INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR MANAGING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A Connecticut Town & City Compendium
Compiled from the year 2014 issues of Connecticut Town & City
April 2015

Dear CCM Member,

We are pleased to present Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments: A Connecticut Town & City Compendium – our 28th 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.

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Norwich Fire Department making some neighborly accommodations

Like a good host who sometimes has to rearrange the furniture to accommodate a houseful of neighbors, the Norwich Fire Department is helping make its neighbors feel right at home.

The Department’s North Main Street satellite station in the city’s Greeneville section is being renovated to provide meeting space for the Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Committee.

“It ties the station into the community,” Norwich Fire Chief Kenneth Scandariato said. “Since Greeneville School has been closed, they need a home.”

Using Community Development Block Grant funds, the department had previously made renovations to the 117-year-old building. A former police station, the station is the second-oldest firehouse of a paid department in Connecticut. Because of that historic status, renovations must be made with state approval and cannot significantly alter the appearance.

Previous improvements included furnace repairs, a new bathroom, and lead and asbestos removal. The brick façade on the 1896 building also got a fresh sandblasting. To accommodate the neighborhood group, department officials are transforming two first-floor storage rooms – including one that served decades ago as a police holding cell – into meeting rooms.

“We made it a lot more efficient on the firefighters’ side,” Chief Scandariato said. “We had to reinforce the floor to hold the trucks. We’re really proud.”

The neighborhood revitalization committee meets once a month at the fire station, which is staffed 24/7 and houses two fire trucks. To accommodate the committee, firefighters had to pull an engine out so the group could meet in one of the bays.

“When calls come in, and we’re having a meeting, it’s pretty interesting,” neighborhood committee chairman Peter Procko said. “We can’t wait to get in the new space. This room will be nothing but an asset for us.”

Village charm at core of Waterford master plan

A master plan to reshape Waterford begins, well, at the beginning. Jordan Village, the oldest settlement in this waterfront town, is the focus of a study that would help the town promote a distinct “Main Street” feel. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the village has been the seat of town government since the mid-1880s when town meetings took place in the basement of a Baptist church.

Aided by a grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation’s Vibrant Communities Initiative, the town has assembled a team to design a master plan for Jordan Village and the surrounding area. The team includes a historic architect, a landscape architect, and an economic consultant.

“We will invite the public to participate in a hands-on process of planning and design associated with the streetscape and village plan,” Town Planning Director Dennis Goderre said.

Public input will be critical to the process, he said. The town plans at least three more forums to give the public an opportunity to review the master plan team’s initial findings and provide feedback.

Because Jordan Village is one of several unique villages that make up Waterford, town officials point out that there is no single “main street” that defines the town. Officials identified Jordan Village as the focal point for the master plan because it is the most intact and least affected by sprawl.

“It is important to the town to maintain its identity, preserve its integrity, and create a cohesive pedestrian-oriented walkable ‘town center’ that supports village scale economic development,” the town wrote in its request for qualifications (RFQ) to conduct the study.
CIVIC AMENITIES

Bozrah builds on its vision for historic homestead

Seven years after the town of Bozrah purchased a 19th century historic farmhouse in need of a lot of TLC, the revival that followed created a hub of community activity – and there’s more to come.

Maples Farm Park will soon have a network of recreational trails throughout the nearly 30 acres the town acquired in 2007 along with the home. This spring, visitors will be able to hike, bike, or just take a quiet stroll through the countryside.

“The trails are a wonderful use of the property,” said Selectman Kitty McCue, who is also a member of the Maple Farms Commission.

The trail project marks the culmination of fundraising and many volunteer hours. Many of the materials, including stone and the steel used to build a barway for the entrance, have been donated. A stone bench, built by volunteers, is also near the trail entrance.

The Board of Selectmen received a Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Grant after the 2007 purchase to study and evaluate future uses – and a vision began to take shape. Two years later, the town was awarded a $175,000 Small Town Economic Assistance Program grant to pay for part of the renovations. The balance came from bonding and community fundraising.

In 2012, the historic homestead was opened to the public to serve as a community gathering place. Supported by an active Friends of Maples Farm Park, the property now plays host to townwide tag sales, concerts, and a popular Friday night Farmers Market in the summer and early fall.

The TLC, the fundraising, and volunteers have all helped breathe new life into the old house, now a source of community pride. Potential renters are reminded of that on a form that lists acceptable uses of the homestead:

“Please keep in mind that this lovely old lady of a house (birthday 1850) must be treated with common courtesy and respect. Without common sense usage, this valuable old girl’s loss or damage would cause undue costs to the local taxpayer or may be forgone altogether. Leave her in better shape than when you arrived and all will be well.”

Voluntown launches initiative to save historic church

With a mix of rich history and civic pride, the historic Voluntown Methodist Meetinghouse is the perfect backdrop to share the story of this small eastern Connecticut town with tourists and visitors.

Exactly where the meetinghouse will eventually tell that story, however, is the main mission of town officials and a passionate group of volunteers who have been hard at work for years on the restoration.

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. The Board of Selectmen has formed a special committee to investigate relocation possibilities and other options for the 1841 structure.

“You can renovate it in place, you can move. Restoration costs are estimated between $200,000 and $300,000. The independent Voluntown Historical Meeting House Society plans to incorporate as a nonprofit to allow it to seek grants for the project.

Society member Ty Cool, who has been spearheading efforts to save the church, was among the first appointed to the new committee and has embraced his new task. The committee must report its findings to the selectmen by summer 2015.

“I expect to approach it with an open mind, by being objective about how we can best serve the community while at the same time saving a predominant structure,” Cool said.

One option for relocation is on land adjacent to the town hall. In the current location, there is not much elbow room and there are difficulties in hooking up water and sewer. The property is just a bit larger than the building itself and neighboring property owners won’t allow access for repairs.

“Our hopes and aspirations are that the meetinghouse will be restored and utilized as a tourist center where the Voluntown story could be properly told,” said Jack Wesa, chairman of the town Economic Development Commission.
New Bristol logo anchors City’s branding efforts

Bristol is out to market itself and is showing a lot of heart in the process. Building on the slogan that Bristol is “All Heart,” the creative campaign taps into the city’s heritage and is designed to capture the spirit of this central Connecticut city. The new logo, the culmination of several months of research and planning, is one that municipal leaders can tout to potential businesses, homebuyers, and customers.

The city’s marketing committee approved the “All Heart” concept, saying the idea captures the can-do spirit of the town and its grit, courage, and commitment to community. It will be the focal point to sell the city and its renewal.

“What we want is a broad brush and a sporty approach,” said Mike Nicastro, former president of the Bristol-based Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce. He said the concept is one that fits in with sports, business, and the arts.

Nicastro worked with local businesses to help hire a $60,000 marketing consultant that would design the new Bristol brand. It was a collaborative process. City Councilor Henri Martin came up with a suggestion to combine a heart with a scripted letter “B”. That idea drew praise from other officials.

“We have a really unique B now, centered around a heart,” said Bristol Development Authority (BDA) Commissioner Mickey Goldwasser.

Fellow BDA Commissioner Howard Schmelder called it “eye-appealing.” Officials plan to incorporate the new design onto ball caps, shirts, and advertising and are working with the consultant for the official roll-out.

Proponents of the new look say it will appeal to a broad range of people, describing the new look as both cool and vintage, warm and inviting.

“It’s got excitement about it,” Nicastro said.

Guilford’s ‘gateway’ boardwalk is first step of National Scenic Trail

As the gateway to the New England National Scenic Trail, the town of Guilford is making sure that hikers and visitors will take their first steps in style.

The town is replacing a well-worn foot path at its Chitteneden Park with a boardwalk, overlook platform, and benches. The handicapped-accessible boardwalk will connect the park to the shoreline dunes near the southernmost tip of the 215-mile National Scenic Trail, which runs through 39 towns in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

The $100,000 project is being paid for through town funds and approximately $80,000 in grants secured by the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA), including a $25,000 grant from the state Department of Economic and Community Development.

“This is a big deal for the town,” said Parks and Recreation Director Rick Maynard. “Once this is completed, it will be a beautiful, handicapped-accessible walkway for people to enjoy. Plus, it is the gateway to the New England National Scenic Trail.”

It is also a big year for the shoreline town. Guilford is celebrating the 375th anniversary of its founding with events throughout the year. The dedication of the new boardwalk in June will also celebrate the first time a National Trail system “connects the water with the mountains,” said Anniversary Committee Chairwoman Veronica Wallace.

“It is such a microcosm of everything,” Wallace said. “We have the water, we have the mountains, we have the trails, we have so many things to offer and people should just celebrate our community.”

CFPA Executive Director Erik Hammerling praised the town for its support and underscored the importance of the project, noting that with its proximity to Shore Line East, it will be the only national trail gateway within walking distance to a train station.

“There are only 11 national trails in the country, and this is one of them,” Hammerling said. “The Parks & Recreation Department has done a phenomenal job. This boardwalk and viewing platform will be a very welcome addition to the gateway of the trail system that will undoubtedly be enjoyed by so many.”
Untouched by time, historic Lisbon tavern is one for the ages

When the town of Lisbon stepped in to save a Revolutionary War era tavern two years ago, it set into motion a process that could very well bring national attention to the architectural gem.

The Burnham Tavern was not only an 18th century social gathering place for townspeople, it also served as a rendezvous point for local militia prior to the start of the war, a stop for troops during the Revolutionary War, and as a naval recruitment center.

