as special permits to allow a hotel and to reduce the number of parking spaces required for the project.

Once they get the green light from the city, Renaissance will begin construction this summer on two major buildings, a public piazza, as well as streetscape improvements.

Frank Johnson, chairman of the Bristol Downtown Development Corp., said after the plan is approved by local land-use boards “we might see some real progress.”

The plan includes the construction of a new McDonald’s restaurant across from the post office and the razing of the existing McDonald’s, which is expected to be completed in the spring. It also calls for one four-story building with 104 residential units that include studio and one- and two-bedroom apartments.

The most conspicuous structure is the second mixed-use building in the plan, which would face Main Street and house shops and restaurants on the first floor and residential apartments on the upper stories.

A pedestrian walkway is proposed to run through the middle of the building to a new public piazza that will be surrounded by restaurants with outdoor café seating. On the far side of the piazza, Renaissance plans to build a hotel during a later phase of the development.

Renaissance officials say the first phase streetscape work on Main Street will match what the city has already accomplished. The first phase will also include improvements around the two proposed buildings and piazza.

According to the plan, parking for the new buildings will be in an area across from a local park that is also slated for redevelopment.

Officials estimate the project’s first phase will take between 18 and 24 months to complete.

The agreement between the city and Renaissance lays out a specific timetable for completion of each phase of the project. Unless altered, the entire project is supposed to be completed by May of 2019.

Ultimately, the Renaissance plan could build a total of 22 new buildings and two parking garages.

The city purchased the mall property in 2005 for $5.3 million and razed the buildings on it, including the mall. Two years ago, it chose Renaissance to lead the revitalization effort to bring a pedestrian-friendly downtown environment back to Bristol.
Businesses looking for start-up support have a place to grow in Fairfield

In a collaboration of creativity and opportunity, the Town of Fairfield is working with Fairfield University and a local business to give five entrepreneurs a boost into the business world.

They’ve established the Fairfield University Accelerator and Mentoring Enterprise, a new business incubator, that Mark S. Barnhart, director of Community and Economic Development for the Town of Fairfield, calls a “win-win” for everyone involved.

“We know that business incubation can be an extremely valuable tool for new business development, and that start-up companies play a significant role in creating jobs and spurring innovation,” Barnhart said. “This is a great opportunity to leverage the enormous talent that we have in this region to stimulate new ideas and to drive economic development.”

A panel comprised of representatives of the town, the University and building owner Kleban Properties reviews applicants and selects the businesses that will participate in the fall.

Backed by investors and donors, the incubator has a budget of about $250,000 a year. The goal is to provide the budding businesses access to technology, funding, discounted business services and guidance from the University’s Dolan School of Business, which features an entrepreneurship program.

Chris Huntley, an associate professor at the Dolan School, said the incubator could also be used in the school’s annual competition among students in designing business plans. The students should be well-acquainted with the incubator’s location – it’s above the University’s off-campus book store on Post Road.

“We want to get them early. We want to get smart, creative people there,” Huntley said.

Barnhart said the town recognizes the importance and upside to start-up companies. His department offers micro-entrepreneur grants and he expects that some of the incubator participants will apply for the funds and eventually set up shop in town.

“There’s a tremendous wealth of talent and entrepreneurial people in Connecticut, and we’d love to have them come to Fairfield,” he said.

All signs point to a village center revival in New Milford

The word on the street in New Milford is a good one – revitalization!

New Milford Mayor Pat Murphy and staff have been working with merchants in the village center to help fill vacant storefronts and enhance what shoppers and visitors will experience when they visit the heart of this Litchfield County town.

At 64 square miles, New Milford is the largest town in the state by area and its village center, complete with historic Green, offers the quintessential New England feel. And why not - the roots of commerce here trace back to one of the town’s most famous residents – Declaration of Independence signer and patriot Roger Sherman. Historians say Sherman and his brother opened New Milford’s first store in the mid-1700s.

“I had a meeting with the downtown property owners that brought suggestions and a good conversation about the difference in marketing downtown businesses,” the Mayor said.

Some of the enhancements include sidewalk upgrades on the Green and improvements along Main Street, including new planters and greenery.

To trumpet the improvements and drive more business to the village, the town erected attractive new landscaped signage along Route 7.

“Overall, things are looking up,” Mayor Murphy said.

New Milford Economic Development Director Luigi Fulinello helped the town carve out its own section this year in the State’s “Spring & Summer” tourism campaign. That gave the town exposure in digital and print coverage in the tri-state area.

“We’re definitely seeing some good signs,” Fulinello said.

A number of new businesses are moving into to vacant storefronts this fall and some established businesses in other parts of town, such as The Golden Needle – a specialty yarn craft store – have relocated to the village center. They know that nothing beats a busy street.

“I moved to a larger space on Route 202 five years ago, but soon realized it was a mistake,” said The Golden Needle owner Linda Bookspan. “I’m back for the downtown location with its foot traffic.
Local focus in Ansonia will help put bustle back on Main Street

With a new slogan and a new economic development director, Ansonia is “Charging Forward” on a path that is taking the town straight down Main Street.

New Economic Development Director Peter Kelly has identified the route toward a more vibrant local economy and believes the key component is the residents themselves.

“I’ll do a lot of the heavy lifting, but the community has a stake in this and must have a voice in economic development,” Kelly said during his introduction at a recent forum. “Everybody needs to be at the table. I really want to be a good partner to the community, but I need the community to be part of what I do every step of the way.”

Those steps should lead to Main Street, according to Kelly. He wants residents to think locally and most importantly, to buy locally when it comes to dining, home furnishing, services and more. The local merchants deserve local dollars, he said.

The city is embarking on a comprehensive economic development strategy intended to make this Naugatuck Valley community of about 20,000 into a destination spot and a source of local pride. Its new branding logo, “Ansonia Charging Forward,” reflects that pride and commitment. Officials say the strategic plan could eventually bring more than 70 new businesses over the next five years.

The plan includes developing an inventory of all available city properties and creating a marketing brochure. City officials aim to establish fun and interesting events to draw more people to the downtown. Supporting all of that will be incentives to help existing businesses stay and to attract new merchants.

New London all revved up to host iconic business

Turning a vacant industrial building into a thriving business is the kind of economic development that city officials dream about — and that’s just what’s happening in New London, where the former Coca-Cola bottling plant is being transformed into one of the largest motorcycle dealerships in the Northeast.

Mike Schwartz, owner of the Delaware-based Mike’s Famous Harley-Davidson, said New London officials have been very enthusiastic and accommodating about the project. He said there have been no major hurdles to clear or red tape to cut through on the way to approval.

Schwartz did consider a few other sites, but the bottling plant, a 55,000-square-foot warehouse, was the right spot at the right time — and it definitely had the unique character that appealed to Schwartz. He purchased the Bank Street building for about $550,000 and intends to keep much of its distinctive style. The 1938 building has classic tongue-and-groove ceilings, warehouse-style windows and steel trusses. Many of these features are expected to be incorporated into the Harley showroom.

“The building is the perfect backdrop for the products we sell,” Schwartz said. “The attractiveness of the building was the grittiness of the warehouse. It’s an iconic building, an iconic brand.”

Bank Street is part of the Whaling City’s dominant commercial zoning district. It permits the widest variety of commercial activity than any other commercial zone and dominates many of the major traffic routes through the city.

Schwartz said he expects the business to double its workforce to 40 employees when the move from Groton is complete.

“Coca-Cola and Harley-Davidson are two of the most iconic American brands in the world,” Schwartz said. “New London is a great American city.”
Simsbury sets out to set itself apart

Simsbury First Selectman Mary Glassman posed the question at a recent Board of Selectman meeting and the answer provided the basis for the town’s strategic marketing plan.

“What can we point to, that sets Simsbury apart?” Glassman asked.

Marketing Simsbury to attract new business and retain existing ones is a three-pronged focus – tourism, high-tech manufacturing and specialty retail. Those are some of the key recommendations included in the first phase of the town’s two-phase marketing plan.

The plan, developed by a consulting firm, also highlighted the importance of forging strong regional relations and promoting the Tariffville section as a unique hub for artisans and as a recreational center. Already a popular destination for whitewater paddlers on the Farmington River, Tariffville’s distinct early 19th Century mill village characteristics – including its old mill housing and street layout – has earned its Historic District a listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The consultant also found that Simsbury has some eye-popping statistics about the composition of its citizenry. More than 60 percent of residents 25 or older have at least a bachelor’s degree and the median household income is $114,000. The consultant, Peter Fairweather, described the demographics as “astonishing.”

“Companies like this because they need to attract a workforce,” he said. “Part of the process is to get everybody talking about what makes Simsbury special.”

In addition to the highly educated residents, the town also can tout the innovative companies that have set down roots in Simsbury and its proximity to Bradley International Airport.

Glassman called the report a “blueprint for our future.”

“This is really valuable information for any business in town and for the town’s future,” Glassman said.
Early childhood literacy gets boost in Norwalk

With the help of a private grant, Norwalk officials are creating a system of early childhood education for children from birth to 8 years old that city leaders are calling a game changer for early literacy in the city.

Board of Education members say it will give the city the “gold standard” in early literacy programs because the city will soon have a consolidated system of services and data management for the city’s youngest residents.

The first year of the grant will help expand several city early childhood education programs including Child First, which helps at-risk families build parent-child relationships, and the parent support program Parents as Teachers.

The Parents as Teachers program goes into homes and helps families with literacy and language development because, officials say, “some parents have not had a role model to know what they can do and how they can best help their kids.”

School grants administrator Italia Negroni said the grant will help children get up to speed right from the start, so they are ready to “read to learn” by the time they’re in third grade.

“It’s taking the children from birth and helping parents with development, then applying the best instruction there is,” she said.

“We were approved for one year of funding for this proposal, with four years of future proposals in the works, assuming we accomplish all the results we set out to perform,” Negroni said.

Early Childhood Instructional Specialist Pam Augustine-Jefferson said the grant has already helped bolster early childhood personnel by enabling the school system to hire a coach to help with community programs.

“This position will allow us to make sure teachers have training and support around literacy instruction and will be able to meet the individual needs of kids,” she said.

Local education officials were grateful for the funding and say will help close the achievement gap.

“We are lucky to have the best of the best in terms of the model that we’re using,” said board of education member Sue Haynie.

“I’d like to thank the Grossman Family Foundation for putting Norwalk on a track that puts us above what a lot of other urban districts are doing to address the really deep needs of literacy and reading at our pre-K and 3 levels, doing it from the ground up,” she said.

Corporate & philanthropic donors back Hartford education reforms

It may take a village to raise a child, but a big checkbook doesn’t hurt either. According to a recent Hartford school district report, Hartford-area corporations, community groups and local agencies contributed nearly $15 million to support the school system’s reform efforts during the 2011-12 year.

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving gave $3 million to fund a range of initiatives, including $1.09 million to Capital Workforce Partners, which conducts a summer youth employment and learning program, and $150,000 to Hartford Performs to support the arts in city schools.

Travelers, the largest corporate donor, invested more than $1.1 million, including $350,000 for the Principal Leadership Academy – a program that funds salaries for three resident principals who are trained throughout the year, said Kelvin Roldan, Hartford schools’ chief institutional advancement officer.

A 2012 survey of community providers reported that 51 organizations are offering 326 programs in 47 city schools, many of them for elementary-age children. For example, Milner School received about $700,000 worth of programming, largely from its lead agency, Catholic Charities, which offers after-school activities, case management and parent engagement.

Another major contributor, the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, distributed $2 million to benefit the schools, the report stated. Donations included $100,000 to the Opportunity High alternative education program.

And the forecast for the future is bright: Roldan said he expects grants and donations in the current 2012-13 year to surpass $15 million because of two recent gifts.

In December 2012, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a three-year, $5 million grant managed by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to expand the city schools’ relationship with the Achievement First and Jumoke Academy charter school networks.

In addition, the city launched the Hartford Promise college scholarship fund after receiving $4.1 million from six donors, including Travelers, Hartford Hospital and the nonprofit Say Yes to Education. The program, which begins with the Class of 2016, will award graduating high school seniors up to $20,000 over four years to help pay for college.

Superintendent Christina Kishimoto said the corporate and philanthropic gifts are “fundamental” to the city’s education reform work. “I will continue to work with our partners to target investments to accelerate student achievement,” Kishimoto said.
Canterbury turns to the classroom for park repairs

The wear and tear at Canterbury’s Veteran’s Memorial Park was beginning to show. Erosion had steepened an already sloping terrain some 10 feet deeper toward a pond. To fix it, officials feared it could be a big job and a big bite out of the town’s budget.

Fortunately, the town turned to a brigade of budding masons this past spring. They were eager to learn and make a difference. It was a solution that worked for everyone and was anything but a budget-buster. The town’s Memorial Committee Chairman Tom Lord reached out to nearby H.H. Ellis Technical High School in Danielson and asked if masonry students would be able to build a wall to save the memorial. The answer was a resounding “yes.”

“We’re an educational program. The boys are learning, so it’s never going to be perfect. But under my supervision, I’m going to make sure they do it to the best of their ability,” said Ellis Tech Department Chair Mike Daigle.

Daigle said the class chooses projects based on their educational value.

Daigle said the Canterbury job was a senior class project. The 15 seniors laid more than 75 tons of stone in nine days. They built a stone wall and sank granite posts, linking them with black chain. Local businesses donated stone and other materials. When it was finished, the town’s cost was only $720.

Other projects for the group have included building a new stone wall at a Boy Scout camp in Ashford. Daigle’s next class can expect to roll their sleeves up, too.

“We’re going to do some really neat stuff next year,” he said.

Manchester schools evoke federal law in cyber bullying case

The federal Title IX law does more than just level the playing field in athletics for girls and boys sports. Manchester school administrators have cited the federal law in launching an investigation into alleged cyber bullying at Manchester High School.

Protections under Title IX include provisions stating that no person may be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

School administrators say four high school boys were suspended for 10 days for allegedly bullying female students through degrading posts on social media. A seventh-grader in Florida jumped to her death after enduring a year of bullying by two adolescent girls who are now facing criminal charges.

Manchester High School Principal Matt Geary says online bullying cases are on the increase nationwide and that “one cannot turn on the news without reading about the deep and sometimes tragic impact cyber-bullying has on young people.”

“I want you to know that administrators moved quickly to investigate this issue,” Geary wrote to the school community. “There will be stiff consequences, up to recommended expulsion.”

Administrators say cyber bullying emboldens the perpetrators because they can hide behind anonymous comments in social media. It also makes it difficult for school officials to identify the offenders.

Statewide, some 1,250 incidents of school bullying have been reported over the last seven years. Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven reported the most incidents. In 2011, the state enacted an anti-bullying law that helps schools expedite their responses, expands staff training and makes all school employee mandated reporters.
Berlin builds energy efficient neighborhoods one home at a time

Berlin officials have a bright idea for helping residents lower their light bills – home energy audits.

Performed by a certified and insured service company, home energy audits evaluate household energy usage and show residents where they can make changes to save fuel and money.

“The service company will come to your home and see how you can save on electricity, oil, gas and the other utilities you use in your home,” said Public Works Director Art Simonian.

The audits can also provide hundreds of dollars in energy efficient products, such as compact fluorescent bulbs, water-saving devices, weather-stripping and rebates for insulation, HVAC and other energy efficient appliances.

“All these things help residents save money,” Simonian said. “In these days of high energy use and high energy costs, those savings can add up quite substantially.”

Connecticut Light & Power told Berlin officials that households could save an average of $200 a year with an energy audit.

The town is spreading the word about the benefits of home energy audits and enlisted the help of a Berlin High School program, Berlin Upbeat, to distribute flyers. In addition, for every Berlin home that receives an energy audit in 2013, a $25 donation will be made to Berlin Upbeat by Victory Energy Solutions and EcoSmart Home Services, partners of the energy audit service company Home Energy Solutions.

Norwalk finds greener way to finance energy efficiencies

It’s a color combination that Norwalk officials heartily endorse – green and green.

“We think green. We think green for the environment, but when it comes to the business owners and the residents, they like to think green about saving some money,” Mayor Richard Moccia said. “Our utility costs are high. It does discourage businesses from coming in sometimes.”

City officials were anything but discouraged when the state enacted a sweeping energy bill that included incentives for businesses to become more energy efficient. In fact, Norwalk was the first municipality to take advantage of the Commercial & Industrial Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE) program.

Mayor Moccia said municipal leadership strongly supported the legislation.

The program allows property owners to pay for efficient upgrades with little or no upfront costs. They repay the loan over time on their property bill. C-PACE is administered by the state’s Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority (CEFIA), which state officials tout as the nation’s first green energy bank. CEFIA is part of the Energize Connecticut initiative, which helps ratepayers lower costs and use clean energy.

Mayor Moccia and other city officials recently celebrated the first C-PACE participant in the state during an event on Westport Avenue. Once a residential area, the site is now home to a shopping plaza that includes a theater, a fitness club, and other businesses.

Through C-PACE, the plaza owners financed a $285,000 lighting upgrade and expect to save about $18,000 a year in electricity costs. There are also plans to install a 100-kilowatt solar project. It is estimated that the solar project will achieve a 30 to 40 percent reduction in energy costs.

Following Norwalk’s lead, 17 other towns and cities have authorized C-PACE financing. According to state officials, about a dozen more businesses and a dozen more municipalities will be participating over the next few months.

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Ansonia recently became the first Naugatuck valley town to commit to the new Clean Energy Communities program, a nationally recognized initiative that offers incentives to municipalities for achieving energy reduction milestones and embracing clean energy.

As part of a statewide effort to reduce energy consumption and increase the use of renewable energy, Ansonia Mayor James Della Volpe recently signed the Clean Energy Communities pledge which signaled Ansonia’s official commitment to improve its energy efficiency and promote the use of renewable energy sources.

“Ansonia strives to become a greener community, not just within our city buildings, but we also encourage our local businesses and residents to join in this effort,” said Mayor Della Volpe. “I personally challenge Derby Mayor Staffieri and Shelton Mayor Lauretti to try and surpass Ansonia, both in reducing energy use and increasing support for clean, renewable energy.”

Under the Clean Energy Communities program, Ansonia has pledged to reduce its energy consumption by 20 percent by 2018. Along the way, the town’s success in saving energy and supporting renewable energy will make it eligible to earn clean energy systems and grants that can be used toward energy efficiency projects.

As it meets certain milestones, the town will be eligible for grants ranging from $5,000 to $15,000 and clean energy systems equivalent to 1 kilowatt (kW) of solar PV.

Mayor Della Volpe said he is kicking off the Clean Energy Communities program by getting a Home Energy Solutions assessment at his home in order to help raise energy efficiency awareness among Ansonia residents and start the ball rolling toward achieving Ansonia’s first energy reduction milestone.

Provided by the Connecticut Energy Efficiency Fund, the Home Energy Solutions assessment is a home energy audit that helps homeowners save money on their monthly energy bills by pinpointing where homes are losing energy and identifying the improvements that will conserve the most energy and save the most money.
New Haven cleans harbor site for new development

The long-awaited redevelopment of a strategic but formerly polluted property in New Haven may be drawing near. The city is hoping to attract a maritime-oriented business to a spacious, environmentally-scrubbed lot at a location where the Quinnipiac and Mill rivers converge in a meeting of marine beauty before running out to the harbor.

The cleanup of the long-empty and long-polluted property is nearing completion and local economic development officials are hoping to attract canoe and kayak makers, propeller repair shops, bait-and-tackle stores or other marine trades to the site.

Economic development officer Helen Rosenberg has been spearheading an effort for years to breathe new life into abandoned factories along that stretch of town and her efforts got a boost when New Haven recently purchased the site in the city’s Mill River district from the Amerada Hess Corporation.

Hess has been working on remediating and capping the property for years, a job that will be completed in a few months. Rosenberg said she will then “pump up the volume” to market the property to a job-creating and preferably maritime-focused business interested in 8 acres with a river view.