Lisbon voters approved the $900,000 purchase in 2012 and earlier this year the town entered into a 99-year lease with the Lisbon Historical Society to assume stewardship of the historic home and the 129-acre property. Historians say the structure of the tavern has tremendous historical significance since it has undergone little or no structural updates.

“Thirty years ago, I would come across five or ten houses that were relatively untouched every year,” Champagne said. “At this point, I’d say I see one every five years. It’s really rare to have something as unaltered as this.”

Through Lamarre’s research, the Burnham Tavern earned a spot on the State Register of Historic Places in June. The next step is to have it listed on the national register, she said. The state designation now opens up opportunities for state grants and, Lamarre said, sends a message that the town recognizes its significance to the community.

“This is an important part of our community,” Lamarre said. “We treasure it and we’re going to take care of it.”
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

Creativity & community: New Milford embracing the arts

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the vision for downtown New Milford has been full of artistic flair.

Nearly a year after the town celebrated the opening of a popular downtown art gallery, Mayor Pat Murphy and others are preparing to transform the defunct factory into an entertainment space. The old building, says Guimond, did more than speak to them: “It screamed.”

The town of Cheshire was listening. After two public hearings on the proposal, the Planning and Zoning Commission unanimously approved a zone change that allowed the vacant building to be used as an arts center with mixed use of retail and restaurant space.

Town support was strong – some retailers expressed interest in moving their businesses closer to the new center once it opens.

P&Z Chairman Ed Kurtz Jr. said the building was “the perfect building for the proposed use.”

Eight weeks after the P&Z approval and with the help of a state grant, the group closed on the 64,000-square-foot property, purchasing it from Dalton Enterprises for $725,000. The town will use the remainder of the funds for environmental cleanup of the three-acre site.

Construction is expected to start in the spring with much of the work aimed toward restoring its original look. Ball & Socket intends to pursue a historic designation for the building. A working factory for almost 150 years, the plant once produced buttons for uniforms worn by soldiers, police, firefighters, and more.

The hometown partners bring a deep and varied background in the arts – as all three have established professional careers in the field. Somogyi is a faculty member of the Yale School of Drama. Guimond is a music administrator for the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center and Daly is the founder of the international Multimedia, Artist Network, Idea Exchange, and Collaboration, aka MANIAC.

When completed in 2017, the new center will represent the fulfillment of a dream of three local high school friends who long envisioned a community space for spontaneity, creativity, and a destination that Guimond says, “will be worth a special trip.”

New arts center planned for Cheshire factory

A Cheshire factory that once produced military buttons and driveway sealer is turning into a work of art – literally.

Ball & Socket Arts is the brainchild of three longtime friends who are turning a childhood dream into reality. When completed, the town will have a new arts center that will feature galleries, classrooms, performance areas, restaurants, and more.

Jeffrey Guimond, who along with former Cheshire High School classmates Kevin Daly and Ilona Somogyi, said the trio has long wanted to transform the defunct factory into the creative space. The old building, says Guimond, did more than speak to them: “It screamed.”

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CIVIC AMENITIES
Perseverance, partnerships help save historic Stonington farm

The vision to preserve one of Stonington’s historic farms has always been there – but raising enough money to do so was a challenge. However, the commitment never wavered and after a two and a half-year campaign spearheaded by Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center in Mystic and the Trust for Public Land, supporters celebrated recently with a ribbon-cutting at the newly created Coogan Farm Nature & Heritage Center.

More than $4.1 million was raised in public and private money to purchase 35 acres of the farm and preserve a resource prized for its environmental and educational value. The nature center and trust helped raise enough money to not only buy the land but to renovate two buildings and create a park. The Coogan family also donated 11 acres. Organizers also secured a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and funding from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

The partnerships created along the way will enhance the quality of life for many people in the community. The new center’s “Giving Garden” is a prime example. The two-acre plot was planted with produce this year through a partnership with the local United Way.

“We like the idea of keeping the ‘farm’ in Coogan Farm,” said Pequotsepos Nature Center Director Maggie Jones. “This has been part of the plan all along and the partnership with the United Way is a great first step. This also provides lots of programming opportunities.”

The “Giving Garden” will help raise awareness of the United Way’s food distribution program, said Virginia Mason, President and CEO of the United Way of Southeastern Connecticut. She said the United Way food bank distributes about 2.7 million pounds of food each year and the need is growing.

“The availability of fresh produce will make a measure of difference in the health of the recipients,” Mason said.

Westport hosts a “walk and talk” about downtown development

Westport’s Downtown Steering Committee has covered a lot of ground through many months of talks, meetings, and surveys about the town’s master development plan and vision to bring more residential and business opportunities to the shoreline community.

The latest gathering over the future of the downtown was a little different - this one literally covered a lot of ground. As part of a weekend-long design “charrette,” a collaborative discussion among numerous stakeholders, Committee members, town officials, consultants, and others toured the downtown to personally get public input on a variety of issues.

The town’s master plan has identified four key points – make downtown more pedestrian friendly, enhance the connection to the waterfront, upgrade traffic management, and develop specific projects for the downtown.

The group walked for two hours, visiting more than a dozen downtown sites. They took photographs of areas they identified for further discussion and listened to shoppers, who obliged with suggestions of their own. Not all input centered on building up the downtown, but rather removing some impediments to the waterfront. One three-story building on Main Street, said one shopper, is blocking the view to the shoreline.

First Selectman Jim Marpe said the Steering Committee brings a “project management approach” to development, one that helps preserve the small town character while planning for a more vibrant, livable downtown with attractive dining, recreational, and entertainment opportunities. Marpe selected Melissa Kane to chair the Steering Committee earlier this year, lauding her ability to work with a diverse board and calling her “a good listener.”

Kane and others were all ears as they toured town. She says citizen input has been essential from day one. More than 3,000 residents responded to an online survey about downtown.

“Westporters adore Westport,” Kane said. “We just need to make it better.”
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

Creature comforts: Shelton unveils new animal shelter

Man’s best friend may be the dog, but for cats and dogs in Shelton in need of rescue, their best friends are clearly those of the two-legged variety.

City officials, members of the Animal Shelter Committee, and volunteers recently celebrated the long-awaited opening of a new animal shelter designed with three functions in mind: a safe, secure place for strays and lost pets, adoption, and humane education.

The $1.4 million building replaces a 40-year-old concrete block shelter that committee members say was “literally falling down.”

Seven years in the planning, the building took just over a year to complete from groundbreaking to ribbon-cutting and came in at budget. Voters overwhelmingly approved its funding at a November 2012 referendum. The city provided utility work and site work which included grading a city-owned hillside. Officials said the project also got “rave reviews” from the state Department of Agriculture.

At the recent ribbon-cutting, committee members had high praise for City Animal Control Officer Sheryl Taylor for her “knowledge and input,” the Board of Aldermen, the city’s Public Works Department, and Mayor Mark Lauretti.

Lauretti returned the compliments, saying of the committee, “to have stayed within the budget and get the product that they got is a credit to them.”

The shelter, formally dubbed the Shelton Animal Shelter and Adoption Center, will be staffed by the animal control officer, an adoption coordinator, a part-time animal control officer, a clerk, and volunteers.

The shelter features more than two dozen new dog kennels, a cat “condo” and playroom, and a special adoption area where families can meet prospective pets and shelter staff can assess compatibility. Committee Secretary Gail Craig, who is also a board member of the Friends of the Shelton Animal Shelter, said promoting adoptions was among the committee’s main priorities in order to find animals “the loving homes they deserve.”

East Haven to re-use old school for community programs

Out with the old, in with the new is an expression associated with the New Year, but in East Haven it also means finding an adaptive re-use for the town’s old high school. If all goes as planned, the redevelopment of the school property will include a new town pool, a new youth basketball facility, and a new community center.

Mayor Joseph Maturo, Jr. said the town has published a Request for Proposals from developers for a mixed-use plan that will generate new tax revenue and provide new, modern athletic and community facilities. The plan also calls for part of the property to be used for senior housing including independent living and assisted living.

“Our Biddy Basketball program is home to hundreds of families in town and is a staple in our community,” Maturo said. “Similarly, thousands of people participate in our town aquatics programs. As a result, development of the property will require the developer to build and provide the Town with new facilities for these beloved town programs.”

After it is redeveloped, the town estimates the property will generate between $400,000 and $600,000 in new tax revenue each year which could be used in a variety of ways. For example, the projected new revenues would be equivalent to about a quarter-mill tax decrease. Maturo said other uses for the new revenue could include a capital improvement program to provide public works with new machinery and renovate existing fields, roads, and town buildings to better serve residents.

The completed redevelopment project will be a win-win for East Haven, as the town expects the new community facilities will improve the town’s financial position and provide improved services and recreational opportunities for residents.
CIVIC AMENITIES

Ridgefield working to accommodate bikers and hikers on multi-use trail

Ridgefield’s latest recreational initiative is more than just a walk in the park. Town officials have joined with community organizers to allow bicycles on a utility-owned rail trail that will ultimately connect to the town’s recreation trail by next year.

The initiative is part of a bigger plan to connect the multi-use trail to the Norwalk River Valley Trail (NRVT), which spans five towns from Norwalk to Danbury.

Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi said construction on the multi-use trail will include building a boardwalk where the trail cuts through the Great Swamp. That portion of the project will require state and local permits, Marconi also said the town has been approved for funding through a regional planning program for part of the project.

“Upon completion, we hope people will be able to travel around the Parks and Rec trail and then enjoy a walk, bike ride, or jog down to Branchville — it should be about 10 miles round-trip, all in Ridgefield,” Marconi said.

Officials have partnered with the Ridgefield-based Leading Initiatives for New Connections (LINC) to move the project forward.

“We fully support their plan to promote a healthy lifestyle through easy accessibility and different modes of transportation,” said LINC Co-Chairwoman Jacqui Dowd.

Town officials and organizers are working with CL&P, which owns the rail trail, to bring bicycles to the trail. Enhancements to the rail trail, such as railings and fencings, are necessary, Marconi said.

“There are areas where the embankments are steep and rocky, and railing is necessary for safety reasons,” Marconi said.

Organizers of the Norwalk River Valley Trail have hailed the town’s efforts for making bicycles part of the bigger picture and it is seen as a boon to recreation as well as to business.

“The rail trail is seen as a vital NRVT spur, connecting walkers and bikers on our trail with Ridgefield Center’s restaurants and shops,” said the NRVT committee in a recent news release.

Westport residents revel in a return to agricultural roots

A town-owned farm in Westport is helping to bring residents of all ages back to the land.

The historic Wakeman Town Farm has become a popular community hub for education, entertainment, and just some good old-fashioned fun. First Selectman Jim Marpe said farm classes and activities help teach people the importance of sustainable living and provide exposure, for the first time for some, to an actual farm.

“I am old enough to have grown up near farms,” Marpe said. “I didn’t grow up on a farm, but I saw farms. We were able to go out and get fresh vegetables, so I understood where food came from. That is harder and harder to understand in our society, so I think this is great. It’s easy to see how popular this is with all the kids, of all ages.”

Visitors can experience a range of hands-on agricultural practices - from homesteading to cutting-edge technology. A perfect example was served up at the recent townwide “Green Day.”

One exhibitor showed off skills that have been in her family for six generations by expertly shearing sheep. Adults and children took part in an old-fashioned Maypole dance and the latest in technology was on display in a new greenhouse. Donated by the Westport Women’s Club, the solar-powered greenhouse uses an automatic watering system.

There are currently about 40 children taking classes at the farm. A three-week summer camp will provide opportunities for youngsters to harvest plants and set up a farmer’s market, among other activities.

“Young, young children are understanding what sustainability is all about, and how much fun it is,” Marpe said. “These kids are having fun, whether it’s with the sheep and the goats, the ducks or just the gardens. These things may take generations to change the way we do things.”

Westport’s town farm has given them a great start.
Less is more with Glastonbury zoning changes

With a few tweaks to existing zoning laws, Glastonbury has begun paving the way to a more vibrant town center that will feature a mix of retail and residential – and loads of curb appeal.

Town officials are hopeful that the rezoned area along the main arteries of New London Turnpike, Hebron Avenue, and Main Street will serve as proof that bigger is not necessarily better. The new zoning regulations reduced the minimum square footage for lots from 60,000 square feet to 40,000. Community Development Director Kenith Leslie said the changes were made to help preserve the character of existing neighborhoods, ease traffic and cut down on noise and light pollution as well as storm water runoff typical in larger retail zones. Leslie said potential projects that would be good fits are streetscape improvements, pedestrian and bicycle use, and new residential development.

“The most significant change is the potential to introduce housing into the district,” Leslie said. “We can potentially do a better job minimizing curb cuts on our busy arterial roads like Hebron Avenue and Main Street. We can share parking in a better manner and site buildings in a better way.”

The new regulations followed months of public hearings on the issues. The Town Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission strongly supported reducing the minimum square footage to 40,000 feet. Members of the Town Council, which serves as Glastonbury’s zoning authority, expressed confidence that the town is headed in the right direction.

“It is critical for our economic sustainability,” Councilman William T. Finn said. “This is a model we have to pursue in terms of how we are able to enhance our economic position. We need to look at this for our future growth.”

New Haven banking on Union Station as major economic catalyst

When the Great Recession of 2008 swept through the state, countless capital projects were put on hold. New Haven officials are excited about one such proposal that is now back on track.

A plan to substantially upgrade busy Union Station and its surroundings is picking up steam again. City officials say the project will leverage state and federal grants geared toward transit-oriented development. Key to the proposal is the creation and state approval of a Union Station Development Authority, which would oversee development, marketing, and bonding. Mayor Toni Harp, who served in state Senate 21 years, said it’s conceivable that the General Assembly could approve the development authority in the 2014 session.

With more than 740,000 riders a year, Union Station is the busiest rail station in the state, well ahead of Stamford’s 385,000 passengers. The New Haven terminal is also the 11th busiest in the nation behind San Diego and just ahead of Wilmington, Delaware. Union Station ridership also continues to grow with reverse commuters who work in New Haven.

Economic development officials envision a revamped Union Station with more retail and restaurants and greatly expanded parking. It would be the anchor of a transit-oriented neighborhood that could support new residential and commercial development.

“This is a no pie in the sky plan. It is achievable. There is enough happening in the next five to 10 years to keep our options open and not close off development,” said development commissioner Pedro Soto.

The station’s 880-space parking garage is bursting at the seams. There is a 450-person waiting list for monthly spaces. The parking issue has become more urgent now that the former Coliseum site that had been used for parking is slated to be developed into residential, retail and office space. As a result, the city’s plan now includes construction of a second 645-space garage at the north end of the terminal. At an estimated cost of $14.8 million, the second garage would be part of a residential building with adjacent commercial development.

“From the city’s perspective, it can’t just be a garage. It would be very detrimental to the Hill-Downtown plan if we just had a wall of parking along Union Avenue,” said Economic Development Administrator Kelly Murphy.
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Greenwich gives a nod to history while building for the future

The old building had history. The old building had character. The old building also sat dangerously close to the river and it had structural issues that meant it could not be moved to higher ground.

But what’s old is new again – one of the parts of Greenwich’s plan to redevelop a section in its Glenville Historic District. An iconic 19th century Italianate building, perched precariously on the banks of the flood-prone Byram River, has given way to a new mixed-use brick building, with the blessings of the Historic District Commission.

“It’ll be sort of an important time in the history of Glenville,” said Joan Caldwell, a long-time member of the Representative Town Meeting.

Caldwell grew up in the historic neighborhood, which in 2007 was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The District is known for its central winding valley and the steep-sloped Byram River that bisects it.

The developers of the new two-story, 4,237 square-foot building say the mixed use space will include retail on the ground floor and apartments on the second floor.

“It’s an exciting building,” Caldwell said. “It fits into the town beautifully.”

The new building is one of several enhancements made in Glenville over the past decade. The town and private donors provided $6.5 million to renovate a large civic center used for all types of recreational activities. The town also has completed a $2.8 million renovation of the nearby Glenville fire house.

Caldwell has seen many changes come to her neighborhood, and while memories will help keep the past alive, she likes what she sees moving forward.

“I just think all of this is coming together,” Caldwell said.

Brownfield remediation key to riverfront revival in Torrington

Torrington has begun turning brownfields into something greener – both economically and environmentally and the early stage of the City’s most recent project is just scratching the surface, literally.

“The contamination on the site will determine what we need to do,” Economic Development Director Erin Wilson said. “This is a good idea of what will come from it.”

The city purchased the vacant property in 2013 for just 1 dollar. Plans call for paving over most of the space to create a parking lot and the balance of the property may lend itself to coveted green space along the banks of the Naugatuck River. The entire $670,000 project is being funded through an EPA revolving loan fund.

“I think it’s a great step forward,” Wilson said. “It also puts us on the map in the state that Torrington is serious about brownfield remediation.”

The project has garnered support from the public and city merchants. A recent hearing drew no comments in opposition. City Planner Martin Connor said the plan is flexible enough to be modified depending on the amount of remediation needed, but enhancing the riverfront for public use would be the ideal goal.

“If we can add green space, everybody is going to be in favor of that,” Connor said.

Wilson, who joined the city staff earlier this year, noted that brownfield conversion is part of the city’s four-year economic development plan, which also includes helping existing businesses and attracting more manufacturing jobs to Torrington.

“I think the most important thing is working with the community and working with the businesses and trying to make them know that we care and that the community cares for them,” Wilson said.

“By supporting them, we can bring more business to the area.”
Manchester’s “coworking” concept catching on

When the Manchester officials were looking for a way to energize the town’s business district, they hit on a concept that celebrates individuality, creativity, and collaboration. The result: one of the first “coworking” spaces in the region – Axis901 – was launched.

The business model is attractive to freelancers, self-employed individuals, or former home workers. It provides a space for people to work independently but collaboratively in a shared space.

“It’s a great place to work and a great environment to be in,” said Manchester Director of Planning Mark Pelligrini. He along with Chris Silver, the director of Manchester’s Neighborhood and Families Office, helped spearhead the local coworking initiative last year.

It’s a concept that is beginning to catch on around the world in recent years. In 2012, there were approximately 1,300 coworking sites, more than double what existed in 2006.

Manchester officials are able to tout Axis901 as a space that offers “technology, amenities, location, and affordable pricing.” Established in the heart of the historic downtown in the 900 block of Main Street, Axis901 occupies the second floor of a building that also houses a first-floor art gallery and Manchester Community College classrooms.

The space includes three private offices, a large common area, and free Internet and printing. Another inducement is free two-hour parking, courtesy of Manchester’s Downtown Services District. The town also uses Axis901 to host events that promote community events.