Rosenberg said city has been considering the purchase of the property for more than a decade, but the site required remediation for serious contamination. After several development proposals fell through, the city decided to purchase and market the parcel itself.

Hess is approaching the finish line on the clean-up project which will conclude with an overall capping of topsoil and grass seed. The remediation also included transporting the most contaminated soil off the premises and re-grading the area with new soil, according to Rosenberg.

Rosenberg said she pursued the marine idea some years back, during earlier stages of the cleanup.

“We sent letters out to boat builders in New England, but we weren’t ready for them,” she said. “We didn’t own the land at that point and it wasn’t cleaned up.

“Now we are ready.”

New Milford preservation efforts are connecting the dots

The town of New Milford has partnered with the State to purchase the development rights for 80 acres of farmland known as the Harris Hill Farm. Mayor Patricia Murphy noted the strategic benefit of purchasing the parcel, which abuts Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust property as well as acreage of the Davenport Farm acquired by the town in 2011.

“The agreement is similar to the one we had regarding the purchase of Davenport Farm,” said Mayor Patricia Murphy. “The town partnered with the State in buying the development rights, but the ownership of the 92 acres is still with the family.”

The Harris family has owned the farm, which occupies a total of 150 acres, since 1958. George Harris died last year but said a few years ago that “it’s a very pretty piece of property” and that “the one significant thing it needs is to be continually farmed, not given over to brush.”

Harris’ daughter Susan and her husband Ed Bailey have been responsible for farm operations 1981.

While the State and town own the development rights to the 80 acres they do not own the property and the use of the land is permanently restricted to agricultural applications. If the farm ever ceases to be a working farm, the land would be open space and could be used for passive recreation. There is also a conservation restriction on the property.

As part of the agreement, agricultural structures may be built or improved in the four-acre farmstead area that surrounds the residence as long as notice is given to the State and approval is received.

Within that area, a one-acre “residential envelope” that contains the residence would not be restricted to agricultural use. The language does require however that the home “remain tied to the farm.”

The mayor also pointed out that if the property is sold, “it could only be conveyed as one farm.”

The town’s commitment to preserving farmland is supported in its plan of conservation and development.

“It’s forward thinking,” the mayor said. “We always have to feed ourselves.”

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ENVIRONMENT

Single-stream recycling turns trash into cash in Cheshire

Cheshire is finding out that cleaner streets and more cash in town coffers are just two of the benefits of the town’s new recycling program.

New closed-top and secure recycling bins were distributed to local households in November 2012. In the first two months of the program, the town diverted into recycling 40 tons of material that would have been previously disposed of as garbage. At $68 a ton, the town saved nearly $3,000 in disposal fees, according to Town Manager Michael Milone.

“In the short run, everything is positive,” Milone said. “Going forward, the more we recycle, the greater the savings for the town.”

Bill Bonaminio, president of Cheshire’s Beautification Committee, said he has seen the difference in the streets already.

“Everything is in the container, not blowing around in the street, and the raccoons can’t get to it and drag cans and things all over,” Bonaminio said. “We’re just a wasteful society and this is a lot more efficient. It saves time. It saves money.”

The new recycling program replaced the bin system that had been in place for years. The bin system required residents to sort the recycling materials and then place the bins at the curb for pickup.

Another problem was that animals got into the bins and dragged materials out, and wind scattered newspapers and other light materials around the streets and lawns.

In addition to being a cleaner system, the new program allows more items to be recycled. Now residents can put anything from aluminum foil and food trays to plastic utensils to all sorts of cardboard in the containers.

Milone said he expects to see major growth in the recycling program as people get more and more used to the idea of recycling.

“People are realizing there is no end to the amount of stuff you can put in recycling,” Milone said. “I just wish we had done it sooner.

Branford preserves pristine 22-acre patch near river

Branford is preserving as open space a “little piece of Vermont in a dense part of town” — 22-acres of open green fields and pastoral marshlands, tucked away at the end of a local road and close to the Farm River and a popular hiking area known as Beacon Hill.

When he decided to sell the property, the owner’s options included offering it for development. Instead, after persistent efforts by the local Land Trust, the green space will be enjoyed by the public as well as the wildlife the area attracts — for generations to come.

“It’s a place for picnics, a place for bird-watching,” said Branford Land Trust board member Bill Horne, who noted that hikers along the 28-mile Branford Trail atop Beacon Hill and riders of the Shoreline Trolley Museum railway will be guaranteed pristine views.

In addition, the parcel’s location within the state — right at the southern edge of the Metacomet Ridge — is an important section of flyway for migratory birds. During the fall, hundreds of hawks use the north-south traprock ridge for its rising air currents, created when the sun strikes stone, projecting heat.

The parcel also includes five acres of farmland soils which a private farmer now mows for hay, leaving them walkable for the public.

The protected land could have landed in the hands of developers, had the Land Trust given up its pursuit after initial talks with the owner.

During the late 1990s, the property was being “actively marketed,” but at a price beyond the Land Trust’s means. The owner, however, was willing to work with town open-space enthusiasts.

The parcel’s location inside the Farm River estuary made it a high priority for conservation, and Trust officials didn’t give up.

Between town, state, and land trust funding, an agreement was reached said First Selectman Anthony DaRos.

Now, an important and strategic piece of property has been preserved.

“Salt marshes are disappearing and we wanted to preserve a natural area, an important habitat of shore birds and fish that run up the Farm River,” Parks and Open Space Authority Chairman Ainsley Highman said.
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 woodsy 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 in 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.

Land trust and developer partner to preserve prime river-front land

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.
Environment Sewer lines a lifeline for economic development in rural towns

Tying into utilities is among the keys for economic development and several small rural towns surrounding Norwich are getting closer to that goal.

Preston, Sprague, Franklin, Lisbon, Ledyard and Bozrah plan to share use of Norwich’s city sewage treatment plant and officials working on the negotiations are very pleased with the progress.

“This is moving much faster than I anticipated it would, and in a very cooperative way,” Norwich Public Utilities (NPU) General Manager John Bilda said.

The agreement would allow the towns to extend sewer lines and build pumping stations to tie into the Norwich sewer system. The expansion is expected to generate the revenues to help NPU pay for a $100 million sewage plant upgrade.

The small towns may be able to qualify for up to $5 million in federal rural development grants to help with their end of the project. While Norwich would not be eligible for a rural grant, there are other funding sources that offer grants in support of regional projects.

Meriden and Wallingford get the green light to make fleets cleaner and greener

Municipal vehicles in Meriden and Wallingford are on the road to being cleaner and greener. Thanks to a state grant this summer from the Connecticut Clean Fuel Program, both communities will be making their fleets more eco-friendly.

Towns and cities are eligible to participate in the program, which reimburses the grant recipients for the cost difference between buying a conventional vehicle and buying an alternative/clean fuel vehicle. The grant can also be used to fund the full cost of a diesel retrofit that removes certain emissions the exhaust. Recipients have until 2014 to either buy a new vehicle or retrofit an older one.

Wallingford was awarded a $27,300 grant. Town officials say it will be used to buy a new vehicle for the Water Department.

For Meriden, the $31,000 grant is another step forward in using alternative fuels. Since 2007, the city has used the state’s Clean Fuel Vehicle grant program to buy several hybrid-electric light-duty vehicles for its Health, Planning and Police Departments and Fire Marshal. The city opened its first Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) station for fleet vehicles in 2010. That was one of several initiatives of the Connecticut Clean Cities Future Fuels Project (CCFF). A private/public partnership, the CCCFF helped fund projects around the state through a $13.2 million federal stimulus grant.

Meriden City Manager Lawrence Kendzior has described the endeavors as a “home run” for the city by combining environmental benefits with fuel cost savings.

Meriden and Wallingford were among the 14 entities to receive the clean fuel grants. In all, the state Department of Transportation awarded nearly $1 million in the latest round of grants for the program.

“The Department is thrilled that so many municipalities and public agencies are looking towards replacing a portion of their fleet or retrofitting existing fleet in order to improve air quality and dependency on petroleum based fuels,” state DOT Commissioner James Redeker said in a statement. “This program has the added benefit in that it may also provide savings in lower fuel and vehicle maintenance costs.”
In Killingly, you can see the forest for the trees. In fact, every second Sunday of the month from spring through October, members of the Killingly Conservation Commission are busy showing off the forests they have worked so hard to preserve.

Led by Conservation Commission members, these guided hikes through town parks and protected lands invite the public to “Get Outside, Get Healthy – Enjoy Killingly.” Conservation Commission Chairwoman Donna Brownell says she has made it her mission to get more folks into the great outdoors.

“My mother always used to tell me to get outside and play,” Brownell said. “My goal is to get people away from their televisions and computers.”

Like many of the communities in the Quiet Corner – where 78 percent of the land is forest and farmland – Killingly has a lot of outdoors to share. One of the most popular draws – the Chase Reservoir and Watershed Conservation Area – is a 365-acre nature preserve. It features an 80-acre lake that once served as a water source for the borough of Danielson. The land is now protected open space that was secured for the public through a land trust nearly 10 years ago.

Conservation Commission Member Richard Fedor credits organizations such as the Eastern Connecticut Forest Landowners Association (ECFLA) with supporting communities in protecting open space. Fedor, who is also a member of the ECFLA, is a steward for 80 acres of town property, which abuts his own 25 acres. Fedor and other landowners took part in a recent ECFLA educational workshop held at the Goodwin Conservation Center in Hampton.

The ECFLA provides information on forest management, invasive species, wildlife and other topics of interest to municipal officials as well as private landowners. The group’s goal is to foster responsible stewardship of the land.

A community committed to preserving open space offers a quality of life that many families are seeking. It’s not all about building housing developments, Fedor says.

“Even though some people think that growing the tax base enhances a town’s quality of life, it doesn’t,” he said. “There have been studies done that show residential housing is a detriment to a town’s infrastructure. It costs money for schools, roads, police and town services.”

By contrast, providing passive recreation through forest management, solid stewardship and land preservation is a walk in the park. And in Killingly, that happens every second Sunday of the month.
Berlin embraces ag heritage in long-range plan

To farm or not to farm? The answer in Berlin is “absolutely.” With a nod to its agricultural heritage, Berlin has underscored the importance and need for farm friendly policies in its 2013 Plan of Conservation and Development.

“The reality is we need to do as much as we can for our agriculture community because I’d rather see property left open as farming and agriculture rather than a 50-lot subdivision,” Mayor Adam Salina said. “There certainly are wonderful benefits.”

The development plan – three years in the making – recognizes agriculture as economic development. Recommendations include using broad agriculture definitions and zoning to enhance opportunities for agri-businesses.

The agriculture focus in the town plan was good news for local farmers, including Diane and David Jorsey, who operate the DeMaria Family Farm, one of the larger farms in town. Their operation underscores the diversity of agriculture in Connecticut. Over the years, the farm has produced fruits, vegetables, and maple syrup, offered pick-your-own sales, and raised poultry and livestock. It also has been selling Christmas trees since the 1950s.

But the couple told town officials that while they love operating the popular farm, they both have to work full-time outside jobs to support their family.

“It hasn’t been possible to drive an income that would sustain us. So, consequently, we are very interested in the future of agriculture in this town,” Diane Jorsey said.

Deputy Mayor Rachel Rochette, a member of the development plan’s advisory committee, said agriculture was one of the main focuses of the committee. She said the committee hired a consultant to examine the different types of agriculture and that the plan recommends that the town study ways that it can be more flexible in assisting the agriculture sector.

“We need to make sure we can do all that we can do to help maintain agriculture in town so family businesses can be passed down,” Rochette said. “It’s important for Berlin to continue that rich history that we had in the past.”

Website touts rain gardens to help reduce runoff

Connecticut is home to thousands of acres of parking lots, driveways, roofs, streets, and other impervious surfaces – and rainwater flowing off all that asphalt and concrete causes water quality problems for local streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes.

Now a new website, www.reducerunoff.org, is helping to educate municipal officials, residents, and businesses on solutions to the problem.

“The website teaches people how to reduce runoff by creating rainwater collection sites, installing rain barrels, or by using paving materials that can absorb water,” said Kierran Broatch, who created the website for two environmental groups, Save the Sound and the Connecticut Fund for the Environment.

The new website is partnering with the Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials program (NEMO), a nonprofit organization at the University of Connecticut Extension Center that provides information, education, and assistance to local land use agencies to enable growth while protecting natural resources and community character.

Rainwater collection sites like rain gardens offer a decorative solution to runoff. Using native plants, rain gardens look like normal landscaping in front of a building but they allow water to filter into the ground naturally.

“Very simply, a rain garden is a depression to collect and infiltrate water,” said Michael Dietz, CT NEMO program director.

Dietz cites land use decisions as big contributors to the runoff problem. The practice of requiring stores to build parking for the expected maximum number of shoppers has created a landscape dominated by parking lots.

Dietz says these “seas of asphalt” allow polluted runoff to be fed into unsuspecting rivers and streams.”

A number of Connecticut towns are already taking measures to address the problem.

Meriden has revised its development regulations to require rain gardens, when appropriate, in new, larger developments, said City Planner Dominick Caruso. The city has been utilizing rain gardens in certain projects for the past five years. “Rain gardens are aesthetically pleasing and much better for the environment,” Caruso said.

In 2007, the City of Bridgeport installed a series of rain gardens along upper Main Street that collects runoff from the street and sidewalks, allowing it to soak harmlessly into the soil.

Other measures include choosing permeable driveways and patios that help to recharge groundwater levels, improve soil moisture, and maintain vernal pools in the spring, an important habitat of amphibians.

“One of the areas that we’re focusing on is the parking lots of the big box stores in the Quinnipiac River watershed, which can be helped by creating ‘bioretention’ areas,” Broatch said. “Basically, these are large rain gardens.”

Towns in the Quinnipiac River watershed include Southington, Meriden, Wallingford, and Cheshire.
Norwich park will be bigger and better with open space gift

Drawn by a variety of recreational activities, families who visit Norwich’s popular Mohegan Park will soon have more places to explore.

The city is adding nearly 70 acres to the sprawling forested park, thanks to a Franklin couple who are donating land near one of the park’s borders. The 30 acres of donated land abuts a tract of some 40 acres of city-owned open space that the city had never annexed to the park.

One of the gems of the Rose of New England, the 400-acre park offers fishing, picnicking, swimming in Spaulding Pond, and scenic trails throughout. The activities fit everyone’s budget – as there is no admission fee. The park is also a popular venue for road races and music festivals and the city’s famous Rose Garden, which has hosted countless weddings.

A special resolution gives the City Council the authority to add land to Mohegan Park. Deed restrictions contain either open space restrictions or conservation easements. Peter Davis, director of planning and development, said the new parcels would likely be used for more hiking, jogging or cross-country ski trails, especially in the more rugged sections of the land.

“The policy in the Plan of Conservation and Development is to expand Mohegan Park whenever possible,” Davis said. City officials are always looking to enhance the park experience. The thousands of swimmers who flock to Spaulding Pond and its beaches have a new changing facility. The city replaced a 40-year-old cinder block building with a secure pre-fabricated structure in time for the 2012 season.

“The Park is really the crown jewel for the city,” Mayor Peter Nystrom said. “Hundreds of people utilize it every weekend. It doesn’t matter what your income is or where you live. This is a park for the public.”

Ridgefield plugs in to new technology -- adds all-electric auto to fleet

What do you get when you combine three environmentally based grants and parking revenue? In Ridgefield, it adds up to the newest and greenest member of the town fleet – a Nissan Leaf.

The all-electric car will be the main vehicle for the Parking Authority enforcement officer when he makes his daily rounds of town lots.

The town is paying for the vehicle with a $14,200 state grant tied to the purchase of alternative-use vehicles, a $9,800 grant for participating in the state’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor Energy Challenge and a $4,000 grant from the Ridgefield Action Committee for the Environment. The town will also use $2,000 in parking revenues. The Leaf, a five-door compact hatchback, costs just under $30,000.

First Selectman Rudy Marconi said the car is a deal for the town because the grants pay for the purchase and there’s little maintenance.

“There is no cost,” Marconi said. “There’s no gas. There are no oil changes.”

But it does need access to power. The town has one charging station at the Ridgefield Playhouse and plans to install a second at a prominent place in town. Marconi said anyone with an electric vehicle is welcome to use the new station once it’s in place.

“I’d like our town to be green, to be a leader,” Marconi said. While its main purpose will be for parking enforcement, Marconi said other town employees could also use it. However, with a range of about 75 miles, it wouldn’t be the first choice to make a trip to Hartford.

Marconi and others had to win over a few skeptics to purchase the Leaf. Some suggested the money would be better used if the town installed energy-efficient lighting or retrofitted some of the existing fleet.

But ultimately, Ridgefield decided to “go for the green.”
New Dam safety laws bring new requirements for owners

The Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection through its Dam Safety Section regulates the operation and maintenance of all dams in the State that would endanger life or property through failure. Important recent and pending changes in the state’s dam safety laws will impact many dam owners and so are critical to understand. Proper management of dams is critical to public health and safety and dam failures can have devastating effects on downstream residents and infrastructure.

All high and significant hazard dams in the state of Connecticut are required to have an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). Guidelines for EOPs were published by DEEP in 2012, creating a uniform approach for their development. As dam owners develop EOPs using the new guidance, DEEP anticipates that the quality of EOPs will improve, which will ultimately help reduce vulnerabilities to dam failures. Numerous local hazard mitigation plans have discussed the general lack of dam EOPs filed in the communities, and have included strategies to improve the development and filing of EOPs.

In addition to the EOP Guidelines, other important dam safety program changes are underway. House Bill 6441 passed in June 2013 describes new requirements related to registration, maintenance, and EOPs (which will be called EAPs (Emergency Action Plans) moving forward. This bill requires owners of certain unregistered dams to register them with DEEP by October 1, 2015. In many cases it shifts regularly scheduled inspection and reporting requirements from DEEP to the owners of dams. The bill also makes owners responsible for supervising and inspecting construction work and establishes new reporting requirements for owners when the work is completed.

Effective October 1, 2013, the owner of any high or significant hazard dam must develop and implement an EAP. The EAP must be updated every two years, and copies must be filed with DEEP and the chief executive officer of any municipality that would potentially be affected in the event of an emergency such as dam failure. New regulations that DEEP will develop will establish the requirements for such EAPs, including (1) criteria and standards for inundation studies and inundation zone mapping; (2) procedures for monitoring the dam or structure during periods of heavy rainfall and runoff, including personnel assignments and features of the dam to be inspected at given intervals during such periods; and (3) a formal notification system to alert appropriate local officials who are responsible for the warning and evacuation of residents in the inundation zone in the event of an emergency.

Milone & MacBroom, Inc. has prepared EAPs for many dams in Connecticut and has written hundreds of descriptions of dam hazards and dam failure inundation areas. The firm also has extensive experience in dam repair, removal, and modification, including repair projects that include coordination with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and other federal, state, and local agencies. The firm recently prepared EAPs for Lake Hitchcock Dam in Wolcott and Mixville Pond Dam in Cheshire; is currently working on dam failure analysis and inundation mapping of five structures in Norwich; and recently completed design of dam repairs in Manchester. If you would like more information regarding the new requirements for dams related to registration, maintenance, and EAPs please contact Nicolle Burnham, Principal, at (203) 271-1773, nicolleb@miloneandmacbroom.com, or David Murphy, Associate, at (203) 271-1773, davem@miloneandmacbroom.com.
Stonington’s newest open space is haven for hikers and birders

Nestled in the northwest corner of Stonington, the Hoffman Evergreen Preserve boasts a lush habitat for birds and an array of colorful blazed trails for the avid hiker. With the recent addition of 53 acres, the 198-acre preserve represents the largest tract of land acquired by the Avalonia Land Conservancy.

It also brings Stonington one step closer toward its long-range goal of permanently dedicating 30 percent of its land in open space by 2020.

The town’s goal is spelled out in its 2006 Open Space Plan. At that time, town officials said it was perceived that 30 percent of land in town was open space, including public recreation areas, reservoirs and associated watershed, privately and publicly owned preserves, undeveloped properties and working farms. But research led to the reality that Stonington had only nine to 10 percent land in permanently protected status — a far cry from the desired 30 percent.

Enter the land trust.

A year after the open space plan was drafted, the Stonington Land Trust was created by a group of citizens who wanted to help the town’s conservation efforts. The organization’s work is complemented by a number of regional land trusts, including Avalonia, that help Stonington work toward its open space goals.

The recently expanded Hoffman Evergreen Preserve is a perfect example of that collaboration. Located off Route 201, the property is forested with hemlock, pine, tamarack, spruce and mixed hardwood trees.

“One thing I like about this property is that you can get away from the highway sounds and just hear the nature sounds,” said Avalonia member and volunteer Rick Newton.

Volunteers will help construct a network of trails on the new 53 acres to connect with the existing red-, blue- and yellow-blazed pathways. For birdwatchers, there is plenty to see: thrushes, vireos, the Acadia flycatcher and pileated woodpeckers. The additional land will enhance the bird habitat, said Beth Sullivan, one of Stonington’s town directors for Avalonia.

“The pileated woodpecker is a big bird that needs big woods,” she said.

Wilton land acquisition is a scenic sensation

One thing is certain about the latest development in Wilton — it’s got eye appeal with not a single house in the mix. In fact, subdivisions are a no-no on the 39-acre property that the town has long coveted as one of its top targets for preservation.

Through approximately $2.2 million in bonding and a $300,000 donation from the Wilton Land Conservation Trust (WLCT), the town is purchasing the development rights to the picturesque parcel from local residents, the Keiser family.

“The goal of conserving the last large piece of undeveloped Wilton property has been pursued for many years by the Town of Wilton and the Wilton Land Conservation Trust,” said First Selectman Bill Brennan.

The land made its way onto a list back in 1996 when the town identified parcels that had the most preservation appeal.

The acreage includes fields that abut land already owned by WLCT. The Norwalk River, popular with fishermen, flows through the west side of the property. Officials say the parcel is important because of its scenic beauty, ecological system and proximity to Cannondale Village, the popular restored pre-Civil War New England village that offers boutiques, restaurants and antique shops.

“The Keiser property is by some measure the loveliest,” said Pat Sesto, Wilton’s director of environmental affairs. “There are other parcels in town that are bigger, but this really hits all the boxes.”

Permitted uses include non-tillable crops on the property, such as hay and blueberry bushes. Fences that block the views are not permitted. The Keiser family will retain ownership of the land but are selling the development rights for generations to visit and enjoy.

“They can drive by, they can see it, they can enjoy it,” said Peter Keiser.
Low vacancy rate on storefronts pushes Hamden to go even lower

The economic rallying cry, “open for business”, really hits home in Hamden. A recent 2012 fourth quarter market report pegs the commercial vacancy rate as one of the lowest in the New Haven region.

“This tells us that businesses come to, and stay in Hamden, because of our many business incentives, our proactive business climate, and because of the desirability of our community,” said Anthony Sacchetti, Chairman of the Economic Development Commission.

Hamden currently ranks the lowest for both office and industrial vacancy rates at 7.99 percent – down from 9.03 percent in 2010. The total regional industrial vacancy rate is 12.17 percent.

“This is a good thing to boast about, but also motivates us to continue to define our goals to help businesses grow in new areas of town and to help them become more profitable,” said Dale Kroop, director of Economic and Community Development. “Because of the lack of vacancy, we should value every property as an opportunity for growth.”

As part of those efforts to attract new business and development and help existing ones expand, the town launched a series of free seminars to new and established entrepreneurs. The sessions covered everything from identifying business opportunities in Hamden, to managing and financing your small business.

The town’s Economic and Community Development department partnered with the Business Assistance Center (BAC) for the educational sessions. The BAC traditionally offers workshops in a variety of business disciplines and has effective partnerships with Quinnipiac University, the Hamden Chamber of Commerce and a number of service providers.

“Everyone knows that small businesses create the most jobs and support one another through local commerce,” Kroop said. “One of our goals for 2013 is to continue to work hard on business retention by offering learning opportunities through programs and markets.”

Killingly reaping rewards of local farmers’ experience

For those citizens who aspire to grow their own food, work their own land and experience a slice of life that harkens back to Connecticut’s agricultural roots, the town of Killingly is sowing the seeds of possibility.

The town’s Agriculture Commission has sponsored a series of farm workshops ranging from beekeeping to hog husbandry. Taught by members of the commission who are established farmers and veteran gardeners, the workshops are designed to encourage Killingly citizens to get involved in agriculture.

Ultimately, the Agriculture Commission is trying to rework the town’s agricultural ordinances in hopes of making them more farm-friendly.

“We’re trying to change the areas in town where you can do a little more,” Commission member Jim Stevens said. He and fellow commissioners are working with members of the zoning commission to discuss possible changes.

Stevens and his wife, Tina, who is also an Agriculture Commission member, are among the local farmers who have conducted the teaching workshops. They have a hog operation on 17 acres in town and are helping to teach aspiring pig farmers with a basic introduction to raising pigs.

Commissioner member Frank Anastasio is another local farmer who has a wealth of experience to share. He’s compiled a list of “dos and don’ts” as a result of growing vegetables for more than 30 years.

“We made tons of mistakes over the years,” Anastasio told a recent workshop filled with rookie gardeners, “but the biggest was never having our soil tested. It’s the same mistake many gardeners make. They believe, like I used to, that nutrients are already in the soil.”

Other workshops included beekeeping, goat farming and even a tomato festival. Town officials say the workshops fill up fast. Stevens, the pig farmer, is not surprised by the avid interest.

“People want to raise or grow their own food,” Stevens said. “They want to know where the food they eat comes from. They are concerned about what these animals are fed and what goes into their own mouths.”
Meriden explores best practices for health insurance

The Meriden school board is examining the best practices of nearby towns on health insurance to gather ideas to help taxpayers save more of their money. With Meriden’s insurance rates about to go up nearly 13 percent, the board invited officials from nearby Cheshire and Southington to hear how their self-funded health insurance plans work.

Meriden has seen an increase in health insurance claims while at the same time, plan membership has decreased. Faced with paying $1.45 million more for health insurance in the 2013-14 school year, the Meriden school system formed a special health insurance committee to discuss the increasing costs.

During his meeting with the committee, Cheshire School Superintendent Greg Florio explained that his town has one health insurance account for both town and education employees.

“It’s broken down by group, but it’s all one account,” Florio said.

Florio said money from the fund can offset money in the board’s operating budget if the school system is having a good year. He said the town of Cheshire also uses money from the insurance fund to offset certain costs. However, he cautioned that this only happens when there is a need, because you cannot predict when a large health insurance claim might be made.

Florio told the committee that Cheshire expects to pay about 4 percent more this year in health insurance costs.

Health Committee Chairman Steven O’Donnell said hearing from Florio and earlier this year from Southington School Superintendent Joseph V. Erardi, Jr. will allow the committee to share what they learned with the Meriden City Council. Erardi had explained that Southington has a special health insurance committee composed of members from the town and school board.

“This is just another municipality’s way of doing things,” O’Donnell said. “They have a good relationship with their town council. There’s equality. We can form a committee and present options so we can all be aware of what goes on.”

Salem branding itself with fresh faces, new vision

New branding, a more vibrant brochure and piggybacking on regional tourism are just a few of the ideas being considered by Salem as ways to attract visitors and new businesses such as a grocery store, a go-kart or miniature golf facility. The goal is to preserve the town’s quaint rural character while promoting its potential for economic development and attracting new residents.

The small rural town of about 4,000 is looking to make some key connections – both inside and outside of town – to take that next step. Town officials are recruiting the younger generation into civic duty to help with bringing in new blood and new vision to the town’s revitalization efforts.

“We don’t want Salem to look like a ghost town. We want it to look vibrant and inviting,” said Nicole Gadbois, one of the younger members on the Economic Development Commission. Gadbois is designing a new town brochure showcasing Salem as a great place to start a business or start a family.

She said the older brochure features photographs of isolated, empty buildings. The new brochure will be updated with well-known Salem structures such as the Congregational Church, built in 1840, and the iconic Town Hall.

The town is working with the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut to explore ways to market Salem to visitors, including using popular Salem businesses — such as Salem Prime Meats and Salem Valley Ice Cream Company — as part of a branding campaign. Salem EDC Chairman Frank Sroka said they are also looking into the possibility of advertising town events on an electronic billboard and asking for resident feedback through focus groups.

Harnessing the broad appeal of the Internet is also another tool EDC officials have discussed, specifically listing the town on the trip-planning website, Mystic.org.

Commission members are hoping to draw tourists from Mystic once they’ve seen the shoreline attractions with the appeal, “after the coast, come visit the country.”

Town officials know that Salem “country” has plenty to offer. The summer farmer’s markets, and businesses such as Burnett’s Country Gardens and Salem Valley Farms already have a strong regional draw. History buffs can explore the Salem Historic District, the Abel H. Fish House, Ebenezer Tiffany House and Woodbridge Farm – all listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sroka points out that with the right connections much of the marketing could be done with minimal investment. The town could partner with Mystic.org for about $50 a year and the Chamber of Commerce for just under $300 a year.

While Sroka says that “is not a make-or-break investment,” it sounds like hitting on a new Salem brand will pay big dividends.
Griswold Youth Center moves into bigger, brighter space

Griswold youngsters had a room with a view, but it was cramped and drafty. Now town officials are planning a move that will pay off with lower heating bills, a lot more elbow room, and renewed interest in its youth programs.

The Griswold Youth Center currently runs its recreation programs and other support services — such as homework assistance, counseling, media club and other activities — out of a 2,360-square foot brick building outside the Slater Mill Mall. First Selectman Philip Anthony and others have described the current location as “the dungeon.” There is no insulation and its 12-foot ceilings and large windows made it pricey to heat.

That is all about to change this summer, Anthony said. Youth Services will be moving into the Slater Mill Mall, an emporium that houses several local businesses and a popular flea market. Plans are for the program to occupy the 5,000-square-foot space formerly used by a children’s science center. The new, larger space within Slater Mill Mall “offers more, in comfort, cleanliness, and security,” Anthony said.

Town officials say the rent for both spaces are deeply discounted and while the new larger location requires a higher monthly rent, the town will more than make up for it in energy savings and other benefits. The new space is insulated and has shorter ceilings.

“If you put it together, the difference in rent price is about $1,000 for the year, but we’ll probably save $1,500 to $2,000 in heat,” said Family Services Director Ryan Aubin.

Aubin said the new center also will benefit from increased foot traffic from the mall that already brings in many families on a regular basis.

“The youth center isn’t just a drop-in center. It’s the home of the parks and recreation department. When parents come in with their kids, it’s a friendlier environment. If you’ve been to ‘the dungeon,’ and that’s a good word for it, we have issues with leaks, and we have 12-foot ceilings with no insulation,” Aubin said.

The move is planned for mid-summer when the lease on the “dungeon” ends. The new location is already “kid-friendly,” Aubin explained. The former tenants painted it in bright purples and yellows – colors “only kids could love.”

National Coast Guard Museum to drop anchor in New London

All the parts are falling into place for a renaissance on the riverfront for New London. The “Whaling City” is adding one more jewel to its rich maritime history – the National Coast Guard Museum.

The 50,000-square-foot museum will be built between the city’s Union Station and a new high-speed ferry terminal. Mayor Daryl Justin Finizio said to make it all happen the city will donate a piece of waterfront property and the state will pledge $20 million.

Part of the project includes a pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks connecting Union Station with the museum. Since it will be nestled in the middle of New London’s transportation hub, Mayor Finizio estimates the museum could draw more than 1 million visitors a year. Ferry service brings in more than 500,000 riders to the region annually and an additional 200,000 to 550,000 more are expected to pass through, he said.

The Coast Guard brass agrees the museum will be in the right place at the right time.

“As people are going to northern New England on the train, and as they go by and look out, they’ll say, ‘Hey, National Coast Guard Museum, it might be neat to come back here and visit that place.’ There will be thousands of people that will be going by that museum every day,” said Coast Guard Commandant Robert J. Papp, Jr.

During the recent event to announce the location, Mayor Finizio presented the commandant with a rare 13-star U.S. flag.

“We have our first exhibit,” Finizio said. “Now, we only need the building to put it in.”

The project is expected to be completed in two to five years.
New ordinance gives Groton another tool in banishing blight

Clean up or pay up. That sums up a new ordinance aimed at battling blight in the Town of Groton.

Property owners risk daily fines of $10 to $100 for neglecting the upkeep of their buildings and lawns, particularly vacant properties which can lie untouched for a while.

“It’s not fair for the rest of the community to have to be subjected to this kind of visual eyesore,” Town Manager Mark Oefinger said.

The blight ordinance is more than just a town beautification initiative – it addresses the health and safety of the public. Under the ordinance, blight is defined as properties considered fire hazards or in dilapidated condition and those that pose a “serious or immediate threat to the health, safety and welfare of the community.”

Town officials say they will be targeting buildings with broken or boarded up windows, overgrown lawns taller than 2 feet and those littered with trash. They’ll also have an eye out for rodent infestations.

In the past, the town could order an owner to board up vacant buildings and demolish unsafe structures. But those properties could just then languish. Town officials say adding the blight ordinance and the fines that accompany it could get results a little quicker.

The owner will get an initial notice and be given some time to clean up his or her property. Failure to comply will result in a civil fine of $10 to $100 a day. The town can turn the matter over to the courts to collect the fine and mandate that the property be cleaned. Owners still not in compliance would eventually have a lien slapped on their property.

“The key to all of this is constant follow-up, and being fair and being reasonable, but being firm,” Oefinger said. “Because there are people out there who will tell you everything and then do nothing.”

From colors to compost – leaves are the ultimate renewable resource in North Haven

It’s called Fall for a reason.

The New England autumn foliage display, a spectacular burst of natural beauty, can be a less-than-spectacular chore when the leaves...finally...fall. However, the Town of North Haven has found a way to not only clean up after Mother Nature but to turn those never-ending leaf piles into a renewable resource for residents at no charge.

The Public Works Department composes the leaves it hauls away during its Fall curbside pickup and offers an unlimited free supply to residents. Selectman Michael J. Freda said this is the first year for the program and from start to finish, the composting is an in-house process and a clear savings for taxpayers.

“Having the entire process completed in-house by Public Works, from collection to re-distribution, allows the Town to provide the materials to its residents without a fee and to save the taxpayers previously incurred contractual costs totaling $71,000.” Freda said.

The free compost is for residents only. Commercial landscapers are excluded. The compost is available at the town’s Elm Street recycling center on a first-come-first-served basis. Piled outside the recycling center gate, the compost is available 24 hours a day and residents can take as much as they need.

Public Works Director Lynn Sadowsky said the Department collects about 7,000 cubic yards of leaves a year. To produce compost, Public Works employees introduce moisture and air into the leaf piles and let nature and time take over. The result is a material rich in natural nutrients that North Haven residents can haul home by the truckload for their gardens, flowerbeds, ornamentals plantings and, of course, trees – the same trees that no doubt will give back to the program year after year after year.
Keeping a pension promise – Hamden looking at long-term plan

Pensions are promises and the Town of Hamden is looking at several options in order to keep its promise to some 500 retirees. But Mayor Scott Jackson doesn’t want any quick fixes.

“What I want is a plan that will outlive me,” Jackson said.

What the Mayor and other town officials know for sure is that doing nothing will solve...nothing. The pension fund is underfunded by $350 million and contains only 14 percent of what is needed.

A town-hired actuary has presented several scenarios of the best and worst options for repairing the fund:

- Do nothing and the plan becomes insolvent within five years
- Reduce benefits only and the fund will become insolvent in five years
- Add cash via a pension obligation bond (POB) and the plan runs out of money in 15 years
- Reduce benefits and float a POB, the fund will become insolvent in 15-20 years

Former municipal employees say the problem with the fund dates back to the 1970s and since then workers have made concessions a number of times.

“The retirees that put in 20, 30, 40 years to the town of Hamden should feel comfortable that they’re going to get the check once a month,” said retired Police Chief Robert Nolan.

Town of officials were advised that long-term solvency is achievable and can be done without dramatic and sustained increases in contributions or severe reduction in benefits. The most optimal course of action recommended is a combination of actions:

- Issue a POB for an immediate injection of cash
- Maintain funding discipline
- Increase town contributions
- Reduce benefits

Town officials, the public, and retirees may not see eye to eye on all things but agree that this is an issue that needs to be solved much sooner than later.

“The time has come to act,” Jackson said. “One way or another, the Town of Hamden is getting out of this.”

Ledyard’s perseverance pays off in tussle over property tax collection at casino

Some eight years and $900,000 in legal fees later, the Town of Ledyard got the answer it had been hoping to hear.

A federal appeals court sided with the town in its case to collect property taxes from non-tribal businesses that lease slot machines to the Mashantucket Pequot-owned Foxwoods Casino.

“This case was just the tip of the iceberg, and our tax revenues would have taken a huge hit if we had not persevered throughout this eight-year legal battle to achieve this victory,” said Ledyard Mayor John Rodolico.

The issue began in 2005, when a New Jersey-based slot machine company refused to pay the town personal property taxes on slot machines it leased to the tribe. The company contended that paying taxes would interfere with the town’s sovereignty and in 2012 was backed up by a ruling from a federal judge in Bridgeport. In that case, the judge cited Indian Trader Statutes, the Indian Gaming and Regulatory Act, and a U.S. Supreme Court case that weighed federal, tribal and state interests.

But this summer the federal appeals found that the lower court had erred and overturned the 2012 decision, paving the way for the town to finally gain access to those taxes.

“With this decision, the Town of Ledyard will be able to collect taxes that are critically important to providing government services, including those that result from being a host community for the Foxwoods casino,” Rodolico said.

Town Council Chairwoman Linda Davis called it a “very complex case.” She said it was critical to the town going forward that the federal appeals court addressed all the major issues in its ruling.

“There will be no future uncertainty that we can collect these taxes,” she said.
Bethel is tweaking its proposed new blight ordinance after residents suggested changes at a public hearing. First Selectman Matt Knickerbocker said the goal is to give the town the legal authority to address properties that represent a health or safety concern for the community.

Knickerbocker said the town’s proposal is not as tough as those in some other towns, but he understands residents’ fears that the language would give the town too much authority over minor aspects of a property.

Town officials have been working on the language of an ordinance for about two years.

“We have been looking at ordinances from other towns and also looked at research from the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities,” he said. “We have backed away from some of the language of tougher ordinances. It’s not a real tough ordinance. It is primarily meant to deal with issues of public safety.”

New Milford and Danbury have blight ordinances, and Ridgefield has been considering the drafting of one. In New Milford, a dilapidated barn on Route 7 and another on Route 67 were torn down under that town’s blight act.

Bethel’s proposal would require that property owners be approached and given time to correct problems before penalties kicked in.

The proposal provides penalties for continuous violations and blight conditions would include a structure or parcel of land that poses a serious threat to the safety, health and general welfare of the community, properties documented as attracting illegal activity, and properties that constitute fire hazards.

Missing, damaged or boarded windows or doors, collapsing or missing walls and other signs of disrepair would be covered. Debris such as parts of automobiles, unused indoor furniture, appliances and garbage in public view might also constitute a violation.
Brooklyn background checks may start personnel decisions

In an age when nearly every component of government now incorporates some kind of public safety function into its procedures, Brooklyn is doing that in its hiring process.

Town officials are considering a plan to conduct background checks for all employees – from Recreation Department workers to heavy equipment operators.