Among the first to set up shop at Axis901 shortly after it opened in May 2013 was the RCJ Creative Group. Its CEO Jeremy Toce said the coworking space provided a fantastic opportunity to work among other startups.

“It’s a really fabulous commercial,” said Committee Chairwoman Ann Monteiro. “It makes me want to go.”

Monteiro said the commercial came about after merchant Justin Wirtalla of Wirtalla Visual gave the committee video taken from the first two years of First Fridays. Metrocast offered to air the spot in exchange for being named a sponsor. The spot, which would have cost $15,000 if not for the deal, will air on Metrocast 300 times a month until October.

The video depicts a festival of families, food, arts, and dance surrounded by the retail shops including the popular antique stores that have helped rebrand the former textile town as an antiques destination. With lively music in the background and scores of people enjoying themselves, the video leaves viewers with one final invitation: Putnam – Vintage Feel, Modern Appeal.

And it’s coming to a TV near you.
Innovative Ideas for Managing Local Governments

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Spurring regional growth the “talk of the town” in South Windsor

Education, communication, and collaboration – especially collaboration – dominated the discussion during a recent economic development panel discussion sponsored by the South Windsor Chamber of Commerce.

Local officials agreed that towns already collaborate well when it comes to certain programs or items. South Windsor Town Manager Matt Galligan listed many examples, including sharing traffic studies, equipment purchases, and even technological expertise. But economic development sometimes brings challenges.

“Why is it we can do it for all the other things, but we can’t do it for economic development?” Galligan said.

Keynote speaker Lyle Wray, of the Capital Region Council of Governments, said time is of the essence for towns to focus on providing training opportunities for the next generation. He said the average skilled worker is only about 10 years from retirement and, therefore, training and retaining talent is key.

He touted an early college program that has been making a difference in Minnesota. Students at the program graduate with an associate’s degree at no cost. Part of its success is fostering a culture of learning.

“We should have thousands of kids in these programs,” he said. “It wouldn’t cost any money. There is no tuition. It’s a mindset.”

Panelists also recognized the great deal of emphasis and pressure placed on school districts to graduate college-bound students. However, a year later many students drop out before getting that degree.

For the 22- to 44-year-old skilled workers, panelists underscored the importance of designing communities attractive to this particular demographic with amenities to enhance the quality of their lives and their towns.

South Windsor Mayor Dr. Saud Anwar said there are some improvements that call for long-term investments while others – low-hanging fruit – can be worked on immediately. The common denominator, he said, is a willingness to share.

“We have to find ways to create partnerships,” Mayor Anwar said. “We need to look at collaboration rather than competition.”

Hartford rewarding creativity, growing economic strategy

Officials in Hartford are banking on the creativity that people in the capital city possess and the city is using $1 million in federal economic development funds to bring the best ideas to light.

Round one of the “Strong Cities, Strong Communities” (SC2) competition showcased the talent and visions of more than 60 creative teams all vying for tens of thousands of dollars in winnings. The crux of the competition requires teams to develop detailed economic strategies aimed at attracting start-up businesses and retaining entrepreneurs.

One of just three U.S. cities to qualify for the funding under the federal SC2 program, Hartford focused on mining its community’s creative talent, while the other recipients – Las Vegas and Greensboro, NC – applied the funds to specific projects or hired a consulting firm.

“By the interest that we’ve had in this program, I can tell the spirit of innovation is alive and well and strong in our community,” Mayor Pedro Segarra said during a recent announcement of the first round of winners, who split $100,000 in prize money.

The first-round winners will move on to the next part of the competition this spring where $800,000 will be split among the top six finishing in that round. At the end of the competition, the entrepreneurial proposals will become property of the city.

Topping the competition in the first round was Hartford Health Works, a team of medical technology and healthcare companies. The group’s proposal identified the city’s existing strengths in healthcare technology and envisioned Hartford as a “hub” for the medical device industry.

Others winners included Community Solutions, a team composed of advocates seeking to end homelessness. The group pitched an idea that would establish a “food cluster” at a vacant factory. The building could house dozens of food-based enterprises and provide training for people working in the food sector industry.

Hartford Rocks, the third winning team, focused on transforming the city into a destination for young entrepreneurs. To create an attractive, livable city for young professionals the group identified the need for synergy among four key components – transportation, arts and entertainment, streetscapes, and economic development.
A summer bus tour of North Haven businesses is intended to give economic development officials a close-up look of the now, the then, and the soon-to-be.

First Selectman Mike Freda said the tour shows members of the Economic Development Commission the opportunities that exist for more commerce as well as projects in progress. The tour will also identify some of the bumps that may be in the road. From their window seat, commissioners will see firsthand the successes and the opportunities waiting for successes.

“The goal is to grow top line revenue and bring in businesses that create jobs,” Freda said. “I’m optimistic about future growth. It’s taking longer than anticipated, but good things are happening.”

Among the stops is an apartment building now under construction on the site of a former car dealership. When complete, the building will have 160 rental units for senior citizens. The tour will also motor past a Yale New-Haven Hospital walk-in center, a veterinary hospital, a Pfizer office, and two recently opened businesses. The site of a former chemical plant is now slated to become a train depot and town officials are working with the state Department of Transportation for funding.

Commission members also will make a stop at an old movie theater that is getting a 21st century facelift and at a former landfill that will eventually be a new landing spot for solar panels. Freda said the town has been proactive finding the right fit for incoming businesses.

“We bring in new businesses into sites zoned for businesses,” Freda said. “When Staples went out of business we found the trendy retailer Five Below to take its place and when the Dollar Store went out we brought in a Comcast service center.”

Road trip: North Haven getting a window seat to the future

Winchester hoping visitors get the picture with new map

Gina Sartirana liked what she saw the minute she saw it. Sartirana, vice chairwoman of the Winchester Economic Development Commission, was immediately drawn to the colorful tourist map of a picturesque New England village with a quaint retail center and a beautiful lake surrounded by mountain scenery.

“My first thought was, ‘I would love to go to this town!’” Sartirana said. “She won’t have to go far because it’s her home town of Winchester.

Sartirana and other town officials recently got their first look at a new artfully done town map, which will be used to drive more tourists and commerce into the Litchfield County town.

The Economic Development Commission is circulating 25,000 of the colorful maps this summer. They will be offered free at a variety of locations in town as well as in surrounding areas.

The price was right for the town – zero. Nearly four dozen advertisers paid for the production of the two-sided tourist map which features businesses, landmarks, and tourist attractions. The sponsoring merchants will be specially featured, but officials say merchants who did not buy space are still included. Created by a Massachusetts-based company, the hand-drawn maps are expected to be in use for up to two years.

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” said EDC Chairman Richard Labich. “It’s wonderfully done – a work of art.”

In addition to the map, the EDC is also circulating a survey among local businesses to determine where improvements can be made to stimulate more commerce. So far, many agree that the map is a great place to start.

“Everybody on the EDC is really excited about it,” Sartirana said. “We’re excited about what it’s going to do for the town.”
Meriden eyes financial incentives to spur business

Look to the east – that’s what officials in Meriden are hoping prospective business owners will do when they consider locating in the Silver City.

The city is working on plans to offer tax abatements and other incentives for its east side, particularly along the stretch of East Main Street between I-91 and Middlefield. Eligible properties would have to meet certain state statutory thresholds to take advantage of the program, such as meeting the $3 million minimum for improvement costs. That is the trigger that allows municipalities to fix property assessments for up to seven years.

Deemed a “priority area,” that portion of the city has great potential for new businesses because of the building stock currently available, including vacancies at a plaza and at the site of a former car dealership.

“Anyone that’s interested in that general area, these incentives may cause them to look further east,” said City Planner Dominick Caruso.

The incentive program allows officials to expand their economic development focus beyond the downtown, which is undergoing significant transformation thanks to some $100 million in redevelopment projects. Ongoing plans include mixed-used development with pedestrian friendly surroundings. A new $20 million transit center will be part of the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield line and another $14 million initiative includes a major flood control project.

Supporters of the new abatement and incentives for the east side say it is moving the city in the “right direction.” It will translate to lower tax burdens over an extended period of time and deliver greater returns for investors.

The program also will help spread the word that Meriden is “a business friendly town,” said City Councilor Larue Graham.

Putnam’s mixed-use complex weaves vibrant tapestry of past and present

Rooted deeply in our New England history, textile mills are undergoing a rebirth and reuse across Connecticut and Putnam has big plans for one of the most historic mills of all.

Cargill Falls Mill was the first textile mill in Connecticut to produce cotton broadcloth while drawing its power from the Quinebaug River that roars behind it. Putnam is once again harnessing that power and along with state and federal grants and vision, the town is poised to bring the old mill back to life in a big way.

The Lofts at Cargill Falls Mills is a planned multiple-use development that will offer a mix of more than 80 market-rate and affordable apartments. The mill is located just a short walk from downtown restaurants, retail, and its well-known antiques district. It is also close to the region’s main hospital, Day Kimball. With spectacular views of the falls and river, town officials and the developer anticipate a lot of interest from young professionals. There is already a waiting list for the apartments.

“People can live in our mills and walk to work or walk to restaurants or shops. People are changing the way they want to live.”

The project has received $5 million in state funds from the Competitive Housing Assistance for Multifamily Properties initiative and has applied for $2.5 million from the federal Urban Act program. The site has undergone brownfield remediation through state environmental and economic development programs and, as the oldest cotton mill in the state, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Putnam officials say the project has all the necessary licensing approvals from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for the hydroelectric generation.