Several residents of the small rural northeast town petitioned the board this past summer requesting that there be background checks for all Recreation Department employees who work with children. That idea was solidly supported by town Recreation Director Bucky Lohbusch. He pointed to neighboring towns that conduct similar background checks.

Supporters have asked, why stop at only one town department? Background checks should be a good idea for all and at an estimated $10 a check, the cost is relatively small, they say.

Selectman Bob Kelleher says the town may also consider a drug testing policy as well. He said that Highway Department workers currently undergo drug testing as part of the requirements for commercial drivers’ licenses.

“If you’re going to do a background check for records, then a drug test should also be appropriate,” Kelleher said.

In researching vendors, the town has settled on two potential firms to conduct the checks and is considering using both. The town also is developing a policy for the background checks to ensure they are done appropriately. Among the questions that have arisen as the town moves forward is could or should the town do background checks on current employees.

“There may be some people who are grandfathered in,” Selectman Drew Dionne said.

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Wethersfield will dispense some zoning guidance on medical marijuana

The state’s legalization of medical marijuana is prompting many municipalities to rethink, review and rewrite their zoning regulations in the event that someone may want to locate a dispensary within their borders.

That’s what Wethersfield is addressing now.

Peter Gillespie, town planner and economic development director, had such an inquiry earlier this year when a potential applicant expressed interest in the town. Gillespie brought the question before the Planning and Zoning Commission.

“Commission members want some form of regulation to provide guidance so if someone is to approach the town, they know what our zoning philosophy would be in regard to those uses,” Gillespie said.

Under the new state law, patients currently receiving medical treatment for a debilitating medical condition listed in the law may qualify for a registration certificate to acquire medical marijuana from a dispensary. The patient must be a Connecticut resident and at least 18 years old.

The process to license a dispensary is a long one. The applicant must obtain a permit from the state Department of Consumer Protection. The state is granting no more than 10 dispensary licenses in the first wave of applications this year.

“I don’t think there’s any urgency right now in terms of timing,” Gillespie said. “The first wave of applications the state will receive I don’t think will impact Wethersfield, but we want to make sure we have things lined up for the next wave.”

Assistant town planner Denise Bradley compiled a list of potential sites for dispensaries, including locations that sit at least 1,000 to 1,500 feet from schools. The planning office researched regulations from surrounding towns and even out-of-state communities. Officials expect to have a draft of the new zoning regulations ready by year’s end.

And the first potential applicant? He withdrew his proposal when he realized he would have to wait for the town to finalize any new rules.

“He did indicate when the dust settles and our regulations are in place he may be back,” Gillespie said. “But at this point he was going to move on to new pastures.”
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.

Putnam targets, tackles problem of back taxes

Putnam is getting ready to begin foreclosure proceedings against 28 local property owners in an effort to recover hundreds of thousands of dollars in long-standing back taxes.

Certified letters were sent in November 2012 to 28 property owners who each owe at least $5,000 in back taxes or who are more than three years in arrears, Revenue Collector Melissa Alden said. The targeted properties are a mixed bag that includes vacant parcels, several commercial/industrial and multi-family properties, as well as two single-family properties.

“We have roughly $390,000 in back taxes owed to the town,” Alden said. “The November mailing was directed to people we previously tried to contact more than a year ago, and again six months later, with a request to contact our office.”

Those mailings provided delinquent taxpayers with information on amounts owed, payment deadlines, and requests to settle the outstanding taxes. All together, the 28 properties owe more than $316,000, $71,000 of which is due to the Water Pollution Control Authority.

Other properties, including single-family homes, account for the remainder of the $390,000 owed. Town Administrator Doug Cutler said the town is working with the local community action agency “Access” to aid those taxpayers — mainly single-family home owners — who may be having trouble clearing their debts.

Cutler said moving to foreclose on the other properties is a fairness issue and was partially prompted by recent water and sewer rate increases.

“It’s a matter of people not paying their bills, which isn’t fair to the people that are,” Cutler said. “It forces those taxpayers who are doing the right thing to bear an unfair burden.”

Alden said her office is prepared to discuss payment plans with individuals who owe back taxes or who are far behind in their sewer and water payments.
Ansonia is offering a new program to encourage facade improvements for downtown storefronts, continuing a decade-long effort to restore and refurbish its historic downtown.

Like many former mill and manufacturing towns in New England, Ansonia has a proud historic district, dotted with period homes of architectural and historical significance. Its downtown district – still located in the original industrial village along the Naugatuck River – has had its ups and downs as first floods and then malls took their toll on customers and merchants.

In 2002, city officials and residents began a revitalization of the downtown area. Today, the downtown area of the “Copper City” is still the industrial village from its manufacturing heyday, but it now houses several antique stores, a wine bar, a coffee shop, a delicatessen, and other businesses.

Alderman John Marini drew up the new loan program for storefront rehabilitation, with input from business owners and the city’s economic development commission.

The program will allow the city to offer businesses 2 percent interest loans in amounts up to $2,000 to rehabilitate building facades and make storefront improvements.

Applicants will be required to meet certain guidelines and loans are for exterior improvements only. Loan funds may not be used for interior renovations or outdoor signage that could be removed if the business leaves the location.

The guidelines also call for conformity among Main Street business facades, Marini said.

Ansonia and the rest of the Lower Naugatuck Valley towns share the honor of having been selected as an “All-America City.”

Colchester using performance data to measure success

For the past six months, the board of finance in Colchester has been analyzing measurement data collected by a variety of town departments to see how their services and programs are being used by residents and businesses. Local departments the board has already reviewed include senior services, youth services, public works, and parks and recreation.

Each department head has presented data to the board and provided an explanation of how the data was collected. The presentations have also included a tour of department facilities.

The kind of data the town has been collecting includes a host of statistics, like the numbers of visitors to the senior center and the number of users of the local library.

“A couple of years ago there was no measurement system,” First Selectman Gregg Schuster said. “It was something I felt was very important, to start tracking performance measures and measures of activity.” The data, Schuster said, often points him in a direction for additional examination.

The finance board is using a similar measurement-based approach in the town’s pursuit of a project to improve energy efficiency at town facilities. Called performance contracting, the project involves identifying where improvements can be made and how much savings those changes would produce.

Over time, the energy improvements would be paid for with the savings achieved by using less energy. The savings from the improvements would be guaranteed by the energy services company and if the savings did not materialize, the company would pay the town the difference between the estimated savings and the actual cost.
HEALTH

Enfield drop-box program keeps old meds out of wrong hands

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.

Newtown hires trauma expert to help reach all corners of the community

In response to the unfathomable event, Newtown has added the expertise of a respected authority in trauma to help the town continue to move forward in the wake of the Sandy Hook shootings.

Dr. Jill L. Barron, a Yale-trained psychiatrist who helped treat New York firefighters after the Sept. 11, 2011 terrorist attack, is serving as the town’s trauma mental health adviser.

“The need for a mental health consultant with expertise in trauma is of paramount importance to us, and we are confident that Dr. Barron will serve us well in this regard,” First Selectman Patricia Llodra said. “Every member of our community and beyond has been impacted in some way by this horrendous event, and we believe it’s important to provide those closest to the tragedy the opportunity for professional assistance.”

Newtown’s Health Director Donna Culbert echoed the need for additional therapy. She said her department has been working with a lot of mental health providers, but they needed additional expertise.

“Let’s say we’re looking at the first responder community,” Dr. Barron said, “It’s basically meeting with the leaders, saying, what are you guys doing? How are you doing? and answering some key questions, such as ‘What’s been done? Who’s done it? How are things going right now?’”

Newtown Health Director Donna Culbert said Dr. Barron will be working closely with her department.

“We’ve been working with a lot of mental health providers. But I really needed expertise to help me work through that process,” Culbert said. “We’ve experienced something that no one else has. Dr. Barron has worked with most of the providers in town. ... I’m relieved that I have someone that’s so very capable working with me.”
Litchfield mapping out plan to combat drugs in schools

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2007-2008, Connecticut ranked as one of the top 10 states for dependence on illicit drugs among young adults. In the survey, 8.23 percent of Connecticut residents reported using illicit drugs “in the past month”. The national average was 8.02 percent.

The issue is one that has parents, educators, town officials and lawmakers working together and they all turned out recently at a community forum for an open discussion on the best ways to combat drugs in schools.

First Selectman Leo Paul was among the first to volunteer to form a committee of community members to develop a strategic plan. The committee also includes at least one student, parents, David Pavlik, President of the Litchfield-Morris Rotary Club and Brent Hawkins, who leads the Litchfield Prevention Council.

Part of the plan includes working more closely with regional coalitions such as the Housatonic Valley Council which will allow the town to leverage more resources.

“Part of what our organization is about is helping collaborate with other communities,” said Allison Fulton, a representative from the Housatonic Valley Council.

She told the forum that gathering student data is essential and recommended that the town provide students with the Council’s 168-question exam. It is a voluntary exam and parents can review it in advance, she said.

Litchfield Resident State Trooper James Holm suggested the town explore using a drug-sniffing dog. Several school districts in the region use dogs and Holms said he would like to have the dogs in the schools.

State Representative Craig Miner, who attended the community forum, supports the town’s proactive approach and said he is hopeful that everyone involved has a sense of urgency for the sake of the children.

Newtown helps support group connect with new location

Newtown First Selectman Pat Llodra played a matchmaker of sorts and the result is a new home for an organization that provides support to parents who are struggling with their child’s substance abuse.

The Newtown Parents Connection has applied for a $500,000 state economic development grant to renovate a duplex on the Fairfield Hill campus. Llodra knew the grant was available and was very familiar with the good works of the decade-old organization.

Parent Connection “has been a mainstay organization for a long time and has developed a sustainable model,” Llodra said. “They are a bridge for parents to access help and resources for their youngsters with addiction issues.”

The area of the property where the Parents Connection plans to settle had been designated an appropriate setting for social services agencies and professional office space. Llodra thought the Parents Connection would be an optimal tenant and approached the group’s organizers to gauge their interest.

Their answer was a resounding yes!

“We’re ready to move in tomorrow,” said Dorrie Carolan, who along with Donna DeLuca, operate the Parents Connection.

Both know first-hand the damage drug use can inflict on a family. Carolan lost a son in 1999 to an overdose. DeLuca’s son struggled for a decade with a heroin addiction and is now sober.

The mothers coordinate weekly support groups and put on workshops where parents can gather with others who know similar heartbreak and pain. The goal of each meeting is to help families reach their drug-addicted children.

The Parents Connection has formally applied for the state grant and earmarked about $200,000 in donations for the project. Meanwhile, the Fairfield Hills Authority has agreed to lease the property to the Connection for $1 a year for 99 years. Llodra said the facility could be ready for occupancy this spring after all the approvals go through.

Carolan and DeLuca are eager to grow the organization and take it to the next level.

“We want to provide what we didn’t have,” DeLuca said.
New London serving up fun and food to teach healthy eating

“Eat your vegetables” - the three words that most children dread – have never been more fun in New London. The FoodCorps is spicing up school cafeterias.

The New York City-based nonprofit FoodCorps is part of the AmeriCorps service network. Overseen in the state by the University of Connecticut Extension Program, the outreach program that aims to mix fun with healthy eating is off to a good start in the Whaling City.

“I love kids and I love teaching them about the importance of nutrition and instilling healthy habits,” said FoodCorps teacher Sarah Doherty, who is assigned to the New London schools.

Doherty literally wrapped herself in her work to tout the benefits of apples during a recent visit to Winthrop Magnet Elementary School. She donned a giant red foam apple costume for a schoolwide “Apple Day” and won over some young fans.

“I’m hoping this will spark their interest in why I’m doing this and it will snowball after that,” Doherty explained.

Her costume, her enthusiasm and the apples were a hit.

“I tried everything,” said 8-year-old Fabian Villate, who polished off some applesauce, cider and baked apple chips.

A food science graduate from the University of Massachusetts, Doherty worked on an organic farm before joining the FoodCorps. The assignment, which runs through July, covers living expenses and an educational award at the end to help pay off student loans or continue her education.

“This is a great opportunity,” Doherty said. “I like to sit and talk with the kids at lunch and ask them why they didn’t take their fruits and vegetables, and I tell them why they’re important, see what they like and don’t like,” she said.

FoodCorps workers, such as Doherty, have been assigned to 10 mostly urban school districts. This marks the first year for New London schools. Her plans include starting an after-school cooking club, organizing vegetable gardens at each school and introducing more locally grown produce into school lunches.

Program organizers say students and their teachers can benefit from the FoodCorps.

“It’s teaching kids about healthy food and where it comes from,” said Dana Stevens, a member of the UConn extension center who oversees the program. “We want to educate teachers about how to use gardens as an educational tool, and give kids hands-on nutrition education, teach them about fresh fruits and vegetables and how to prepare them, and build relationships with local farms.”
Rejuvenated housing plan moving forward in Danbury

Timing is everything. In 2007 when Danbury was poised to redevelop the site of the former Danbury mall and a nearby abandoned industrial site into more and much-needed downtown housing, the Great Recession was unfolding.

The project may have lain fallow over the years, but the interest in bringing a vibrant new residential area to the Hat City never waned. Now, Mayor Mark Boughton says the project has new life, new investors and is back on track.

“It is very important to the city that this project happens, and I’m very excited it’s moving forward,” said Boughton. “This will represent an investment of tens of millions of dollars into the downtown that will have a huge economic spin off for Main Street.”

The property owner told city officials this summer that a national developer expressed interest in the project. Boughton said the developer wants to build 367 high-end luxury apartments with “lots of amenities.” He added that last fall, a group of private equity investors who are financing the $70 million project toured the site with local officials.

The city is hopeful the new housing will attract more young professionals with disposable income to the downtown, a key factor in Danbury’s revitalization hopes. Officials expect that as more people move downtown, more services and amenities will emerge along with more jobs.

Dubbed “Kennedy Place,” the 10-acre site is bordered by Main and Rose streets and Kennedy Park. The site is short walk to the Metro-North rail station and bus depots and it fits into the planning for a transit-oriented development district.

Gratitude underscores New Britain’s outreach to veterans

New Britain officials are repaying a debt of gratitude to those who have defended our country and now are in need of support.

A vacant city-owned building on Arch Street is being converted into transitional housing for homeless veterans. Another initiative will help veterans receive career training through local businesses.

“We as a country owe it to our veterans to meet their needs after they stood up to defend us,” said Mayor Timothy O’Brien.

The city is working with the non-profit group, Veterans Inc., to provide housing and training. The group is using a $1.2 million grant to renovate the building into housing units. The groundbreaking is expected this spring and veterans could begin moving in by September 2014. Veterans can stay up to two years in the transitional housing.

Christopher Montes, director of the city’s community services department, said a $125,000 grant will be used to train veterans at local businesses.

“If there are veterans that need work and are willing to be trained, there are local businesses that will train them,” Montes said. “They will get paid to be trained.”

Veterans Inc. provides housing for veterans throughout New England and maintains about 275 housing units. Organizers plan a marketing campaign to reach veterans in the New Britain area as it gets nearer to the occupancy date.

The city has also agreed to allow Veterans Inc. to take ownership of a vacant lot next to the housing site. Officials say the lot could be used for parking or a resource center or it could be sold.

New Britain officials had originally offered a nearby vacant factory building as the housing site. Mayor O’Brien says the new contract with the non-profit allows the city to put the factory building back up for sale “to revitalize Arch Street as a center of commerce and civic life.”

Now that is what’s known as a “two-fer!”
Mixed-use, mixed-income – a recipe for affordable housing

The Baby Boom generation is downsizing but doesn’t want to pick up roots entirely. The younger generations are entering the workforce already saddled with high education debt and can’t afford to move into the homes the Boomers leave behind. Different generations with similar desires – affordable housing in their hometowns.

Affordable housing, however, is not abundant in most Connecticut communities. In fact, the large majority of housing stock in 133 municipalities is single-family. More and more communities across the state are looking for solutions for their affordable housing needs – and new help is now available.

The state is awarding nearly $200,000 in grants to help municipalities pay for predevelopment costs in establishing incentive housing zones. Municipal officials will be able to study ways of creating more high-density, walkable – and affordable – housing close to transit.

The latest round of the HomeCT grants from the state Department of Economic and Community Development were awarded to Ridgefield, Brookfield, Stonington, North Stonington, Fairfield, Milford, Haddam, Durham, Burlington, and Canton.

Grant awards for most municipalities were approximately $20,000. Stonington First Selectman Edward Haberek the town will use its grant for site selection and design standards.

Incentive housing zones allow for residential or mixed-use development that sets aside at least 20 percent of the units for households earning 80 percent or less of the area median income for a minimum of 30 years. A unit is considered affordable if the rent is no more than 30 percent of a household’s yearly income.

“Our state’s ability to attract young workers, families and businesses that provide jobs and increased revenue is dependent on the availability of various types of housing opportunities,” Governor Dannel P. Malloy said when the grants were announced this summer. “Incentive housing zones are an important tool that communities can use to promote high-quality workforce housing, revitalize vacant or underutilized properties, increase pedestrian activity, support businesses, and make better use of existing public infrastructure.”

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Marine patrols rely on cooperation, education to keep waterways safe

The sounds of summer wouldn’t be complete without the buzz of a few thousand outboards. Getting out on the water is one cool way to beat the heat in Connecticut and this past summer was no exception. Thankfully, municipalities with waterfronts – either shoreline or lakes and rivers – can rely on a “boatload” of help in keeping people safe.

“Unlike the road cop, we’re out there for safety – to prevent that accident, that drowning,” said Fairfield Police Officer Jim Wiltsie, a member of the department’s marine unit.

Marine officers’ jurisdiction extends to all state waters and local and state agencies often work together to patrol the waterways with an eye toward being proactive.

“We’d rather deal with people before they get out there and get in trouble and go through their boat with them and make sure they have things like the proper number of life jackets on board,” said Milford Police Officer Jeff Nielsen.

A veteran of the Milford unit, Nielsen knows that the work won’t cool off until the temperature does. Summer is prime time for recreational boating.

“It gets pretty busy out there,” Nielsen said. “A lot of people have the time off and they have relatives down and friends.”

It can get just as busy inland, too. The 11-mile long Candlewood Lake, the largest lake in the state, is bordered by five towns – Brookfield, Danbury, New Fairfield, Sherman and New Milford. It’s patrolled by a number of agencies, including the state Environmental Conservation Police, said EnCon Officer Capt. Ryan Healy.

Marine officers can board vessels without probable cause in order to check for safety equipment and current boat registration. The officers try to make it a teaching moment as they reinforce safety rules.

“We’re not out here busting chops ... people just forget,” said Fairfield’s Wiltsie. “Most of our enforcement is through education.”

The logistics of administering sobriety tests become a little more challenging on the water.

“First and foremost you want to make sure that you do all that stuff in a safe environment,” Nielsen said.

EnCon officer Healy says marine officers are being trained on new sobriety tests which are performed while the suspect is seated. Healy and others say drunken boating offenses are not that prevalent except in fatal boating accidents.

Greenwich Police Lt. John Brown says seeing a marine unit on patrol can be a strong deterrent. He explained during one weekend this past July dubbed “Operation Dry Water,” Greenwich officers stopped over 40 boats and made no arrests for suspected drunken boating.

“They had heard that we were bringing the intoxilyzers with us and they had seen our posters,” Brown said.

One of the busiest days of the summer for the marine patrols is July 4th when boaters come for the water by day and stay for the fireworks by night. Cooperation is the key to smooth sailing.
Land swap paves way for 220 new jobs in New Britain

To bring 220 new jobs to town and nearly $500,000 in new taxes, New Britain officials have had to take the road less traveled. And they’ve had plenty of company along the way because a key step in the construction of a Costco membership warehouse store in the City is completing a complex land swap that involves New Britain, Newington, a few state agencies, the General Assembly and Costco.