The town is working with the mill owners and developer to ensure that The Lofts fit naturally with other projects in town and will be attractive to businesses interested in locating at the new Quinebaug Regional Technical Park.

“This is a true enhancement of what we’ve already been building in Putnam,” Town Administrator Doug Cutler said.

Construction is expected to start in March 2015.
Call it a harvest of harmony

The Community Farm of Simsbury (CFS) has fostered a collaborative environment for both urban and suburban students. Simsbury Board of Education Chairwoman Lydia Tedone said the Community Farm is the perfect atmosphere for collaborative projects and field trips between Simsbury and Hartford students.

“We are a very open system,” said Tedone. “What all school districts want to do is develop good, productive citizens.”

Tedone said all fourth-graders in Simsbury public schools take part in the farm program. There they mingle with students from Hartford and other areas to learn where food comes from and how to be effective stewards of the natural resources.

The CFS, which includes 70 leased acres, is a collaborative organization that promotes education and local agriculture, while practicing sound environmental stewardship. It donated more than seven tons of organic produce to families in need in 2012 through partnerships with Simsbury Social Services, Gifts of Love, Hartford Food System, Foodshare, and Billings Forge Community Works. The original farm was once home to poor residents of Simsbury who worked the land. A dairy farm later replaced it and in 1981 the town decided to close the farm. From there, town officials sought different options that would meet the charitable mission of the deed.

CFS recently merged with Avon-based Gifts of Love, a non-profit social service agency, that serves the Greater Hartford region. The joint mission is unchanged - providing food for those in need and offering educational programs.

Derek Freiman, father of a Hartford student who recently visited the farm as part of an educational field trip, said the visit underscored the benefits of exposing children to diverse backgrounds, a new environment, and the sharing of ideas. For some of his daughter’s classmates, it was their first trip out of Hartford.

Collaboration and communication pave way for new partnerships in Killingly

If it’s about education, it’s up for discussion in Killingly – all year long. The town has created the Killingly Community Engagement Council (KCEC) to promote community involvement in education throughout the year.

“We need to understand the problems and issues in the community, and the public needs to understand the issues educators face getting kids educated, successful and productive,” KCEC Chairwoman Laurie Leclerc said.

The KCEC, which grew out of a school board advisory committee, held a townwide forum recently to help identity short- and long-term goals. Leclerc said the group pared down 30 pages of ideas into 18 items that included identifying community partnerships and programs, creating a resource guide, implementing an all-day kindergarten and preschool and establishing a Killingly alumni network.

Organizers expect some of the tasks – such as identifying community partnerships - to take six months to a year.

“It would mean finding out who does what and building a resource guide,” Leclerc said. “Creating an alumni network wouldn’t be super complicated, but it would require a good deal of coordination.”

Superintendent Kevin Farr said the school board will have an active and collaborative role at the KCEC forums. Concerns raised by parents and others can be addressed directly because school board members and the superintendent will be attending. Farr said school administrators will also be asked to make presentations on important issues brought before the council.

“We can do forums, have the meetings at locations that would accommodate 400 people, and put it on television,” Farr said.

KCEC members say they are taking a broad view and hope to increase community involvement throughout the year – not just at budget time.

“We’re all stakeholders,” Leclerc said. “Studies show that the community benefits directly from student success. National and state data speak to the fact that for every failed student the costs to society are huge. Those costs are significantly greater than the cost of educating that child successfully.”
New London educators do their homework on dual-language program

“Vaya al oeste, joven.”

Heeding Horace Greeley’s famous suggestion to “Go West, young man,” a group of New London educators set out with the goal of expanding their district’s dual language English-Spanish program.

Specifically, their mission landed them in Omaha, Nebraska, one of 15 public school districts in the country that offers dual-language programs from kindergarten to 12th grade. Omaha’s highly regarded program, which teaches 2,300 students at nine schools, is recognized by the Ministry of Education of Spain.

“Primarily, we went to see firsthand how these different schools are functioning,” said Maureen Ruby, New London’s supervisor of professional learning and career development. “It’s one thing for someone to tell you about a school, but it’s another thing to walk into the school and see it actually happening.”

The New London contingent visited five schools where students learn in both English and Spanish. Although Omaha’s student population is 15 times that of the Whaling City, officials said both cities shared familiar challenges because of similarities in economics and diversity.

One of the differences, however, is the teacher certification process. New London officials said a critical element affecting their program’s success is finding well-qualified teachers with Connecticut certification.

“It is a little easier for someone who is certified in a different country to get certified to teach in Nebraska than it is here,” Ruby said. “When we find high-quality people, we want to see how we can facilitate getting them certified to teach here.”

New London has a dual-language program for pre-kindergarten through fifth grade at one elementary school. Officials want to expand it as the city transitions to an all-magnet school district. New London’s chief academic officer Katherine Ericson said the Omaha trip provided New London officials with numerous ideas they can use to build a program unique to their district.

“I don’t think any program can be a cookie-cutter, but we’re not going to start from ground zero and try to reinvent the wheel,” Ericson said. “We’ll steal the parts of the program that fit for New London and our kids.”

City students pleased to make Berlin schools their class of “Choice”

As an active participant in the Hartford Region Open Program, the Berlin school district has thrown its doors open to students from the Capital City for years. The students who have walked through those doors – from elementary to high school – have given that experience a collective thumbs-up.

A recent survey of the Hartford Choice students in Berlin schools showed that the overwhelming majority felt welcome and safe and believed teachers and administrators were accessible to their parents and guardians.

Administrators are heartened by the results.

“The students seem like they’re happy here and are enjoying the opportunity,” Superintendent David Erwin said.

The program is managed by the Capital Region Education Council, which oversees the out-of-district placement of about 2,000 Hartford students. The Choice program provides opportunities for Hartford public school students to attend surrounding suburban schools at no cost to the families.

Berlin is among 28 participating school districts and currently has 112 Choice students. The Berlin district receives $6,000 per student because more than 3 percent of its student population includes Choice enrollees.

The district surveyed 24 elementary pupils and all 71 high school and middle school students. The results showed that 100 percent of the elementary students felt safe at school and three-quarters of the respondents said their new classmates have been helpful and welcoming. The results were much the same for the older students. Some 85 percent said they enjoyed coming to school and 90 percent felt they could get help if needed.

“This is really a credit to the Choice liaisons for all the work they do in making parents comfortable in reaching out,” said Assistant Superintendent Brian Benigni. “We stress that they are all Berlin Public School students the day they walk through the door of a Berlin school. They are Berlin students who just reside in Hartford.”
West Hartford outdoor center shines in three ways

If nature is the best teacher, then West Hartford has one of the best outdoor classrooms anywhere with Westmoor Park, an environmental, agricultural, and horticultural education center dedicated to generating awareness and appreciation for the natural world.

As sprawl and development continue to eat away at our natural resources and environment, promoting sustainability in our home towns is key to preserving the quality of life so many find is the ingredient they want most when choosing a place to live.

Westmoor Park encompasses 162 acres and includes a diversity of natural habitats including the park’s demonstration farm, home to a variety of barnyard animals that make it a particularly popular attraction for families and children of all ages.

A large garden area is devoted to flower beds and herb and vegetable gardens, and the park includes three miles of nature trails that encourage visitors to explore the park and experience the change of the four seasons. One-half mile of the trails is handicapped accessible and the wildflower meadows, gardens, trails, and ponds are open to the public daily.

The education center at Westmoor Park features an exhibit area, a nature discovery room, and a heated greenhouse. There is also a spacious meeting room available for classes and community use.

The Park is operated by the Leisure Services Department of the Town of West Hartford and is maintained by experienced staff with backgrounds in biology, natural sciences, and agriculture. Their commitment to quality interpretation has helped the park achieve its reputation as one of the finest environmental education centers in the state.

Flowers and vegetables aren’t the only things growing on the farm. A year-round schedule of educational programming and field trip opportunities for school children, organized groups, and the general public mean new knowledge and new awareness about the natural world are sprouting in the minds of children and others.

Programs and classes range from animal studies to natural history and garden design, helping the park attract more than 100,000 annual visitors.

Sustainability can also lead to sharing and the park has designated a half acre for the “Plant A Row for the Hungry” program that welcomes community volunteers to organically grow vegetables and herbs which are donated to a local shelter in Hartford, as well as the senior centers in town.

There’s something for everyone at Westmoor Farm!
Weston’s vision to convert a historic farm into a living classroom and reconnect residents with the region’s agricultural heritage is coming into sharp focus.

This year has been a big one for supporters of Lachat Town Farm, home to the historic 18th century David Godfrey House. The Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation stepped in this past January to help with restoration work on the home, now on the Connecticut State Register of Historic Places.

Fueled by community passion and town support, there has been some marked improvement on the town-owned property that not that long ago had been in such disrepair that selectmen discussed the possibility of demolishing the 240-year-old house.

This spring the Friends of Lachat Farm broke ground on community garden plots, a daylong event that drew dozens of volunteers, who helped build raised beds, pull weeds, and do some general sprucing up of the property.

“The goal is to create a model of a sustainable farm,” says Amy Kalafa, a member of the Lachat Farm Oversight Committee.

Most recently, First Selectman Gayle Weinstein along with Oversight Committee members secured permission from the town Planning and Zoning Commission to establish an education center at the farm that would offer programs for children and adults alike. There also are plans to establish an internship program and an after-school club.