“It is land with transportation easements on it, so it makes it pretty complicated to get easements released,” said New Britain Mayor Tim O’Brien.

The property in question is between the Iwo Jima Memorial Expressway and the Newington/New Britain town line.

The state Department of Transportation has agreed to convey 15.5 acres from Newington to New Britain in exchange for about 68 acres of New Britain land plus a 23-acre conservation easement and the administrative cost of the conveyance.

Because the property concerns the sale of unneeded surplus property, it was included as part a conveyance bill awaiting action by the General Assembly. All state conveyances are included in one large bill that will be voted on at the end of the current legislative session.

“At the mayor’s request, we asked if this particular conveyance could be done early,” said state Rep. Rick Lopes, D-New Britain. “We were told there would be an effort to do it early, but that it was highly unlikely that it would succeed since it would cause conflict with other conveyances that other legislators also wish to have done early.”

In addition to the state DOT’s involvement, the deal requires input from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) for wetlands issues and the state Department of Administrative Services (DAS), which manages state property.

Despite the deal’s circuitous route that wound through New Britain, Newington and eventually to the halls of the state Capitol, city officials say Costco is expected to break ground before Labor Day.

Town team up for solar savings

Who says there’s nothing new under the sun? How about savings of nearly 30 percent on utility costs?

Solarize Connecticut, a grant program that provides discounts to residents who install solar panels, is catching on in the state and towns are banding together to reach more people. Easton, Redding, and Trumbull are among those teams up to help their residents tap into those solar savings.

Their goal is to outfit 50 new homes in the region by February.

“I am delighted that Easton is a Solarize community,” said First Selectman Tom Herrmann, who even had a solar audit performed on his home. “I know that there are many homeowners out there who have been thinking about installing a solar PV system, but have been hesitating to make the investment. Now that Easton, Redding, and Trumbull have come together, these systems will be so much more affordable.”

Electricity rates in Connecticut are among the highest in the nation. Connecticut’s 17.31 cents per kilowatt hour ranks third behind Hawaii (36.61 cents/kwh) and Alaska (19.28 cents/kwh).

Solarize Connecticut is offered through the Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority (CEFIA) in partnership with SmartPower, a private marketing company. Municipalities who take part in the program provide outreach and education to residents to raise awareness and interest.

“Everyone who gets solar will get the lowest price point at the end of the program, even the first residents to sign up,” said Cathy Alfandre, chairwoman of the Easton Clean Energy Task Force. “When combining a federal tax credit with a state incentive, the cost of installing solar may never again be this low since state incentives are expected to drop off in the future,” Alfandre said.

Flexible funding options are offered from leasing to buying, according to installer Sunlight Solar. Leasing includes comprehensive insurance and warranty coverage for 20 years, “and the lowest monthly payments,” according to Sunlight Solar.

The solar audit on Herrmann’s home helped shed a bright light on what the Easton First Selectman could save. After a rebate from CEFIA and federal tax credits, he was looking at a potential 14 percent return on investment.

“It’s a very attractive return on investment,” he said.
Towns join together on study of regional dispatch center

The top elected officials from Waterford, East Lyme and New London are considering the creation of a regional dispatch center for fire, police and emergency medical services that would serve all three communities.

“We have to recognize that there are efficiencies to be had in services, and there is an economic focus as well,” said Waterford First Selectman Daniel Steward.

Staff members from each community are working together as part of a planning group to explore options for technology solutions, governance, legal and financial structure, labor and management organization and policies and procedures.

East Lyme First Selectman Paul Formica said, “the study will determine once and for all if it’s a good fit.”

New London Mayor Daryl Justin Finizio said the communities already partner in other ventures, so creating a regional dispatch center would make sense.

The regional dispatch center would be located in Waterford’s existing center. State Emergency Planning funds would help with implementation and operating costs if the leaders agree to move forward.

The percentages of the operating costs would be based on the volume of calls for service in each municipality and calculated annually. For example, if there are 100 calls and New London is responsible for 25 of them, New London’s portion of the cost would be 25 percent.

Formica said the study would also look at how the unions would blend together. New London and East Lyme dispatchers belong to unions while Waterford’s dispatchers do not.

In August, Waterford and New London agreed to share Waterford’s emergency communications equipment, saving New London the expense of building its own system.

Waterford, which installed a $6 million state-of-the-art network several years ago, has the radio capacity to meet all of New London’s needs. The signal from Waterford covers 95 percent of New London, with none of the dead spots that were part of the old system.

All three local leaders said the goal of a regional dispatch center is to provide better and more cost-effective services.

Naugatuck Valley towns find strength and opportunity in numbers

Made in America could mean more specifically “Made in the Naugatuck Valley Corridor,” according to local officials who say the opportunity for more manufacturing in the region is greater than ever.

The 18-town Naugatuck Valley Corridor district recently won approval from the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) to be designated an economic development district. The federal designation, which comes two years after the state designation, will help pave the way for funds to help with economic development and infrastructure investments.

“It puts us on the map for federal economic development assistance and attention,” said Waterbury Mayor Neil M. O’Leary. “It puts our region on par with the major metropolitan areas across the United States and, to be direct, it puts our region in a priority position to access significant federal funds for economic development initiatives.”

O’Leary pointed to opportunities that exist in the manufacturing sector as prime examples of how the district can benefit from the collaboration.

“There is enormous opportunity, especially in the Northeast and particularly in Connecticut, for manufacturing opportunities,” said O’Leary, who is vice chairman of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Advance Manufacturing Task Force. “The federal government is finally recognizing that made in America means made in America.”

The district includes Ansonia, Beacon Falls, Bethlehem, Cheshire, Derby, Middlebury, Naugatuck, Newtown, Oxford, Prospect, Seymour, Shelton, Southbury, Thomaston, Waterbury, Watertown, Wolcott and Woodbury.

James Ryan, president of the Shelton Economic Development Cooperation calls the federal designation a “door opener.”

“If you don’t have this, the EDA won’t speak with you about federal investments,” Ryan said.

So far the EDA has been listening and several municipalities in the corridor are already reaping the benefits of the collaboration.

A Waterbury business park project has received about $1.2 million in federal and state economic development grants and matching U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants. Derby received approximately $1.8 million in federal and state funds to help build an access road to industrial space.

“I like this idea of a cooperative effort,” said Oxford First Selectman George Temple. “I think we’re all in this together.”

The district has also anticipates applying for an $80,000 EDA grant to develop an operation plan for its next phase of economic development.

“It’s been a long ride, and now we truly are showing what regional collaboration can do for economic growth,” said District Chairwoman Sheila O’Malley, who is also the Derby Economic Development Director.
Berlin joins task force to target gun violence

In an effort to fight violent crimes in the central Connecticut region, Berlin police have joined officers and officials from New Britain, Plainville, Bristol, Newington, Southington, Central Connecticut State University, and Hartford, as part of the Greater New Britain Shooting Task Force which includes police officers as well as state corrections and probation officials and an inspector from the chief state’s attorney’s office.

Last August, Berlin police officers launched an investigation in search of two men who robbed a fast food restaurant just inside the Berlin town line – at gunpoint. While no shots were fired, a gun was displayed and the suspects are still at large. Law enforcement officials believe they may have fled to New Britain.

Berlin Police Chief Paul Fitzgerald said the New Britain State’s Attorney requested a task force to handle violent crimes in New Britain, but that many criminals leave the borders of New Britain and commit crimes or go into hiding in adjoining towns.

“That’s how a town like Berlin benefits,” Fitzgerald said. “We don’t have the number of officers like New Britain has, so if we have an armed robbery or a serious assault in town, that task force will come to help us and they will provide us with the manpower to launch an investigation, especially if suspects flee to New Britain.”

With the task force in place, when a violent crime occurs and after detectives assert that the case was violent and gun-related, they will dispatch members of the task force.

New Britain, one of Berlin’s neighboring towns, has reported that gun violence led to five homicides over the last year. In addition, New Britain police have investigated nearly 150 reports of gunfire or other incidents where a gun was displayed in just the past nine months.

“We are most appreciative of the contributions of all of these agencies, which have stepped up to the plate to join in this effort, which recognizes the reality that crime knows no geographical borders,” said Acting New Britain Chief of Police James Wardwell.

Officers will also assist municipal police departments who are task force members with cold cases and other ongoing investigations that involve homicides and gun reports.

“This task force is built on teamwork and the collaborative efforts of law enforcement at all levels of government, allowing us to achieve maximum results from the limited resources available,” said Chief State’s Attorney Kevin T. Kane.

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 of 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.”
PUBLIC SAFETY

Berlin checkpoints crack down on drunk driving

As part of a continuing effort to keep local roads safe, the Berlin police department has been cracking down on drunk driving by conducting a series of DUI checkpoints in different parts of town and on sections of the heavily traveled Berlin Turnpike.

Deputy Police Chief John Klett said the goal of the patrols and checkpoints is to reduce the number of accidents and injuries related to drivers who are under the influence and to help ensure overall safe travel.

Based on the most recent data from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Connecticut ranked 49 out of the 50 states as well as the District of Columbia in terms of the percentage of deaths in DUI-related traffic accidents, with only North Dakota and Hawaii posting higher death rates.

Forty-two percent of total traffic deaths in Connecticut were DUI related, and the Berlin DUI checkpoints are trying to get those numbers down by getting drunk drivers off the road.

The sobriety checks are made possible through a federal grant that supports increased DUI detection and enforcement efforts. The grant has allowed the town to hold several checks that began last Thanksgiving, ran through the holiday season and will continue until next Labor Day.

Klett said the grant provides “75 percent reimbursement of the overtime costs related to these efforts” and “will help to provide funding for staff and additional DUI patrols as well as roadside sobriety checkpoints.”

The deputy chief added that roadside checkpoints have been shown to be the most effective method to detect and apprehend intoxicated drivers. Checkpoints also allow police to enforce other driving violations, such as driving an unregistered vehicle or driving without a valid license.

Police are required by a 1990 Supreme Court ruling to announce DUI checkpoints in advance.

Centralized dispatch center boosts collaboration

When Branford residents call 911 and get connected to a dispatcher, everything may sound the same to the caller — but for the dispatchers, it’s a whole new world thanks to a recent $1.65 million technology upgrade at the police department.

The town is now among just a few municipalities in the state that do all dispatches — fire, police and emergency medical services — from one location according to police Capt. Geoffrey Morgan.

The telecommunications upgrades were the first for the town in nearly two decades. The improvements were challenging because the work had to be accomplished while the room was still functioning as a 911 center.

Having everyone “on the same page” allows for a better collaborative effort, Morgan said, especially during major events such as snowstorms and other bad weather. “The ability to dispatch everyone from a central location keeps things reliable and efficient,” he said. “Every 911 call to Branford is answered and handled right here.”

The replacement of the telecommunication consoles is part of the town’s comprehensive effort to update and replace the communications equipment for the police and public works departments. The upgrade was necessary because much of the equipment and technology was so outdated it could no longer be fixed or replaced.

As a result, the equipment in the telecommunications room was nearly doubled — from two computers and four monitors to four computers and seven monitors for each dispatcher. The new furniture and consoles allow for customization for dispatch staff, which makes the work environment more efficient and comfortable, Morgan said. Dispatchers often work shifts longer than eight hours — sometimes working up to 16 hours.

The next step in the technology improvement project will be the replacement of the portable and mobile radios used by police, as well as updates in communications devices in patrol cars. The town’s public works department will also receive a technological upgrade and will operate on the same radio frequency.
Retired police officers expected to be part of new Enfield school security measures

Towns and cities across the nation are wrestling with an issue that resonates nowhere more deeply than right here in Connecticut – how to keep our children safer at school.

Since the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December, Enfield became the second town in the state to step up school security with armed guards. North Branford is also stationing armed guards in schools.

The Enfield school board voted this spring to station armed guards at all 11 public schools and add a number of other security enhancements. The guards are expected to be in place by the beginning of the new school year in September.

“We want to throw as many hurdles as we can before an armed gunman can get into a building,” said Enfield police Chief Carl Sferrazza. “We refuse in Enfield to accept any casualties in our schools.”

Chief Sferrazza says retired police officers will get preference for the jobs. Everyone hired to be armed guards will be trained in security tactics and firearms use. They will not be sworn officers but will report to the Enfield Police Department. Police officers are already stationed at the two high schools and the middle school. The new initiative would place armed guards in 10 public schools and a Head Start center.

The chief served on a special committee convened after the Sandy Hook shootings to make recommendations on school security. The committee also included members of the Town Council, the Board of Education, and other town officials. The committee recommended that the guards initially work during normal hours. One door would be unlocked from the outside and a guard would be stationed at that door to screen visitors.

The town expects to spend more than $600,000 a year on the program, but officials say they cannot put a cost on keeping children safe.

“I want to make sure Enfield does everything humanly possible to protect our kids,” Chief Sferrazza said. “For those people who say it couldn’t happen here, we’re about 50 miles from Sandy Hook.”

Familiar faces are key to fire safety in Andover

As fire departments across the state and country geared up for National Fire Prevention Week this fall, Andover firefighters got up close and personal with local children. It was more than a friendly gesture – in fact, it just might save a life someday.

The Andover Volunteer Department held an open house to encourage local families to meet their firefighters. Assistant Chief Mindy Hegener explained that familiarity with the first responders and their equipment is important, especially with children. The more familiar they are, the less frightened they may be when disaster strikes. Finding a frightened child quickly is vital in saving a life, she said.

“Kids tend to hide under beds and in closets,” Hegener said.

The intent of the open house was to “show them how we respond, what we look like when we respond, and not to be afraid of us,” Hegener said.

Of course there was some fun involved, too. Children had the chance to try on firefighting gear, explore the fire trucks and watch various demonstrations.

The open house also familiarized Andover families with members of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), which was founded in 2007. Guests learned that there is help for them in all types of emergencies. Superstorm Sandy was a prime example as CERT members canvassed the town after the storm knocked out power to 90 percent of Andover, checking on residents’ well-being, and providing emergency food.

“When you need people fast, we’re ready to go and handle anything,” CERT member Mary Duval said.

The 2013 National Fire Prevention theme was “Prevent Kitchen Fires.” Two out of every five home fires begin in the kitchen – more than any other place in the home – and the campaign helped spread the word about the dangers of unattended cooking.
Task force casts wide net for school safety study

A new school security task force formed by the Danbury board of education will tap state and national expertise to improve safety equipment and protocols in the city’s school buildings.

The task force was formed – like other groups around the state and country – in the wake of the Newtown tragedy. Mayor Mark Boughton, who chairs CCM’s subcommittee on school safety, will also be involved with the school board’s task force.

Danbury Human Resources Director Kim Thompson and Board of Education member Kathleen Molinaro are co-chairs of the local task force.

“We will start with the work that has already been done internally by our school finance director and building and grounds official in assessing our buildings, and then reach out from there,” Thompson said. “We will be looking for lots of collaboration with the city.”

The task force will present recommendations to the school board at its first meeting in April.

Boughton said he is hiring a consultant to audit the city school buildings, adding that the CCM working committee report will also provide about a dozen recommendations that will be forwarded to the committee for review.

“There is no one size that fits,” Boughton said. “All municipalities are a little different. They have different size buildings and different finances, so not every recommendation would fit.”

He said issues being discussed include locks, layouts of new buildings and personnel issues.

“Every first selectman and mayor has heard the pros and cons of having a police officer in every building. There are a lot of logistical challenges to putting a cop in every building, and that’s what the public needs to hear,” Boughton said.

But Boughton said he supports adding “safety advocates” at the 11 elementary schools in Danbury. Since the shooting, there has been a private security firm providing a security officer in those schools. The city’s middle and high schools already have advocates and police officers.

“Across the state, we need to have common training procedures for advocates so they approach the job in the same way,” Boughton said. “So if you walk into Danbury or into New Fairfield, you want to be sure that everyone has the same training and could provide the same information to the first responders.”

Montville consolidates public safety functions in new complex

For the last 30 years, the Montville police department has operated out of a former highway toll office leased from the State. Since it was never intended as a police facility, police officers for years have had to conduct interviews with victims in drab, semi-public areas and deal with the challenges of an antiquated building that only Rube Goldberg could have admired.

Those days are over, now that the police force has a brand new 17,000 square-foot permanent place to call home for its big law enforcement family. After several years of planning and construction, the public safety complex is home to the police department, resident state trooper, animal control offices and an expanded dispatch Center.

“Moving into the new complex was like coming out of the dark ages,” said Fire Marshal Raymond Occhialini. “This facility has cutting-edge technology.”

John Platt, chairman of the building committee for the project, said the members traveled to numerous police stations in Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts to learn what worked and what didn’t at their facilities.

The new complex is “U-shaped” with the dispatch center at its center. The center features four dispatching stations – each with eight computer screens and the capability of receiving emergency radio traffic, taking 911 calls, dispatching emergency services and mapping calls.

The facility has four holding cells and a shower. It is equipped with a kitchen, a sergeant’s room and television screens to monitor security.

It has private locker rooms for male and female officers – a convenience the old barracks lacked – as well as a roll call area, an on-site evidence laboratory, private interview rooms and a large, open space for community gatherings.

Each officer’s locker has its own power source so officers can charge their portable radios. The locker rooms are divided by a fitness room - a place where officers can unwind or get a work-out before or after a shift.

Even the desks are even state-of-the art – they can be raised or lowered to an ergonomically correct seating level.

“We built it for the police department, and we built it for the future,” Platt said. “It’s bringing our police and dispatch into the 21st century.”
Local groups take lifesaving to HEART

North Haven has earned designation as a HEARTSafe Community by participating in a program that helps Connecticut’s cities and towns improve the chances that any member of the community who suffers a sudden cardiac arrest will have the best possible chance for survival.

The program helps towns determine whether their employees and residents are likely to be heart attack survivors due to quick access to life-saving treatment, how many ordinary citizens can recognize the signs and symptoms of a sudden cardiac event and how many know how to provide immediate emergency care and get additional help on the way, right away.

HEARTSafe is a voluntary, community-driven program and most communities already have the most important requirements for designation: ordinary citizens trained in CPR and trained in the use of automated external defibrillators (AED), and AEDs available in public locations. The program utilizes “Champions” to gather the required documentation for HEARTSafe designation.

For well over two years, former Rotary Club president Richard DiNorscia has been that Champion in North Haven – dedicated to delivering life saving devices for public buildings in town and providing training for town employees in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Under his leadership, the North Haven Rotary supported a multi-year drive to provide defibrillators for public buildings throughout the community, as well as staff training. In addition, many of the town-owned AEDs were provided through the efforts of the North Haven Rotary Club.

In 2010, a combination of Rotary resources, a donation from a local business and a partnership with a local children’s organization funded the initial purchase of three AED units for the town’s elementary schools.

Since then, AED’s have been installed at the town library and community pool directly through the service Rotary’s annual fund raisers, and partially through a matching grant obtained by DiNorscia in order to obtain the state’s recognition of North Haven as a HEART Safe Community. In addition, CPR training and training in the use of the defibrillators was provided at no cost to the town by a local ambulance company – arranged by a Rotary member.

In praising DiNorscia’s efforts, Rotary officials have described his HEARTSafe accomplishments as his “personal legacy.”

Gun buy-back and turn-in programs get weapons off streets

Like law enforcement agencies across the state and country trying to curb violence, Stamford and Trumbull police have conducted weapon collection events that yielded pistols, revolvers, rifles and ammunition – as well as 2 swords and a battle axe.

Stamford police collected 54 weapons during a three-day collection drive spread out over a two month weapons buy-back initiative. The number of weapons collected each day was 13, 24 and 17.

All weapons collected are processed through the National Crime Information Center, an FBI database, to ensure that the guns were not involved in any crimes. Once weapons are cleared, they are turned over to Connecticut State Police to be destroyed.