Weinstein says the farmhouse may eventually host special dinners for small groups. She was encouraged by the turnout and enthusiasm at a recent benefit harvest dinner for Lachat Farm held at another farm in town.

“It was a fantastic event,” she said. “And one of the best dinners I’ve ever had.”

The Regional Agriscience Center at Suffield High School has taken the slogan “No Farms, No Food” to heart in fulfilling its mission to prepare the next generation for careers in farming and other rewarding occupations in agriscience disciplines.

The Agriscience Center serves communities throughout the Greater Hartford region with more than 100 students currently enrolled from towns that include Avon, Simsbury, East Granby, Enfield, Bloomfield and Windsor Locks. The Agriscience Center prepares students for college, business and the work force by offering honors, academic and advanced placement courses, athletics, music, drama and art programs.

Students schedule their agricultural science program courses in conjunction with their required high school courses leading to both a high school diploma and an agricultural science certificate. Graduates are then in a position to seek further education at the college level and/or direct job employment.

The Center, established in 1964, is one of nineteen state-sponsored centers specializing in agricultural science education. It strives for the highest possible achievement level in a creative and flexible environment and values each student’s unique abilities, talents, interests, learning styles and backgrounds.

State Rep. Tami Zawistowski, whose legislative district includes Suffield, recently toured the Agriscience Center with the program’s director Laura LaFlamme who showed Zawistowski the program’s greenhouse and its aquatics center as well as the large and small animal facilities.

In cooperation with the Family, Friends, and Alumni (F.F.A.), agricultural science students are also encouraged to participate in “career development events” which test the knowledge and abilities of students in 23 major areas of instruction, with specific subjects offered each semester that include agricultural sales, agricultural issues, poultry evaluation, dairy foods, livestock evaluation, forestry, floriculture, nursery landscape, meats evaluation and more.
Windham shines bright light on energy efficiency

In Windham, there’s a lot of energy associated with the town “green.” It is energy that’s renewable, sustainable, more efficient – and catching on.

“We have a lot of different entities doing things,” said Energy Commissioner Chairwoman Jean de Smet.

From town utilities to the halls of higher learning at Eastern Connecticut State University, the community has taken advantage of a variety of energy conservation efforts, while at the same time lobbying Hartford for more opportunities.

De Smet was among those who testified in strong support of a proposed bill last legislative session to allow for “solar gardens,” where solar panels are placed in empty lots and neighbors share power.

“While we applaud and participate at every opportunity in the work of the state’s clean energy programs, all customers contribute to these programs, and all should benefit from them, even if they don’t own property, or a suitable site,” she testified.

Solar energy does shine bright at Windham Water Works, which has 442 solar panels and a water turbine to help cut down on the utility’s energy needs. Officials there say on the sunniest of days, the Water Works generates more electricity than it consumes. Drawing water from the Willimantic Reservoir, a 164-square-mile watershed of the Fenton, Mount Hope and Natchaug rivers, the utility tapped into a grant from Connecticut Clean Energy fund for its solar operations.

ECSU has embraced break-through technologies, such as geo-thermal power and fuel cells to help power its community. The school’s stationary phosphoric acid fuel cell produces 400 kilowatts of continuous power.

“We have a campus-wide commitment to sustainability at Eastern,” said ECSU President Elsa Nunez.

The town’s “Safe Haven” micro-grid incorporates turbines and solar panels between a middle and elementary school and will help keep the lights on for the community at large in the event of a prolonged power outage.

Windham is also one of more than a dozen towns in the state participating in the non-profit “Neighbor to Neighbor Energy Challenge.” The goal is to help households reduce their energy use by 20 percent, while earning points that can be redeemed for rewards. Organizers sponsored school poster contests and other events to promote awareness of energy conservation and the Challenge program.

“The more people you have involved, the more people you have to spread the word,” de Smet said.
Southington schools looking for energy savings through sunlight

Three schools in Southington are scheduled to be outfitted with solar panels in the coming months, a move that officials expect could save nearly $2 million over the next 20 years.

“That’s a green effort and also a cost savings to the town because it should reduce the energy use,” said Town Council vice-chairwoman Cheryl Lounsbury.

In addition to solar, the town has been exploring a variety of alternative energy sources, including fuel cells, geothermal heating, and small-scale wind projects. Working with a consultant to help determine the most optimal projects, Southington officials chose solar installation for the Hatton, Plantsville, and South End schools.

Town Manager Gary Brumback said the town landfill and another property are also being considered for solar installations next year.

Greenskies, a Middletown solar energy company, is working with the town and company Vice President Andrew Chester said the firm will offer the solar energy created at a reduced rate.

“We will develop, finance, build, and own and maintain the solar assets for the town and the school district,” said Chester.

Work on mounting solar panels on the Plantsville school is expected to be completed this year. Solar panels at Hatton School, South End, and at the landfill are slated for completion next year.

The project will have value in the classroom as well. The equipment is monitored 24 hours a day and Chester said the monitoring can be streamed to the town web site and to the schools.

The solar company projects energy savings over the next 20 years at about $414,000 at Plantsville School, $850,000 at Hatton School, and $678,000 at South End School.

“This is the wave of the future,” said school board member David J. Derynoski. “It’s a great opportunity and we’re always looking to save more.”
Out in the country: Lebanon celebrates agriculture milestone

No other town in Connecticut has more active farmland than Lebanon. So it’s no surprise that with more than 10,000 acres used by working farms, this eastern Connecticut town is very keen on preserving more to keep its rural character for generations to come.

It was Lebanon farmers and town officials who helped lead the drive that established the state’s Farmland Preservation Program in 1978. Their efforts helped head off a trend of sprawl and development that threatened to wipe out not only pristine farmland but a way of life forever. Now nearly four decades later, about 5,000 acres of the town’s 10,000 acres of active farmland have been preserved in perpetuity for agriculture use.

First Selectman Joyce Okonuk says the town has made protecting and expanding agriculture “its number one priority.”

Number 300 also means a lot in town these days. A recent gathering on the historic Lebanon Green celebrated the latest farm to be preserved under the state’s program, which has now protected about 40,000 acres from development. Most fittingly, the 300th farm was a Lebanon farm. Folks didn’t have to travel far to see it because the 350-acre expanse known as the “Williams Farm” abuts the Green.

Retired farmer Oliver Manning was among the Lebanon farmers who helped get the state program off the ground and is among the program participants. He preserved his 700-acre farm and it was later purchased by dairy farmer Robin Chesmer. Of the 900 acres at Chesmer’s Graywall Farm, 700 are in preservation. Manning and Chesmer were among the dozens taking part in the recent celebration. With a country fair feel, it featured blue grass music, locally grown foods, a hay maze, pumpkin painting, and a photo display from the state Department of Agriculture showing the history of farming in the area.

The historic photos, says Manning, are a great reminder of what farmers endured to stay in the business and what it will take today to keep them going into the future.

“I just hope that a hundred years from now people will think this program was a good idea,” Manning says. “And I expect they will.”

Steps to the Sound: East Lyme shoring up public beach access

Of the nearly 60,000 annual visitors to the Niantic Bay Overlook, East Lyme’s public shoreline walkway, at least two have worn out their welcome – Irene and Sandy.

Battered but not beaten by the devastating storms, the 1.1-mile stretch of beach will soon have a new and more storm-resistant walkway. Town officials say the project is expected to cost about $4.4 million and will be paid for with a combination of insurance payments from the past storms, federal disaster aid, and awards from lawsuits over construction flaws.

Dubbed the “Railroad Beach” for years by locals because of its proximity to the Amtrak line, the Overlook was the brainchild of the East Lyme Public Trust Foundation that began the project in 1994.

But the vision for this section of shoreline began much earlier. In 1987, the East Lyme Plan of Development recognized the potential of the beach, which then was little used because of the barrier between the town and Niantic Bay created by the railroad. Town officials realized that the railroad had also insulated the shoreline from development, thus keeping the beach in open space – public open space.

To make public access a reality, the efforts of the town and the Trust over the past two decades have benefited from support from the state and Amtrak as well as residents, donors, and numerous volunteers. In addition to the public enjoyment, the boardwalk has been a boon to local business.

Fast forward to 2014 and the redesign and rebuild. First Selectman Paul Formica said he is hoping to work with Amtrak to secure some $400,000 in funding to build a mutually beneficial embankment to ward off future storm surges. Formica said it would protect the railway as well as the walkway.

“Amtrak should participate in some of these repairs,” Formica said.

In the meantime, volunteers continue to move the work along, doing their part to keep the beach open to all. All, that is, except for the likes of Irene or Sandy.
‘Survey Says:’ Go green Old Saybrook

Old Saybrook officials wanted to gauge just how environmentally friendly citizens wanted their town to be. And so they asked. The response was clear – very friendly indeed.

More than 200 residents answered the town’s “Sustainable Saybrook” survey and offered strong support on everything from new bike paths and more sidewalks to a public kayak rack at the beach. Energy conservation initiatives also garnered a hearty thumbs-up.

“Overall we received responses from 215 people – just over our goal of 200,” said Emily Grochowski of the town’s Conservation Commission. “I think we were most pleased with the number of people who took the time to answer the open-ended questions. There are a lot of great ideas for Old Saybrook in there.”

Protecting the town’s natural resources – its beaches, parks, forests, and aquifers – drew deep support. Some 70 percent said they were willing to pay for town efforts to protect the environment. Respondents also weighed in on future development with a note of caution – avoid over-development while preserving the character of this shoreline community.

Residents endorsed efforts to encourage more solar energy installations and to pursue energy efficient LEED certification for town buildings.

Conservation Commission officials said the survey will help them prioritize projects and noted that many of the initiatives residents favored are already underway. Among them is the town’s preparation for sea level rise. A newly created Sea Level Rise Committee is studying the effects of sea level rise on the town and will present its findings to the selectmen next year.

“Because the town is bounded by two significant bodies of water – the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound – the impact from sea level rise could be significant,” Committee Chairman Walter Smith said. “That’s the big thing, to stay ahead of this and understand the science.”

Clinton land trust takes stewardship of family’s treasured meadow

Running along the Indian River in Clinton, a pristine tract of meadowland is part of the rich history of one local family whose desire to preserve it forever has become reality.

The Clinton Land Conservation Trust has been granted the deed for the 18 acres by the Elliot family, who can trace their arrival in Clinton to the 18th century specifically because of that parcel. The land was given to Jared Elliot in 1708 as an inducement to settle in town and become the minister of the First Congregational Church of Kenilworth, the former name of Clinton.

It was passed down through the generations until this year when 86-year-old Lucy Elliot deeded the unique parcel to the land trust with the stipulation that it would remain in open space forever. Home to a variety of wildlife, the land also features stands of endangered native maize.

“The land already had an easement on it that my husband put there before he died, and I felt that it was time for the land trust to take care of the property and make sure that it will always remain a beautiful, wild meadow,” Elliot said.

To honor the generous gift, the land trust officially named the meadow the “Elliot Preserve” and held a special thank-you party for the family in June.

Elliot’s daughter Becky Elliot Keating said the land has had numerous uses – both agricultural and social. It originally was farmed to grow salt hay, which was harvested in the meadow near Clinton Harbor. Later, flax seed was planted, harvested, and eventually processed into linen cloth. It was also home to Clinton Little League for a while.

When Jared Elliot’s descendant Nellie Pratt died in 1977, ownership of the property was transferred to a corporation of several Elliot cousins. Lucy Elliot’s husband, Henry Melvin Elliot, Jr., became sole owner in 1989 when he bought out his cousins and siblings. He returned part of the property back into conservation land before he died in 1999. Lucy Elliot and her family later worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to restore portions of the original meadow under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program.

“I am so proud of my mother’s decision,” Keating said. “For 305 years members of the Elliot family have worked and protected this bit of heaven along the Indian River. It has been a legacy that has been treasured by each generation.”
In Madison, the conservation-minded citizenry can indeed see the forest for the trees – and it was worth saving.

The town recently celebrated the opening of Salt Meadow Park, a 42-acre expanse once slated for a 140-unit residential complex. The parcel encompasses 10 acres of a rare “coastal forest,” land marked by small trees and conducive to abundant growth of sassafras and greenbrier. The lush vegetation provides protection and a resting area to migratory birds with fly patterns across Long Island Sound.

The town purchased the property four years ago for $9.5 million, of which $1.7 million was provided by the Trust for Public Land. First Selectman Fillmore McPherson said citizens approved the purchase in a vote that “was not a squeaker.”

“It was a solid expression of sentiment by the populace,” McPherson said.

The groundswell to save the land included support from a local group dubbed “Stop Griswold Over Development,” which mobilized a letter-writing campaign and monetary donations from about 1,000 people. Group member Bill McCullough called the campaign “a wonderful example of democracy in action.”

The recent grand opening culminated three years of construction. Madison residents now have access to three new athletic fields and more amenities are planned. McPherson said the town intends to add a canoe and kayak launch, restrooms and possibly a concession stand. Local Eagle Scouts helped build trails and provided picnic benches.

The town also created a permanent eight-member governance committee to oversee the park. Among its duties, the committee is charged with maintaining the trails, implementing passive recreation and educational programs, and developing a long-range capital improvement program by identifying funding sources and grants.

With so much of the Connecticut shoreline disappearing due to development, coastal forests are few and far between. But thanks to the stewardship efforts of town officials, residents, and preservation groups, this rare forest will remain part of Madison’s ecological footprint.

There’s power in those leftovers.

Southington will soon be home to the first food recycling power plant in the state. That, coupled with several solar projects in schools and municipal buildings, had Town Council Chairman Michael Riccio recently proclaiming that Southington, “is the greenest community in the state.”

Construction on the food-to-energy plant is expected to be completed by the middle of 2015. Plant owner, Quantum Bio-power, operates several food recycling and composting drop off sites around the state. But the Southington facility will be unique in that it will generate energy through an anaerobic digester that produces methane gas. The gas can be used to produce electricity, fuel power plants, or be converted to vehicle fuel.

The town has a 15-year power purchase agreement with Quantum and expects the plant to generate enough power for 750 homes a year. Quantum is financing the $10 million plant with a combination of debt and equity, which includes a $2 million loan from the Connecticut Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority.

Southington officials say all the “green” projects are expected to save the town about $900,000 annually in energy costs. Town Manager Gary Brumback said taxpayers pay $3 million in annual energy costs so “it was important for us to get a handle” on that burden.

The town used a $172,000 federal grant in 2010 to install a solar system at the fire department for heat and electricity. More recently, the town has contracted with a solar company to add panels to three elementary schools and the landfill.

Board of Education Chairman Brian Goralski said energy savings are just one of the benefits the town will derive. The technology has great educational value, as well.

“We’ll be able to show the kids how energy is saved,” said Goralski.
ENVIRONMENT

Westbrook adding to inventory of open space

When opportunity in the form of open space came knocking on Westbrook’s door – the town answered with a resounding “yes.”

Conservation Commission Chairman Thomas O’Dell says the 77-acre parcel under consideration would be a vital purchase that would help the town protect water resources in the area, something this shoreline community has been doing for decades.

Saving open space to preserve the rural nature of the shoreline town began to gain momentum more than 40 years ago with the formation of the local land trust. Concerned by the rapid development, volunteers and town officials have worked together helping the shoreline town maintain its rural character while protecting its ecologically valuable salt marshes.

The latest parcel has been offered by the developer of a local subdivision who proposed selling the 77 acres to the town for $850,000 to $950,000. The same developer had previously conveyed almost 80 acres of protected land as a result of the subdivision approval.

O’Dell, the Conservation Commission’s longtime chairman, helped shepherd the proposal through the channels in town. After a unanimous vote from the Commission to consider the offer, O’Dell brought the matter before the Board of Selectman this summer and secured approval for a $10,000 appropriation for land appraisals. Next stop was the Board of Finance, which also unanimously approved the appropriation, which will come out of the town’s Open Space Preservation Account.

Town officials say there is now a contract pending for a short appraisal that will cost the town $1,200. O’Dell says that appraisal should give the town a good idea of the land value.

After more than 40 years of conserving open space, the town of Westbrook and the volunteers who have made preservation a priority already know that it’s a good idea.

Sunlight will help turn ‘trash to cash’ in Ansonia & Derby

Embracing renewable energy and the cost savings it delivers continues to gain momentum in cities and towns across the state.

Derby and Ansonia are proceeding with plans to tap into the benefits of solar energy with projects that could save more than $1 million in over the next two decades. Those plans include installing solar panels over landfills that are now closed.

The projects are part of the state’s “ZREC” renewable energy program, which allows solar companies to partner with cities and towns to submit bids to UI and Connecticut Light & Power.

Officials in Derby say the city will receive about $1.3 million from United Illuminating for the solar project over the next 15 years. The city saw its electric bill spike nearly 40 percent over the last year. To reverse that costly trend, the project includes installing about 3,800 solar panels at their 6.5-acre landfill.

Derby Mayor Anita Dugatto said the project demonstrates “our strong commitment to environmental responsibility.” The city is working with Jordan Energy, a New York-based firm, to help develop its renewable energy projects.

The opportunity to harness the sunlight and turn “trash to cash” is also proceeding in Ansonia, a UI designated “Clean Energy Community.” Chief Administrative Officer Chris Tymniak said the city is working with Greenskies, a Middletown-based solar company, to install nearly 2,000 panels at its closed North Division Street landfill. Greenskies would finance the $1.1 million project.

The city expects to save some $1.6 million in energy costs over the next 20 years with more than $40,000 in savings in just the first year, Tymniak said.

With no cost to the city, Tymniak points out that “the upside is “paying less.”

“Solar is the way to go,” Tymniak said.
Land preservation deal creates ‘greenbelt’ between Groton and Ledyard

When is a road closing considered progress? When it clears the way for a community to preserve one of the most significant pieces of undisturbed land in the region.

Flanked by the towns of Groton and Ledyard, nearly 300 acres of a historic dairy farm have been saved from development. An agreement between the landowner and the Groton Open Space Association will protect fields, forests, bogs, and ponds and provide greater access for passive recreation.

Landowner Julia Weber, whose father Latham Avery was the original property owner, is donating 146 acres on the Groton side to the Association. The balance of the land in Ledyard will be sold to the Association for just over $1 million.

Weber explained that her father was also an avid conservationist and maintained a diverse habitat for wildlife. The family has allowed local residents to hike the trails that traverse the land. A nearby nature center also uses it for classes, educational hikes, and birdwatching.

“I just maintained the farm and tried to save it,” she said. “I wanted to keep it as a unique place, with lots of brooks and ledges and fields. It’s a nice isolated piece of property.”