The Stamford police have so far issued $4,350 in gift cards for the weapons collected. Payout rates for functional weapons are $50 for rifles and shotguns, $75 for handguns and $100 for assault weapons.

The last time a gun buy-back program was hosted in Stamford in 2001, police collected 67 guns over five events for an average of 13.4 guns per day. For the recent buy-backs, Stamford is topping those numbers with 16.3 guns-per-event.

A voluntary gun and ammunition turn-in program in Trumbull netted 16 guns and about 500 rounds of assorted ammunition from local residents.

Local officials said the turn-in event was part of an overall effort to set the tone for change in the wake of the Newtown tragedy.

The day-long program was held at police headquarters and Police Chief Tom Kiely said the goal was to reduce the pipeline of illegal guns that flow onto the streets.

“What we see a lot are situations where someone who owned a few guns dies and their wife or children now have them,” Kiely said. “They don’t really want them, but they don’t know how to get rid of them so they end up sitting in the closet for years and then if someone breaks into the house, those guns end up on the street.”

Norwalk, Greenwich, Bridgeport, New Haven and New London are just a few of the many Connecticut towns that have conducted, are conducting or are planning to conduct gun buy-back or turn-in drives.
Cheshire recently test-drove the latest innovation in school safety. The “smart” school bus is outfitted with three high-resolution video cameras to document drivers who illegally pass school buses while they are stopped to pick up or discharge students. The bus was on loan from New Britain while the Cheshire planning committee considered whether to recommend that the Town Council approve installing cameras on Cheshire buses.

One particular route where bus drivers have encountered problems is along Route 10 and Main Street. “I get multiple passes each day,” driver Samantha Squires said. “They go blowing right by even though I’m fully stopped and they think it’s okay to do that. I’ve had to stop kids from getting off the bus.”

Squires test drove the “smart” bus for a week along the route where she picks up and delivers her precious cargo – some 35 kindergartners. Two cameras were mounted on each side of the bright red stop sign that juts out each time she stops. The third camera was positioned near the rear of the bus. During that week, the cameras caught three vehicles passing a stopped bus. The videos were sent to the Cheshire Police Department.

The Cheshire Police Department supports the use of the cameras on school buses. The fine for passing a stopped bus with its red lights flashing and stop sign extended is $450. Police officials say there is no cost to the town or school district to install the cameras because of that $450 fine, $234 would go to the camera vendor to pay for the cameras.

Bus driver Squires also supports the measure as another tool to help her keep her young passengers safe. “I blow my horn – that’s about all I can do and the kids know that means stop right where they are,” she said. “I hopefully get a license plate, but I don’t really have time to look because I’m watching the kids.”

Proactive policing in Stamford keeps the bad guys at bay

The strong emphasis on community policing is making a real difference in Stamford. Recent FBI statistics show that crime is down in seven of the nine categories tracked by the federal agency and since 2008, crime is down across the board.

Police Chief Jon Fontneau says the department tries to get to the root of the problem before it becomes a problem. “I believe it is a collaborative effort. We are a family-oriented police department and we are proactive,” Fontneau said of the latest crime figures. “We are more assertive than a reactive police department.”

Officers are active in the community, working with children in sports leagues, leadership programs and anti-truancy initiatives. Fontneau, who was named police chief in 2012, said he regularly accompanies his district commanders to neighborhood association meetings to get a firm sense of the problems that citizens are facing.

The collaboration between the department and community helps contribute to the lower crime rate. Police officials say citizens don’t hesitate to phone in suspicious behavior. Patrol units are out visibly working the street. The police force also benefits from solid forensics, talented investigators and neighboring police departments that share information and resources.

Fontneau said the biggest decrease was in robberies, down about 25 percent. Car thefts dropped nearly 20 percent and violent crimes were down 9.8 percent, bucking the national trend.

The chief pointed to the case of the downtown “Apple pickers” to illustrate the success of a collaborative effort. In 2012, several bicycle-riding thieves stole dozens of iPhones by ripping them from the hands of women walking in the downtown. Police met with security officials at city corporations who in turn warned employees to be mindful of their surroundings. Due to the heightened awareness and the arrests of several suspects, the thefts dropped off.

“I am very happy about the serious crimes going down nearly 10 percent. As we are trending down in serious crimes, we are also making more arrests and writing more motor vehicle citations,” the chief said. “If you are moving out there, we are saying hello to you.”
Talk and trust - a two-way street on the beat in New Haven

The beat goes on in New Haven and the police officers who walk it are reopening lines of communication and trust with the people they are sworn to protect.

Simply put – community policing is back in the Elm City. “I think residents really like to see officers in their neighborhoods walking,” Mayor John DeStefano said. “I think they like to engage them and talk to them. ... I think what comes from that is a sense of relationship and trust so when there are violent or other inappropriate incidents in the neighborhood, it makes citizens more likely to talk.”

It is also a homecoming of sorts for Police Chief Dean Esserman, who was serving the same role in Providence when DeStefano hired him with the intent of reviving community policing.

Esserman was New Haven’s deputy chief in 1991 when the city launched its community policing initiative. At that time there were nearly three dozens murders in the city that year. But once more officers began walking the neighborhoods, interacting with residents and becoming a part of their lives, the murder rate plummeted. However, a change of philosophy over the years meant a departure from the beat cops and in 2011 the murder rate spiked to 34.

“They said it wouldn’t happen again, and it happened again,” said Esserman, whose refocus on community policing is getting results. “We’ve seen dramatic drops in crime, in violent crime, the last two years. That’s a good thing.”

The department ranks are also growing – 40 recruits graduated this year and 27 more are in the academy. Before long, even the rookies will be walking the neighborhoods, establishing relationships and giving residents – the young and old – someone to trust and call in times of need.

“You don’t have to love the New Haven Police Department,” Esserman explained. “You just have to love your beat cop. ... We talk to people and people talk to us. It’s not just about contacts. It’s about learning humility and developing trust. You can’t drive on by when you ain’t in a car.”

Griswold enhances senior citizen safety by embracing ‘Triad’ protective partnership

There truly is safety in numbers and when those numbers add up to three, senior citizens in Griswold benefit from a protective partnership.

The small rural eastern Connecticut town recently became the latest Triad community in the state by officially setting up a three-pronged partnership composed of law enforcement, senior citizens and community groups, dubbed the SALT Council (Seniors and Law Enforcement Together).

Triad is a national policing initiative that promotes senior safety and reduces the fear of crime, abuse and other problems facing seniors. There are about 40 Triad communities in the state.

The national Triad movement began 25 years ago when AARP, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), and the National Sheriffs’ Association (NSA) agreed on a cooperative approach to crime prevention for senior citizens. Those organizations officially signed a cooperative pact in 1988 and the name “Triad” was chosen to represent the founding three.

For Griswold, signing on to the growing initiative was just a natural progression of its ongoing senior outreach.

“In a way, we were already doing this, because it’s a small town and there’s a lot of community involvement. It made no sense not to formalize it,” said Griswold Senior Center Director Tina Falck said.

Joining Falck on the SALT Council are former Jewett City Borough Warden John Connelly, Road Foreman Todd Babbitt, Senior Center Bus Driver Claire Crag, Commission on Aging Member Erika Bevis and Resident State Trooper Jay McCarthy. Together they will offer educational material, lectures and services designed to seniors to keep them safe and health on topics such as scams, elder abuse and disaster preparedness.

Among the group’s first initiatives is the “Yellow Dot” program in which seniors would fill out a card with contact and medication information and keep it in their vehicle glove compartment. In the event of an accident or other type of emergency, a yellow dot on the back window would signify to first responders the presence of the card.

Falck said other groups interested in helping include local churches and the town’s fire department and ambulance service.
Rapid notification key to preparedness in Darien

The town of Darien is making every effort to stay in touch with its residents – especially when emergencies strike.

Citizens can customize how they want to be notified through the town’s CodeRed alert system, a high-speed notification system. CodeRed is a free service and sends out alerts related to storms, evacuations, shelter locations, missing child reports and other critical information.

“We need to be able to reach our community in case of an emergency. Be proactive and make sure we have your contact information in the CodeRed database so you can keep yourself, your family and your property protected in case of a real emergency,” said Marc McEwan, the Town of Darien’s Emergency Management Director.

Residents can visit darientct.gov and click on the CodeRed logo to enroll or update their contact information if they have moved or have new phone numbers or email addresses. As a precaution in the event of power outages, residents are urged to list their cell phone numbers as well as their home phone numbers.

The latest technology also allows residents to download a CodeRed Mobile Alert application to get free location-specific information and missing persons notifications from other CodeRed communities across the state and nation.

The town used the platform of National Preparedness Month in September to widely promote the CodeRed Alert System and remind citizens to enroll.

“Sometimes it takes a nationally recognized campaign like National Preparedness Month to get the word out about CodeRed. Our number one priority has always been to keep our citizens safe. The only way to do that is to get them better prepared and the best way to be prepared is to be informed using the CodeRed system,” McEwan said.

Berlin drawing up plans to meet demand for more senior housing

Many Berlin senior citizens may soon have a new place to call home.

The Berlin Housing Authority is embarking on plans to expand the town-owned affordable housing complex for seniors - the 40-unit Marjorie Moore Village – by as many as 54 units. The new units cannot come soon enough, says Housing Authority Chairman Joseph Bajorski.

The town has had a waiting list for some time, Bajorski said. More than 50 senior citizens have signed up for the next available spots and the Authority is not taking any new applications.

“We’re operating on 100 percent occupancy,” he said. “We had a meeting with the State Department of Housing and talked with our State Senator and everyone is eager to get this project moving sooner rather than later.”

The Authority does have room to grow. In 2012, the town sold to the Authority the former Knights of Columbus building as well as land that abuts Moore Village. The Authority has hired a design team, a civil engineer, subcontractors for electrical and mechanical needs and a law firm to oversee the legalities.

“We have a concept in place for a design,” Bajorski said. “We’re currently in the process of undergoing our pre-development studies, such as the impact of the wetlands and topography, and looking at a sewer line that runs through that section.”

The Authority also plans to conduct a full market analysis of the ability to sustain the number of proposed units. The analysis is necessary to receive financing, Bajorski explained.

“We are targeting the zero to 30 percent income range, which most of the developers out there have not,” Bajorski said. “They focus on the market rate, which is 30 percent and above.”

The Authority had already made several improvements to the existing complex as well as the town’s other affordable senior housing development – Percival Heights. Those enhancements included new lights, parking lot improvements, kitchen renovation and American with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades.
Two cans and string served as the “ribbon” as New Milford officials held a recent ceremonial ribbon-cutting to celebrate the completion of the town’s new emergency communications system. The levity was appreciated by all in attendance – but the town has always meant business during the process of bringing the new system on line.

The 15-month project was completed weeks ahead of schedule and under budget.

“The goal was for 95 percent mobile and portable on-hip coverage, but we far exceeded that for our responders. It’s really 99 to 100 percent,” said New Milford Police Department Lt. William Scribner, who also served as the co-chairman of the Emergency Communication Construction Committee. The project involved the replacement of three towers with new mono-pole towers and the installation of point-to-point microwave transmission, simulcast equipment and antennas.

The first part of the project was completed in 2012 with the upgrade and expansion of the dispatch center, which is located in the police headquarters. In a town of more than 60 square miles, responders have a lot of ground to cover so in May 2013 town officials approved a plan to improve multi-agency communications for police, three community fire departments, emergency medical service and public works.

“Mayor Pat Murphy has really been leader of this whole effort, and the committee has been working diligently for more than a year to ensure a swift response when necessary,” said Raymond O’Brien, a member of the Communication Construction Committee. O’Brien said the project came in just under $3.5 million and called it “money well spent.”

Lt. Scribner said the genesis of the project may actually date back some 15 years ago when an officer sent an internal memo about the spotty reception in some areas of town and the frustration of hitting those dead zones when on patrol. That officer, Scribner said, is still with the Department.

“I recently found his memo,” Lt. Scribner told those gathered at the ribbon-cutting. “And I was happy to respond to him today that it’s all taken care of.”

Roger that.
Officials work together on development plan for Newington busway station

City officials are working with the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) to study what kind of development will be both positive and possible near the planned busway station – now called the CTFastrak – in Newington.

CRCOG is funding an in-depth study of the planned Newington Junction in order to help town officials thoughtfully plan whatever kind of development eventually gets built in and nearby the new station.

The CRCOG grant was used to hire a consulting team to determine what development may be feasible for the area. The team will examine existing conditions, how sites are zoned, preferred land use, ownership, vacancies, visibility, and access to the busway, in addition to known or suspected areas of contamination, areas with drainage problems, and issues in street design.

Town officials and representatives from CRCOG have already begun meeting with the consultants and the first step will be to prepare a map of potential development sites within a half mile of the Newington Junction.

According to Town Councilor Terry Borjeson, who is the town’s liaison to CRCOG, the study will look at what sites have true capacity for development.

“The primary emphasis is going to be employment generation,” Borjeson said. “It will also look at one of the things I know is critical for residents in town, particularly in that area, and that is traffic congestion.”

The consultants are preparing a concept plan, which will be presented to CRCOG and Newington officials. A final summary will discuss the area’s opportunities, constraints, and infrastructure impediments.

“I think it’s necessary to move the plan quickly because the busway is coming along quickly,” Borjeson said.

On a parallel track, CRCOG has been discussing CTFastrak development opportunities in a more general sense at a statewide level.

Last month, CRCOG conducted a meeting that brought together eight towns along the busway corridor to discuss the importance of having sustainable development for generations to come.
Litchfield County schools leverage state grants to beef up security

Their wish lists varied but their ultimate goals were unanimous – protect the children, protect the staff and preserve their communities’ peace of mind.

In the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy, schools around the state are undergoing security upgrades thanks to the state’s Competitive Grant Program for school security. Five Litchfield County school districts are putting that money to good use in a variety of ways.

Winchester will install cameras that will stream live video into the Police Department. The town is also updating its safe entry swipe system. Future upgrades will include perimeter lighting, officials say.

“It brings us into a much safer, more contemporary way of handling entry,” Superintendent Tom Danehy said. “We’re just thrilled to get it because it really moves us forward in a much bigger way than the town would be able to fund.”

New Hartford, Regional District No. 6 (Warren, Morris, Goshen), Regional District No. 14 (Woodbury, Bethlehem) and Plymouth were among the districts that shared in the $5 million first round of grants, which were part of the Gun Violence Prevention and Children’s Safety Act enacted after the Sandy Hook shootings.

The districts’ grant applications were among the 111 applications the state received for proposed infrastructure projects in 604 school buildings. Proposed upgrades included installation of surveillance cameras, bullet proof glass, electric locks, buzzer and card entry systems, and panic alarms.

“We will look to use the funds to continue to enhance security in Region 6,” said Region 6 Superintendent Edward Drapp. “We were proud when we did a survey at the end of the 2012-2013 school year that 94 percent responded favorably that our district takes school safety seriously. So, we will continue to invest in security measures to make our school safe and we’re thankful to the state for the grant as well.”

The grants are administered by the state departments of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP), Education and Construction Services.

“Public Safety is a core function of our government, especially when it comes to our children’s security,” DESPP Deputy Commissioner William Shea said.
New school safety measures being considered by CT towns

Cities and towns across Connecticut have spent the days and months that followed the tragedy in Newtown in near-constant study and discussion of issues relating to school safety. Below are summaries of just a few of the measures being implemented and considered by towns:

New Milford is reviewing, upgrading and strengthening its school safety policies, plans and infrastructure to reflect “a world changed by Newtown.” The town is also hiring an outside agency specializing in security to conduct a school vulnerability assessment of each campus in order to create customized school emergency management plans.

In addition, a “significant police presence will continue at each of the town’s schools for the rest of the school year,” according to local officials. Officers will be stationed at each school at the beginning of the day and at dismissal time. Two additional school resource officers were also added to the schools’ staff.

Access to hallways and classrooms at all schools has been limited. All staff members are wearing ID badges, as do visitors, who must be buzzed in to gain entry and then checked in by office staff. In addition, the district’s facility and technology departments are working with police to install software to allow police to remotely access security cameras in each school.

Further security enhancements are being considered, including security film for windows, creating second vestibule areas in each school with required buzz-in, and installing emergency response (911/panic) buttons in each school.

In Groton cameras accessible online by police, panic buttons and security patrols are just some of the ideas being considered by the town as it reviews ways to enhance security at its 10 schools. Officials say layers of protection, such as panic buttons that automatically dial 911, can provide valuable time for response during an emergency.

Improvements already undertaken include the replacement of locking systems in some classrooms to allow teachers to secure doors from inside the classroom.

Ridgefield is strengthening security measures including the addition of security guards at their schools. A town-appointed committee is looking into an increased police presence in schools, staff security cards, and a background check system for visitors. The committee’s goals are to:

- research best security practices regarding school physical plant, communication, staffing, procedures, and training; establish short, medium, and long-term security goals; conduct security audits and monitor each school site’s security; ensure appropriate training for all staff; establish a school security committee in each building; and develop a security implementation plan with recommended budget.

Putnam has installed a new locking system in the town’s middle and elementary schools and has authorized funding for an expanded video monitoring system which would enhance current surveillance.

Ellington’s board of selectmen voted to ask for a state trooper to patrol all five schools in town to provide a police presence and conduct prevention programs for students.

SCHOOL SAFETY
Wilton & community partners create new elderly housing

After a decade of planning, fund raising and finally construction, Wilton’s newest senior living facility – Wilton Commons – has opened its doors.

Seniors ages 62 and older have started moving into the affordable housing complex near the Wilton train station and Wilton Center, bringing to a close a $10 million finance campaign to complete the building’s first phase of construction.

The recently completed 51 one-bedroom apartments include 24-hour on-site staff, social events and activities as well as handicapped access throughout the facility. Wilton Commons also features a laundry, a meditation and prayer area, activity and common rooms, an outdoor gazebo, and a sitting area.

At 650 square feet, the units are spacious, close to parks and businesses, and the building is surrounded by beautiful light wooded areas. Rents include hot water, taxes, sewer, trash removal, maintenance, landscaping and snow removal.

The new housing resulted from a unique partnership that saw a local nonprofit housing developer combine contributions of land from the Town of Wilton, $2 million from private fundraising, and a package of funding from State agencies.

“Wilton Commons is an impressive story of persistence, dedication and generosity,” said First Selectman William F. Brennan. “It is the result of many years of hard work and planning.”

In 2003, a group of concerned Wilton residents recognized the need for more affordable housing options for seniors and began working to secure a location and create a community that would meet the needs of the growing senior population in the Wilton area.

After 10 years, they had assembled the funding package:
- More than $5 million in state funding that included Low Income Housing Tax Credits, low cost mortgage loans and grants through CHFA and DECD;
- $2.6 million from the National Equity Fund;
- $2 million raised from more than 200 contributors by Wilton Commons, Inc., under the leadership of resident E. Bulkeley Griswold; and
- A lease with the Town of Wilton for the 4.8 acre parcel for $1 per year, a commitment valued at $2 million over the life of the agreement.

Wilton Commons is owned by a partnership between its builders, the Mutual Housing Association of Southwestern Connecticut, and Wilton Commons, Inc.

Plans are also underway – and $5.6 million in state funding has been earmarked – for 23 additional units of congregate housing at Wilton Commons.
Accurate GIS information now just a click away in Cheshire

Cheshire has gone live with a new geographic information system that allows residents, town staff and other users to get accurate ownership information and house data by clicking on any parcel on the town map.

One of the key advantages of the new GIS system is accuracy, said Town Manager Matt Milone.

The new GIS system is built on “layered information” and provides a specific outline of every building in town. Layers on the GIS map allow users to highlight specific information. Sewers and storm water drains are viewable on the map as an added layer. There is an open space layer, as well as topography, wetland, vegetation and fence layers – and additional layers may be added if needed.

Milone says one of the most important layers shows fire hydrants and water mains. Combined with the ability to check the specifics of every home, including room layouts, Milone believes first responders have a valuable tool at their hands.

When police and firefighters respond to a structure fire, they will know how to safely enter and exit a building and find trapped occupants “because they know the exact layout,” he said.

In addition, the mapping and other images provided by the new system are new and sharper.

“The flyover photos used to map the old GIS were taken in 2005,” Milone said. “For the new system, the town contracted a flyover to map Cheshire exclusively, so it will be the only town that appears on the new GIS.”

“The flyover was performed at lower altitudes, providing more accuracy and higher quality,” he said. “It allows us to more easily identify features.”

The flyover plane also traveled slower, providing crisper photos.

Now, the “layers of information on the GIS are more relevant to us and the people in town,” Milone said.

Westport “charges” ahead with solar and electric power

A variety of electric cars were recently on display at the Saugatuck railroad station in Westport to showcase “the future of clean energy” as local officials unveiled plans for a new solar-powered transportation hub at the historic eastbound rail depot.

New charging stations for electric cars will be installed outside the venerable station house, and solar panels are being built on top of the building to provide electricity for the structure and the car chargers.

The 27 kilowatt solar panel system will power the interior of the station, the platform lighting, and up to 20 electric car charging stations. The installation of the first four charging stations is underway.

To encourage greater use of electric cars, the town is offering parking permit holders special VIP rail parking spots if they purchase electric cars for their commute. Officials also expect to achieve a net increase in parking spaces because electric cars are smaller and thinner than typical gasoline cars and SUVs.

“It is a great deal for a commuter to get a reserved spot here,” said First Selectman Gordon Joseloff who called the new solar-powered hub “another example of Westport being ahead of the crowd.”

Several car dealers were on hand with models of electric cars including a Fisker, which has solar panels built into the roof and an interior largely made from recycled materials.

The dealers and electric car buffs said their vehicles are good for the environment and that “with gas prices going up and up, this is the future of cars.”

“It is very heartening to see Westport in the vanguard of renewable energy innovation, and we hope this will be a role model for other train stations along the Metro-North corridor,” said state Rep. Jonathan Steinberg, D-Westport, a member of the legislature’s Energy & Technology Committee.
For many Bridgeport schoolchildren, there’s a lot new under the sun – specifically their school buildings.

The city is installing rooftop solar arrays on the Cesar A. Batalla and Blackham schools. Both schools have preschoolers through eighth-graders and are expected to have more than 10 percent of their power generated by solar.

Mayor Bill Finch said the project has no up-front costs and funding comes from the state’s Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority. Students will not only learn in an atmosphere powered by solar energy, they will also learn about solar energy. The school district is introducing a solar science curriculum developed by Main Street Power, the company the city has contracted with for the solar energy system.

“Teaching the next generation of conservationists the importance of lowering our carbon footprint to take better care of the planet is one of the highest priorities of our BGreen2020 efforts,” Finch said. “This partnership with Main Street Power and CEFIA will bring a renewable energy source to two of our schools, and it will also educate students on the use of solar energy.”

The BGreen2020 is a community-wide environmental initiative. The 10-year strategy includes retrofitting existing buildings with energy efficient systems, improving the city transit and encouraging the development of green business.

CEFIA provided funding as part of its mission to deploy clean energy in Connecticut through private capital partnerships. CEFIA attracts capital and investments from sources beyond utility ratepayers to help fund clean energy grant and loan programs.

“Congratulations to the city of Bridgeport for yet another exciting clean energy moment,” said CEFIA President Bryan Garcia. “Providing opportunities for students to learn about solar energy and the benefits associated with it – not just this year, but for decades and generations of students to come – provides a platform for knowledge that will help the youth as they prepare for their future in Connecticut’s clean energy economy.”
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

Rails are route to revival for Windsor town center

Windsor officials are doing their homework when it comes to the “Three Rs” – rails, redevelopment and revival. The heart of their plan is to turn Windsor center into a vibrant hub commuter rail service, which is on track to make its first stop in town as early as 2016.

“People may choose to live in the center because the idea of taking a train to work appeals to them,” said Town Planner Eric Barz. “There could be a spin-off effect. While they’re walking to the train station, they might pick up coffee or breakfast, drop off their dry cleaning, maybe grab something to eat on the way home.”

Currently, Amtrak provides the only train service in this town of nearly 30,000. The proposed commuter rail would make daily trips south to Hartford and New Haven and north to Springfield. The potential for a boost in residential and business activity in the town center has officials considering adding more amenities for pedestrians and bicyclists, making parking more convenient and improving signage.

How all this will come together will be spelled out in the Windsor Center Transit Oriented Development Planning Facilitation Program.

Working with urban design consultants, the town has held two public workshops to get feedback from citizens and businesses on the proposal. Recommendations from the consultants were provided in May and information is available on the town website.

Professional industries, such as insurance and aerospace, are well-established in Windsor. To complement the service sector, town officials would like to see a growing retail sector that envisions the proposed renovation of the old Plaza Theater as a centerpiece.

There is much optimism riding on these rails: local officials believe they have the potential to reinvent Windsor as a bustling business center and a hub to call home.

“We think that the more people we can get living in Windsor center, the better,” Town Planner Barz said. “It creates a vibrancy that lasts into the evening, because those new residents would support the restaurants and existing businesses, and perhaps attract some retailers back downtown to some of the prominent locations.”

Windsor Locks plans to link downtown development with high-speed rail

Windsor Locks is planning to rejuvenate its downtown area and address the future of its historic train station by linking them both together.

The town is planning to relocate the train platform from its present location to a strategic spot that will create expanded opportunities for redevelopment.

The goal is to develop Windsor Locks into a town that can compete with other area towns by offering quality housing and commercial retail in the decades ahead – and the lynchpin to the effort is the arrival of high-speed rail, once the New Haven to Springfield line is completed.

When that happens, Windsor Locks hopes to see commuters hopping on or off the many high-speed trains that will pass through their town – so local officials want to make it an important stop on the route.

The historic train station will be moved to a more central location to encourage transit-oriented development and the station building will be completely renovated. As part of the town’s overall planning, retail and housing development opportunities in the area are also being explored.

One of the keys to the downtown development plan is the Montgomery Mill complex, a former wire manufacturer that closed 22 years ago. Over time, the mill buildings have been ravaged by arson, graffiti and scrap metal thieves – and home only to vagrants and vandals.

But the property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the town considers it a potential “catalyst project” because it consists of three contiguous parcels comprising 3.3 acres of commercial land in the downtown area.

Combined with its proximity to high-speed rail, the development at the site of a hotel, a hotel and restaurant or an apartment complex would also attract new housing and retail development to the area.

When downtown Windsor Locks is developed to its maximum potential, the town estimates a total of 675 new living units could be developed.

“It’s a great vision,” said Con O’Leary, a member of the Board of Finance. “It’s moving forward. It’s important that we have commercial development.”
Volunteerism in Milford is really picking up – one plastic cup, one fast-food bag, one candy wrapper at a time

An Earth Day challenge to rid city parks and streets of litter brought out several volunteers who fanned out in parks, the beach, and downtown. The goal of the 50K Challenge, organized by the city’s open-space and natural resource agent Steve Johnson, was to help pick up 50,000 pieces of litter.

Several of the volunteers included students from the Post Graduate Transition Academy. They donned gloves and fanned out across an athletic field where litter-strewn basketball courts awaited them. In short order, they had tidied up the area, stuffing their bags with beverage containers and food wrappers. They continued on through the downtown on their way to the beach where more litter awaited.

The students began their efforts by cleaning up around their own school and collecting redeemable bottles and cans to help pay for a school trip. Johnson called them an “inspiration for everybody in Milford.”

“There is no required minimum, just show up and purchase something to support the business,” Quirk said. “We strengthen our communities when we support locally-owned business. Torrington is an amazing city and this movement we have started here is only the beginning.”

Organizers of the “cash mob” effort had a mechanism to gauge the interest. In the days leading up to the “cash mob,” anyone who visited the Deli and said “cash mob” received a business card that depicted the poster. Deli owner Alfredo Viscariello kept track of how many cards he distributed.

Torrington shoppers encouraged to “Like” local business

Not only can social media be social, in Torrington it can also be profitable – especially for local businesses. Torrington merchants have been the targeted focus of “cash mobs” spearheaded by the Facebook group “T-Town Torrington Chatter.”

In the virtual world of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media platforms, a call to action can mobilize scores of followers for a common purpose. A “cash mob” is similar to a “flash mob” but instead of people assembling somewhere to dance or sing, a “cash mob” encourages followers to patronize local merchants.

Most recently, customers turned out to patronize Alfredo’s Deli on the same afternoon in late October. More than 230 people responded to an online survey, which chose the business as the “target.” To help promote it, local artist J. Timothy Quirk painted a watercolor poster for the Deli and the Facebook group posted invitations. The poster depicting a bright red building with Italian flags and Deli signs was shared among the 600 “friends” of the T-Town page.

“There is no required minimum, just show up and purchase something to support the business,” Quirk said. “We strengthen our communities when we support locally-owned business. Torrington is an amazing city and this movement we have started here is only the beginning.”

Volunteers

VOLUNTEERS
Westport volunteers make a difference

What a difference a day makes. In Westport, for families in need, they really mean it.

Local volunteers turned out on the last Saturday in October – the national “Make a Difference Day” – to participate in numerous volunteer activities to help others in need. The Town-appointed Westport Make A Difference Committee decided to extend the “Make a Difference” activities beyond the national one-day observance and organized a week’s worth of goodwill activities.

“We work with a variety of non-for-profits in lower Fairfield County,” said Committee Chairwoman Barbara Pearson, “and one of the agencies with the greatest need is the Family and Children’s Agency in Norwalk.”

One of the largest human service agencies in Fairfield County, the agency responds to the needs of children and families, adults and seniors. Its service area includes Norwalk, Wilton, Westport, Weston, Darien and Stamford. The agency had a “wish list” it shared with the Make A Difference Committee.

The Westport Weston Family Y served as drop-off for donations for the agency. Volunteers filled the wish list with non-perishable food items, baby items for families the Foster Care and Family Support Program and even “gently” used Halloween costumes.

Organizers sponsored an assembly line of sorts at the Westport Center for Senior Activities. Volunteers worked for a few hours putting together toiletry kits for homeless men, comfort bags for abused women and arts and crafts for children in need.

Volunteers also encouraged the youngest members of the participating families to pitch in.

“We want to teach our children by example that volunteering one’s time is not only helpful but fun and more important, rewarding,” said Pearson. “By engaging the Town of Westport through various project types, we have been able to foster and cultivate an enthusiastic community every October.”

Manchester CERT volunteers bring helping hands, cool heads to emergencies

To a lost hiker in the 640-acre expanse of Case Mountain in Manchester, the welcome voice in the wilderness you hear just might be one of Manchester’s well-trained search-and-rescue volunteers. For the past 10 years, the town’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) has trained about 250 people in various skills needed in an emergency or major disaster, turning out a special corps of individuals ready to pitch in when first responders are tied up elsewhere.

“We’re just ready for whatever we have to do,” said Donald Janelle, Manchester’s deputy emergency manager. “Whatever the incident needs, we try to accomplish.”

Manchester offers a free eight-week CERT course in the spring that teaches first aid, CPR, emergency communications, search and rescue, and other skills needed in a disaster. The course also includes sections on disaster psychology - understanding how people react under pressure.

Janelle explained that it was an international disaster that sparked the U.S. CERT program.

“It started around 2002 by George Bush. After the Mexico City earthquake, civilians were getting killed when they were trying to help out because all the emergency responders were tied up,” Janelle said.

Manchester is one of about 80 towns in Connecticut with a CERT program and has about 85 members. Those who take the course are not obligated to be on the team. Often, they just want to be better prepared to take care of their families, Janelle said.

The Manchester CERT was formed from the merger of three groups – emergency communications, such as ham radio operators, mountain bike search and rescue, and the Connecticut Canine Search and Rescue.

“It was a natural marriage of the three groups,” said Janelle. He said the CERT team is well-adapted to a variety of responses – urban search and rescue or finding lost hikers in the Case Mountain area.

The CERT team also pitches in at the emergency shelter and provides clerical work involved with emergency operations support, which frees up town resources during an emergency.

“Some people take the class, say ‘thank you,’ and return home confident that they can better protect their families and neighbors,” Janelle said. “Others want to give back to the town, and so they join the team, and this is how they help out.”
Mentoring and cooking on the menu at after-school program

A Glastonbury volunteer program may have hit on the perfect recipe to teach children that homework can be fun to tackle, especially when there is a lot of help and a few tasty snacks around the table.

The Expressive Arts and Cooking program enlists teens from all over town for an after-school program that helps mentor children in Welles Village. Started nine years ago by the Youth Services Action Group, the program matches high school volunteers with about 50 children each week to work on homework, arts, crafts, cooking lessons, and outdoor activities at the Welles Community Center.

“We teach them all the time about manners and how to treat each other,” said Chris Gullotta, who oversees the town’s Youth and Family Services’ Creative Experiences program. “The students who come in from other parts of town learn that it’s a safe place to come to and they have a real community here.”

The volunteers go through a training program and many have mentoring experience by the time they come into the program. Some started out as assistant mentors in middle school so making the next step can be a seamless transition and, for many, a rewarding experience.

“We help kids with their homework, make snacks and play games,” said volunteer Luis Lugo, a 2012 Glastonbury High School graduate. “I like the kids, and I just like helping people and making them happy. It definitely feels good. I don’t even know how to explain it.”

Lugo, now a culinary arts student at Manchester Community College, started as an assistant mentor in middle school and specializes in the cooking program at the Welles Center.

“I’ve been here so long, I even know what some of the kids’ allergies are,” Lugo said.

While there are plenty of fun activities on tap at the after-school program, homework always comes first, Gullotta explained.

“Most of them don’t have anyone at home to help them with their homework,” Gullotta said. “We tell them it’s a bonus that they get to do it here with us.”

A member of the Connecticut Youth Services Association, Glastonbury Youth and Family Services provides a variety of community-involvement opportunities for youngsters that help teach them social skills in a rewarding and educational environment.

Torrington shoppers encouraged to “Like” local business

Not only can social media be social, in Torrington it can also be profitable – especially for local businesses. Torrington merchants have been the targeted focus of “cash mobs” spearheaded by the Facebook group “T-Town Torrington Chatter.”

In the virtual world of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media platforms, a call to action can mobilize scores of followers for a common purpose. A “cash mob” is similar to a “flash mob” but instead of people assembling somewhere to dance or sing, a “cash mob” encourages followers to patronize local merchants.

Most recently, customers turned out to patronize Alfredo’s Deli on the same afternoon in late October. More than 230 people responded to an online survey, which chose the business as the “target.” To help promote it, local artist J. Timothy Quirk painted a watercolor poster for the Deli and the Facebook group posted invitations. The poster depicting a bright red building with Italian flags and Deli signs was shared among the 600 “friends” of the T-Town page.

“There is no required minimum, just show up and purchase something to support the business,” Quirk said. “We strengthen our communities when we support locally-owned business. Torrington is an amazing city and this movement we have started here is only the beginning.”

Organizers of the “cash mob” effort had a mechanism to gauge the interest. In the days leading up to the “cash mob,” anyone who visited the Deli and said “cash mob” received a business card that depicted the poster. Deli owner Alfredo Viscariello kept track of how many cards he distributed.

“Supporting local businesses is one of my favorite things,” Viscariello said. “It’s a great thing for the town no matter how many people show up.”
Community services building gets needed space

The building that houses Southington Community Services was built in the late 1800s as a one-room school house. Later it became the town’s community center and during the 1960s, an addition turned the building into a firehouse. The organization moved to their current location due to a lack of space – their offices were originally in the basement of the Town Hall.

Over the last few years, it has become déjà vu all over again. While the need for services and the number of donations have swelled, the room used to store donations was also being used to store voting machines. The cramped quarters have forced Community Services to use off-site storage and even turn down donations.

“We’ve had to say no to people,” he said.

Once the town moved the voting machines, the building gained 700 square feet of extra space that was renovated by local volunteers – effectively doubling the size of the existing storage room. New shelves were built and new sheetrock walls and floors were installed by the volunteers with help from employees from the nearby Home Depot – which also provided $8,400 worth of supplies for the project.

During the renovation project, Town Manager Garry Brumback visited the site and thanked the workers who donated their time and skills to put the room together.

“This is no small thing for us,” Brumback said. “To give time the way you’re doing in order to transition this into something that’s even better is very special.”

SCS Director Janet Mellon said before the renovation there was no easy way to keep track of inventory, but the new shelves will help take care of that.

“Now they’re going to make sure we can sort the donations and have everything organized,” Mellon said.

Bikers, boarders and bladers gather to clean local park

After being cooped up and snowed in for much of the winter, a sunny weekend and 50 degree weather recently found more than a dozen New Britain teens – as well as a few adults – at a local skate park, not only ready to roll, but ready to clean.

They arrived – some with skates boards in hand, some toting rollerblades and others sitting atop their BMX bikes – to do some spring cleaning and then some long awaited riding, blading or boarding on “toys” that had been tucked away in closets and garages for a long winter’s nap.

For city resident Teddy Luciano, it was the eighth straight year he has helped with the annual clean-up. Luciano said he tries to treat the park with the same respect it treats him – as a safe, fun place to go – and he spent part of the day clearing out snow and leaves from inside the concrete bowl scaled by bikes, boards and blades.

“It’s important to look after the park,” he said. “Rather than here, some kids ride on streets in the city, but it’s good to come here to avoid accidents and stay out of trouble.” After the work was done, there were more than 15 teenage boys and young men using the skate area and enjoying the sunshine on their bikes, skateboards and rollerblades.

Brendan Brown, also from New Britain, watched the crowd from a staircase overlooking the skate park. He and two other friends brought their rollerblades, but deemed the pavement too wet for safe blading. Brown said he and a group of friends have made “clever use of the skate park” to accommodate the sport of skating.

The volunteers say a few minor improvements would make the park an even better place to hang out – and they plan to approach New Britain officials with an offer they hope the city can’t refuse.

“We could do so much with just two jersey barriers — any sort of metal rails the city gets their hands on and can donate,” Brown said. “We care about this park – we always clean it up when we’re here.”
Madison goes to the dogs with new off-leash park

Soon, the answer to “who let the dogs out” will be “Madison residents” at the new off-leash dog park in town. A group of local dog lovers are looking forward to letting their dogs run loose now that the Board of Selectmen has endorsed a request to put a dog park on municipal park land.

The idea of creating a dog park has been discussed for the past three years and was first brought to the town’s recreation commission by a resident who thought the town should have a place for dogs to run free.

Since then, about 15 residents have been pushing for the dog park. A location was selected in an area of land next to an existing field that needs to be cleared of brush. All of the funding will come from private donations and the clearing of land will be done by volunteers, which means the project will not put much of a dent in taxpayers’ wallets.

Officials believe the work will cost between $20,000 and $40,000, but the only public dollars will be for engineering fees and the installation of a fence.

The dog park will be divided into two areas, with one area for small dogs and one area for big dogs and small dogs who like to play with big dogs. A sitting area with benches is also being planned.

Town staff think the preliminary work can be completed by this spring.

“Not only will the park be good for the dogs, it also will be good for the dog owners,” said Scot Erskine, director of the Madison Beach and Recreation Department. “It will be a way for dog owners to socialize, and for the dogs to run free.”

Weston task force helps fill needs at domestic violence safe homes

Butterflies – symbols of new, beautiful beginnings – are the perfect symbol for the latest campaign of the Weston Domestic Violence Task Force.

Task Force Chairwomen Juri Garone and Lorraine Riley have placed two butterfly bushes at Weston Town Hall and the Town Library and turned them into “giving trees.” Dangling from each branch are pieces of paper containing the names of items needed most by those staying in the local Domestic Violence Crisis Center safe houses that serve Weston and the surrounding towns of Norwalk, Westport, New Canaan, Darien and Wilton.

“We bought two butterfly bushes that we plan to plant at the safe houses in the coming weeks, which symbolize the hope of a new beginning, survival, independence and freedom,” Garone said. “Butterflies are delicate creatures, so we loved the symbolism.”

Organizers say that basic everyday household necessities such as towels, toothpaste and blankets are among the items most needed by women who have found a safe haven in these shelters.

“When you flee in the middle of the night, you’re not thinking, ooh, I better grab those,” said Garone. “They’re running for their lives to get to safety and have to leave everything behind.”

Requests that adorn the “giving trees” include phone cards, bus tokens, diapers, feminine products, blankets, bath towels, gift cards to local stores, and outdoor furniture for shelter backyards. The items can be dropped off at the Weston Police Department.

“If you can’t make a monetary donation, you can donate a tube of toothpaste... nothing is too small,” Garone said. “We are looking for basic, basic stuff for those who really need it. And you never know, the items could be potentially going to your neighbor.”
In Cheshire, everything is coming up roses... and marigolds and begonias

Green thumbs abound in Cheshire, and why not – especially when the town has been dubbed the “Bedding Plant Capital of Connecticut.”

Volunteers with a passion for petunias and other colorful flowers have turned once-drab corners into bursts of brilliance. Adopt-A-Spot gardens, as they are called in town, are the handiwork of local volunteer groups.

Church groups, business organizations and others have given an enthusiastic “thumbs up” to the Town Beautification Committee’s Adopt-A-Spot program ever since it began in 2007. Committee members were unsure of the interest when they launched the program but soon learned they had a hit on their hands.

“We received 20 responses the first year,” said Economic Development Coordinator Jerry Sitko.

The committee generated such a strong interest that a lottery was formed to pick the first five volunteer groups to beautify the spots. The Committee chose spots that are in high-visibility areas.

The Adopt-A-Spot just off the heavily traveled Interstate 691 sports a fusion of gold, white and red flowers. On the north end of town, visitors pass by a sunburst of brilliant marigolds. A stand of begonias and sedum on the south end of Cheshire mark the entrance to Bartlem Park, the town’s popular recreation park. A spot along the Yellow House, the town’s youth services building is rich with roses and green potato vine while a variety of summer annuals spruce up an area near the South End Fire House.

Town officials have credited these volunteer gardeners for adding to the quality of life in this town of about 30,000.

“They enhance our town,” Sitko said. And in some cases, can be a sight for sore eyes.

“When you’re stuck in traffic, it’s nice to look up and see these beautiful plantings,” Sitko said.

One-room schoolhouse in Bethel alive with memories

Volunteers restoring a 19th century one-room schoolhouse in Bethel have a vivid idea of what it must have looked like – as well they should – many were students there in the 1940s.

“The fact that I went here, my mother went here and I’m a native of Bethel – I have seen what’s happened to the other one-room school houses,” said 83-year-old Leroy Staib. “Nobody is paying attention to our history. This is our history. That’s why I want to do it.”

Built in 1867 and later enlarged in 1884, Plumtrees Schoolhouse had capacity for about two dozen students from grades one through seven. It closed in 1970 and was later used as a children’s health care clinic.

But those who learned the Three Rs within its walls and others with an appreciation for history do not want its legacy to be forgotten. So in 2006, the Plumtrees School House and Landmark Preservation Committee was formed and a year later, the school earned a spot on the Connecticut Registry of Historic Places.

The town owns the building and the Plumtrees School Association maintains the inside. The group is banking on grants and donations to help with the restoration and much of the labor has been free. For some, it’s been a labor of love.

Don Taylor, who attended grades one through seven at Plumtrees, is among the former students heading up efforts to raise donations to restore the schoolhouse to the way they remember it.

“It was quite an ordeal to find the shutters,” said the 80-year-old Taylor. They tracked down the shutters through an antiques dealer in Massachusetts. To pay for them, the group secured a grant from the Albert Wadsorth and Helen Clark Meserve Memorial Fund, which supports public, charitable and educational projects in the Greater Danbury area. About $13,000 in Meserve grants have helped pay for a new roof, shutters and other materials.

The Bethel Building Department has approved the construction of a new woodshed building. And while there is still more work to be done, the little one-room schoolhouse continues to teach the newest generation in Bethel. Bethel schools bring younger children to visit each spring.

The volunteers are hopeful that more people in town will be inspired to roll up their sleeves and help, particularly with fundraising.

“We need to get younger people involved,” said 78-year-old Ed Rockwell, who attended grades one through four. “I feel it’s an important part of Bethel. A lot of people are descendants of people who attended this school. It’s nice to have it remembered.”
Oxford volunteers lead with their hearts to honor a child’s memory

A new playground for the children of Oxford came together as a labor of love and remembrance.

Lily Park was named in memory of 3-year-old Lily Brooks who died in a car accident in September. Volunteers assembled the park’s playscape with such great care and detail that it prompted the manufacturer to declare that “this was the best community build ever,” said First Selectman George Temple.

“In the finest tradition of New England and Oxford, the town pitched in and got the job done,” Temple said.

The First Selectman also praised the work of the Playscape Planning and Building Committee for its thoughtful planning and design in creating a “safe place for the little people of Oxford.” Much of the materials were purchased through grants or private donations.

In rounding up volunteers this fall, Temple told residents: “You don’t need tools or skill, just the desire to complete this project in the memory of Lily and for the enjoyment of our young children.”

He got a significant response.

Volunteers of all ages, including 84-year-old Town Treasurer Mike Angelini, pitched in to help the child’s family create a place where she will forever be remembered. The Oxford High School cheerleaders and football players from Fairfield's Andrew Warde High School were among the volunteers. Lily’s father, Jonathan Brooks, a teacher at Warde High, helped with construction along with his wife, Amy Brooks, and Lily’s grandparents. Residents planted lilies near the park.

A local contractor donated concrete and dozens of residents turned out with wheelbarrows, shovels and rakes to help spread some 500 yards of mulch.

The state-of-the-art playground is located across from Great Oak Middle School. The playground features two playscapes – one for children 2 to 5 years of age and a second for children 5 to 12. The facilities include sliding boards, swings, ladders and balance beams.

“Oxford was truly together, and all differences were put aside for the love of our kids,” Temple said. “I believe our playscape will be the envy of all, because it was built from the heart.”

Nonprofit group launching ‘Art Escape’ for seniors in Southbury

The organizers behind a nonprofit project with art at its heart are out to prove that learning is endless.

“Art Escape,” the brainchild of Southbury resident Becky Butler, will be a senior community arts center where people over 65 can study music, fine art, literature and more in an environment that supports their creativity and enjoyment.

“The arts are so important on so many levels,” Butler said. “I really believe that learning and trying new things are critical to a happy, healthy lifestyle.”

Butler, a community life director at a retirement community, has assembled a seven-member board of directors, which has been busy seeking grants and reviewing locations. Woodbury is at the top of the list. Organizers say the town is centrally located in Litchfield County in proximity to one of the largest concentrations of retired senior citizens in Connecticut. They envision a facility of about 4,000 to 5,000 square feet.

The approximate 5,000-square-foot facility would feature gallery and reception space in the front and studios and classrooms in the back.

“Art Escape” would be a unique complement to the town’s senior center, an active hub for individuals over 60 who take advantage of trips, lectures, exercise and more. The “Art Escape” would be the first of its kind not only in the state, but in the country, say organizers.

“My vision for Art Escape is to create a center where seniors can come and work independently or within a class and be encouraged to try new mediums,” Butler said. “If someone isn’t a hands-on artist but loves music, theater or literature, there will be those opportunities as well.”

In addition to looking for the right location, organizers are also seeking volunteers to help share their talents and love of the arts.

“If somebody has worked in a museum, they could help in the gallery. If somebody has a marketing background, we could use help in that area,” Butler said.
Volunteers rescue a genealogical gem from the trash bin in Voluntown

It is a given that the spirit of volunteerism is alive and well in Voluntown. After all, the eastern Connecticut border town derived its name from the Colonial “volunteers” who along with their Native American allies fought side-by-side in the so-called “King Philip’s War” of 1675. So it seemed fitting earlier this year that that volunteer spirit loomed large in uncovering a part of the storied beginning of the town during an all-out effort to save a piece of the past.

A dedicated group of volunteers have rolled up their sleeves to preserve the historic former Voluntown Methodist Church, one of the last churches of its kind in New England. Its unique architecture has a sloping floor and the pulpit is near the front entry rather than the rear of the building.

“Voluntown has this incredible history. It’s slowly fading away, and this is an opportunity to bring it back to life, and to really show everyone what we have,” said Voluntown Meetinghouse Society President David Hobbes. “There’s so much history here, and all across America. It’s just fading away and being forgotten. We hope that, by restoring this, we can spark some interest in saving our history.”

During one clean-up day, a crumpled cardboard tube certainly sparked interest in volunteers David Hobbes and Jim Lavoie. Sensing that the contents had historic significance, they plucked it from the trash.

“It was destined to be put on a truck, [but] it’s a major find,” said Meetinghouse Society Member Ty Cool. “Kudos to the two guys who recognized it for what it was and rescued it from the trash.”

The “major find” was an 1843 pen-and-ink map created by local surveyor William Stanton, titled “The Old Parchment: A Correct Copy,” and is a handmade copy of the 1737 map of landholdings in town.

That original map is currently in the State Library in Hartford, said Town Clerk Cheryl Sadowski. She said a color photocopy of the map also hangs in Voluntown Town Hall. The plots identified on the map became the property of the militia members – the “volunteers” – who fought in King Philip’s War.

“Think of the resource this would be for genealogists,” Cool said. “All the more reason it should be displayed.”
West Hartford helps girls build confidence one stride at a time

A group of West Hartford parents hit on a winning combination for instilling confidence in young girls with a program that is both fun and athletic. The result was “Girls in Stride,” a town-sponsored program that is now off and running for its seventh season.

Initially created for elementary school girls, it now includes middle school girls. This season, some 40 girls, ages 6 to 13, meet once a week at a town park for a fun run.

“It’s great, because that’s such an awkward age,” co-founder Lisa Pillow said. “It’s great to build their confidence, positive body image.”

Pillow and Glenn Marcella, both runners, helped start the program with several parents. Since 2010, the girls have trained for two local 5K runs each year.

“When we first started talking about it, we knew there were a lot of options for very ambitious, athletic girls,” said Marcella. “What about the girls that aren’t as athletic? They want to be active and healthy, but there is little for them.”

The program is heavy on the fun and education and lighter on competition.

Every weekly meeting starts with a warm-up that teaches basic running techniques. The youngsters then run for 30 minutes and collect a bracelet for every lap they complete around the quarter-mile park loop.

To add incentives, organizers have created incentives such as “Golden Sneaker” and “Golden Dumbell” for different accomplishments. The girls can earn awards for showing improvement or cheering on a fellow participant. The girls can add a plastic charm to the necklaces each of them wears.

The young participants love the program and so do their parents.

“It’s a way to get them all out there, get them moving, exercising, and they do it the right way,” said parent Amy Baumer. “It’s competitive in a different way – they’re all cheering for each other.”

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East Haven fifth-graders lobby DOT, save local landmark

East Haven’s Farm River bridge is a stone arch structure and a historical monument. It was erected in 1644, and rebuilt in 1876. It was also slated for replacement by the State Department of Transportation – that is, until the DOT ran into the “Bridge Brigade,” a group of local fifth-graders who fought to save it.

After an extensive letter-writing campaign, a petition and a meeting with DOT officials, DOT has decided to refurbish rather than replace the historic structure, providing the students with a valuable lesson about civics and government – and getting involved.

Elementary school teacher Dana Nelson’s class started learning about bridges last year. After hearing about the proposed fate of the historic bridge in their own backyard – and with the encouragement of local officials – they swung into action.

In addition to writing letters and garnering petition signatures, the students held a bake sale and raised more than $400 to donate to the historical society, whose members also lobbied against replacing the bridge. The historical society then visited Nelson’s class to discuss the bridge’s history as the students ramped up their campaign.

When the students met with DOT officials last year, they pressed for more information. Nearly every student had a question, including why structures in Rome have withstood the test of time while newer bridges have not.

Students also asked specific questions about the maintenance and inspection schedules of the stone bridge, availability of federal funding and how long officials believed the bridge would last if nothing was done.

“A group made up of officials, the students, the people from the historical society and people from town all fought to save that bridge,” said East Haven Mayor Joe Maturo. “You can fight City Hall per say, and I don’t just mean the town. They fought to save it. And I think it’s fantastic that the DOT capitulated and they’re going to work around replacing that bridge.”

In calling for its replacement, DOT engineers had said the bridge was structurally and hydraulically inadequate. Now the work to refurbish the bridge will include repointing the masonry mortar, removing the Jersey barriers that line the bridge, and replacing them with a bridge rail.

“Was this a class of fifth-grade kids who became preservationists,” Nelson said. “It was just something they started learning about in class, but this seed was planted and it became a cause for them.”
Nature’s classroom teaches confidence and camaraderie

The great outdoors makes for a great learning experience and for thousands of Connecticut youngsters, it also has also taught them the importance of flora, fauna and friendship.

Welcome to Nature’s Classroom - the residential environmental education program that has been a resource for schools in the Northeast for 40 years. It has 13 locations including four in Connecticut - Colebook, Andover, Ivoryton and Lakeside (Morris).

“It teaches them to think outside the box,” said Danbury fifth-grade teacher Janet Sayegh, whose class recently spent five days at the Colebrook location. “It’s a great bonding experience and it helps them build trust and social skills while relying on people.”

Most schools offer their students a 5-day, Monday - Friday stay at Nature’s Classroom, but shorter programs are also available. After a hearty breakfast, students typically break into their field groups for a morning of exploring. There is a little recreation time after lunch, followed by more hands-on lessons that incorporate nature and life skills. Nature’s Classroom also offers team-building activities for children of all abilities.

Each Nature’s Classroom is unique to its surroundings.

The Colebrook Classroom has more than 500 acres of fields, streams, forest and also includes a small farm. Campers have hiked up Sunrise Mountain using a series of ropes and other trust-building challenges.

In Andover, the Skungamaug River flows through the 300-acre woodland property, providing lessons in fish, amphibians and other creatures that thrive in that habitat.

The Ivoryton Classroom, which is the closest of the four to the shore, has numerous streams, a cedar swamp, two ponds including Bushy Hill Lake, on a 700-acre expanse. Students are also treated to a day trip to Hammonasset State Park to visit tidal flats, a salt marsh and a sandy beach.

There is a touch of history in the Lakeside Classroom. The 300 acre site has cellar holes, bridges, historical wells and even a small cemetery to explore in addition to a beaver pond, swamps and fields.

At the end of their stay, participants come away with valuable lessons and living together for a week creates a sense of confidence and camaraderie that is ultimately brought back to their regular classrooms.

“I’ve had these kids for two years and it’s very emotional to see them solidifying as a team,” said Danbury fourth-grade teacher Rebecca Migiano. “Seeing the kids in a different way is amazing.”

For more information: www.naturesclassroom.org.

Harwinton, Burlington teens find “safe harbor” from bullies

The youth service collaborative that serves the needs of Harwinton and Burlington teens and their families is now bringing both communities together to combat bullying.

Safe Harbor Youth Service, established in August 2012, has received a $1,000 grant to address bullying in Region 10 schools. At the heart of the latest initiative are the people involved – a committee comprised of community members. Beginning early 2014, the group will begin a six-month study on bullying issues that affect not only the students, but also their families.

“This is a wonderful opportunity to again be proactive within the Region 10 schools,” said Superintendent of Schools Alan Beitman. “Inappropriate student conduct takes many forms, and with the support of our parents and staff we can help mentor and guide our youth to become excellent citizens.”

With support from the Torrington Youth Service Bureau and the McCall Foundation, Safe Harbor operates in a satellite office in Harwinton Town Hall. It provides professional adult counselors for teens. Officials say Safe Harbor filled an immediate need for teens who sought relief from stressful societal and family situations.

The bullying initiative is a perfect fit for Safe Harbor’s mission of providing counseling, support and mentoring groups to the region’s youth. The group can re-apply for the grant each year and may be able to receive increased funding depending on the program’s success.

“For years bullying has been going on in many different forms and it’s great to be able to partner with Burlington and the Region in our continued efforts to keep our youth safe and address this growing issue sweeping across our country,” Harwinton First Selectman Mike Criss said. “We need the parents to get involved too so they can help us identify and address bullying concerns in the most effective way.”
Seymour students help New York storm victims

In the aftermath of Storm Sandy, thousands of Staten Island, NY, residents who were still dealing with the disaster got a busload of help from students in Seymour, CT. Coats, blankets, batteries, non-perishable food, and other items were all delivered to families who had lost their homes and belongings.

The collection drive was initially begun by Madeline Taggart of the Oxford Ambulance Association who put out the call for help on various social media outlets. When Seymour High School teacher Mary Deming heard about the collection drive, she recruited Seymour Schools’ Director of Security Rick Kearns, and together they rallied students and the community to pitch in.

Kearns helped coordinate the collection and delivery from all four schools in town to the main collection point at Oxford Ambulance, which had already collected a large number of items from Oxford and other area residents.

Kearns was first sent to Seymour Middle School in his car after being told to “pick up a few things” that had been collected.

On his arrival, Kearns realized he was “going to need a much bigger boat.” About 100 students were waiting with arms full of donated items and a full-sized school bus was eventually “stuffed with stuff” for the storm victims.

Kearns said his heart grew bigger and bigger as he drove up to each of Seymour’s four schools, seeing on his arrival all of the students armed with items.

“I was met at each school by lines of students who stuffed the bus with much needed food, clothing, blankets, cleaning supplies, and toiletries,” Kearns said.

In addition, volunteers and local scouts sorted, bagged, and boxed the items: coats, bottled water, batteries, diapers, baby formula, and more. Then a volunteer from Oxford’s fire department drove the items to families in Staten Island.

“The volunteers and students across the school district were well aware they were helping disaster victims,” Kearns said. “It was a great learning experience for them and they were all motivated and wanted to help more.”

Bridgeport schools put bullying in spotlight

Tell someone.

That message came through loud and clear for Bridgeport students who witness bullying or are the targets of bullies.

“Don’t worry about snitching,” said Tyrone Dunmore of Connecticut Against Violence. “Be strong enough to tell your mother, your grandmother, your teacher. Tell somebody so we can put an end to it.”

Dunmore’s group was among the participants at an education expo for parents and students at Luis Munoz Marin School. He delivered his message to children from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, encouraging all to chant “Bullying is Bull.” The students earned prizes for sharing with the others who they would report to if they were bullied.

“We have to stop it, and the only way to stop it is to be aware of it,” Dunmore said.

Marin Principal Steven Douglas agreed. Making adults aware of a situation can stop it before it gets worse. Douglas also said that students today are more willing to expose bullies.

“There is much more awareness,” Douglas said. “Before, they were afraid and not wanting to communicate that someone was bothering them. They are much more likely to speak up and advocate for themselves.”

Superintendent Paul Vallas said the District may establish a student hot line devoted to reporting bullying. Vallas also discussed bullying on a painful, personal note when he shared his own traumatic experiences of being bullied as a boy.

“I stuttered and stammered, and kids used to threaten to beat me up, so I went to school every day terrified when I was a freshman,” Vallas said.

Jessica Martinez, vice president of the school’s Parent Advisory Council, said the school opted to make bullying a focus of the expo knowing that the topic would attract parents. She said her goal is to eliminate it and that she fears children are exposed to bullying at a very young age.

“Students need a safe, comfortable learning environment,” Martinez said. “These days, bullying starts in first grade,” she said. “And now it involves the Internet and social media, which is something we never had.”
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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