In fact, the parcel is considered “one of the most biologically diverse and valuable sites for conservation in eastern Connecticut,” according to Connecticut College Biology Professor Dr. Robert Askins. The town of Ledyard, which maintains an access road to the property, closes the road to vehicles in the winter to prevent damage from snow plows and erosion.

Town officials now plan to go a step further and close off a portion of the road year-round to vehicles with the exception of emergency vehicles and Weber. Hikers, runners, and bicyclists will still be allowed.

Groton Open Space Association Treasurer Sue Sutherland said fundraising has begun to pay for the purchase and the group is also seeking a state grant. The property abuts another Association-owned parcel and this latest acquisition will create “a greenbelt of protected land from Gold Star Highway into Ledyard,” according to the Association.

The agreement also allows the 78-year-old Weber to continue to live in the Colonial farmhouse where she grew up.

“I’m thrilled,” Weber said. “Now I don’t have to worry about it. It’s going to be protected by people who care about it.”

Sun shines on energy savings in Enfield

There’s a big demand for sunshine in Enfield – and not just because of the long, cold winter of 2013-14.

The town is promoting more opportunities for solar energy, helping residents lower their electric bills and be “green” in the process. Aiming to “Solarize Enfield,” the town is promoting incentives offered through state and federal property credit programs and grants through the Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority (CEFIA).

To help spread the word, the town partnered with the non-profit SmartPower, which creates community campaigns for renewable energy. Homeowners have shown tremendous interest in the first six weeks of the program and are keeping solar installers busy.

“We have over 200 homes at the present time that are getting a quote from one or more of our installers,” said Enfield Clean Energy Commission Chairperson Melissa Everett. “So far we have had at least 20 houses install the solar energy system.”

The town approved three installers for the program. Kate Donnelly of SmartPower explained that homeowners have up to an additional 120 days from the time a contract is signed to the date of installation.

“Some residents felt that it would be a good thing to have more than just one installer,” Donnelly said. “They felt that having a choice of more than just one installer would be in their best interest.”

Enfield Clean Energy Committee member Gregory Mark is sold on sunshine. He’s had solar power for three years and hopes his neighbors take advantage of “Solarize Enfield.”

“I have not had to write a check to CL&P for the past two years,” said Mark. “I highly recommend solar energy. I am using my system for heat and air conditioning as well as the usual electrical needs of any family of five.”
Sorry, Fido – Bridgewater has a better plan for food scraps

Not a member of the “Clean Plate Club”? No worries in Bridgewater.

The town is embarking on recycling a pilot project this spring that aims to turn food waste into composted soil and reduce the amount of household garbage that ends up in landfills.

“I know programs like this have worked in other parts of the country,” said First Selectman Curtis Read. “Hopefully, it will work here. I support it.”

Conducted by the Housatonic Resources Recovery Authority, the food-to-compost pilot project may be the first of its type in the state. Resource Recovery Authority officials explain that about a quarter of all municipal trash is food waste and not ideal for incinerators because of its high moisture content.

Food waste shipped out of Connecticut ends up in out-of-state landfills and produces methane gas, an emission that contributes to climate change.

The state’s current recycling rate is about 25 percent. Officials at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection have goals to reduce the waste stream by 58 percent by 2024 through recycling and abandoning the use of some materials all together.

Resource Recovery Executive Director Cheryl Reedy said she’s confident the program will work and that other towns will eventually follow.

The program will provide Bridgewater participants with countertop containers for food waste and a month’s worth of bags. All American Waste, the commercial hauler that picks up most of the town’s garbage, will provide curbside containers. The food waste will then be hauled to one of two facilities that compost food waste into soil – New Milford Farms or New England Compost.

Reedy says recycling food waste makes sense.

“The state’s recycling efforts began with cans, bottles, and newspapers and evolved from there. Then we added plastics,” Reedy said. “Now, we’re recycling electronic equipment. The state has started to recycle paint and mattresses. Food waste is now the low-hanging fruit.”

Literally.

In Old Lyme, sometimes the best gift can be your own backyard

There are some gifts that last generations and that is particularly true when it comes to open space. Officials in Old Lyme have long recognized the importance of land preservation and have been active in spreading the word and the “how-to” to local citizens.

The Old Lyme Open Space Commission and Old Lyme Land Trust have worked closely for years to identify and preserve tracts of land for passive recreational use. Approximately 25 percent of the town’s land is protected from development by various means, including deeded privately-owned open space tracts and conservation easements and parcels owned by trusts and the Nature Conservancy.

The town’s public outreach has included educational seminars for property owners interested in preserving their land. A recent seminar titled “Preserving the Legacy of Your Land” helped owners understand their options and presented information on various conservation strategies. Conservation options included easements, sale or donation of land, and protecting land in the event of resale.

Since 2000, the town has either purchased or partnered with the state, the Nature Conservancy, the Old Lyme Trust, and Gateway Commission to buy six major parcels that total more than 800 acres. Chaired by Diana Atwood Johnson, the Open Space Commission has engaged volunteers who have created and maintained a well-used network of trails. For avid birders, the Commission keeps a list of sightings on its website.

Officials say the Commission’s work is moving into a new phase now that passive recreational and natural resource protection has been acquired. The Commission is focusing on plans to maximize wildlife habitat. Plans include an element of public participation by inviting the community to provide their observations of “interesting flora and fauna” spotted in a wooded tract, along a trail, or even in your own backyard.
Fundraising moves Simsbury land trust closer to goal

A busy fundraising summer is translating into a very promising fall as the Simsbury Land Trust closes in on its goal of adding 75 more acres to the town’s open space.

The group raised more than $170,000 in private funds and $75,000 from a charitable fund, including a matching dollar-for-dollar donation, all towards the purchase of the long sought-after Tanager Hill – The Ellsworth Property. The parcel would serve as a key connection for hikers from the town center, across the Farmington River to the New England Trail along the Metacomet Ridge.

“We have made great strides this summer in our effort to preserve 75 acres at Tanager Hill,” said Land Trust Executive Director Amy Zeiner.

The land features a 500-foot change in elevation from the Farmington River flood plan to the upper west slope of the Metacomet Ridge. When completed, the $1.2 million purchase of Tanager Hill will add meadows, forest, and rich habitat for a variety of plants and wildlife to the historic farmland the Land Trust has preserved over the years.

Land trust officials say the property would provide “exciting recreational opportunities consisting of an especially attractive and challenging hiking destination, an existing network of trails connecting the major physical features of the site, and the most practical pedestrian route from the New England Trail to a river crossing into the Simsbury Town Center.”

Together with the adjacent Owen-Mortimer Property, already protected by the Simsbury Land Trust, adding the Tanager Hill land would create a 105 acre preserve.

Established in 1976, the not-for-profit organization has permanently protected 32 parcels in the town. The efforts have kept about 1,000 acres in open space, of which more than half have been donated to the Simsbury Land Trust.
**ENVIRONMENT**

**Middletown pulling it all together for hikers and habitat**

Mount Higby looms large in Middletown’s plans to add to its open space.

The two-mile long ridge is a popular hiking spot along the New England National Scenic Trail where the Mattabesett and Metacomet trails meet. Middletown’s purchase of a long sought-after 113-acre parcel on Higby Mountain would add a key connection for hikers while preserving valuable wildlife habitat.

Those plans have the support of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, which calls this section of the trail one of the “most familiar and treasured landscape features” in Connecticut. Middletown officials are well aware of its significance to the community. In 1990, the city’s Conservation and Development plans noted that after the Connecticut River, Mount Higby, with its commanding views of the Quinnipiac Valley, was probably one of the most prominent features in the city.

The parcel carries a price tag of $686,000 and City Planning Director Michiel Wackers says about 30 percent of that is available through a grant from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. This past fall, Middletown was one of 25 municipalities to share in a $7.8 million state grant for open space. The awards are earmarked for purchase of more than 2,200 acres in open space.

The parcel also represents a more convenient and direct route for hikers on the New England Scenic Trail. Currently, hikers have to veer off in a more circular route to avoid trespassing on private property.

“It’s been a property we’ve been working on for a long time,” Wackers said. “There has been a desire to have it since at least the 1990s.”

The purchase would enhance the conservation work the city has already accomplished. A 2010 grant of $170,000 allowed Middletown to purchase nearly 30 acres near the Mount Higby Reservoir. That same year, the city also received $660,000 in grants to preserve 450 acres in open space for three sites in East Haddam.

**New section of greenway opens in New Milford**

There’s no place like home and New Milford residents who want a safe and scenic spot to ride a bike, go for a walk, or run no longer have to go far to find one.

The town recently re-graded a long-neglected dirt road in Sega Meadows Park to create the first non-motorized leg of the New Milford River Trail, a greenway that’s planned to follow the Housatonic River from the Gaylordsville section of town to Harrybrooke Park, a beautiful park bordering a rushing waterfall on the Still River in New Milford.

With the opening of the new trail section, Sega Meadows Park is officially completed after 7 years of work and what was once a rocky trail tangled by tree roots and tall grass is now a smooth, non-paved, surface that’s a sweet ride for hybrids and mountain bikes and gentle on runners’ knees.

The bike trail weaves its way through the pristine, wooded acres of the town-owned park in the Boardman district of town, a scenic ride along the Housatonic River.

The Sega Meadows portion of the trail runs for 1 1/2 miles from Boardman Bridge to River Road. From there, the New Milford River Trail continues on to Gaylordsville as a shared use pathway that allows slow-moving cars.

The distance from the Sega Meadows entrance at Boardman Bridge to the Gaylordsville Country Store is exactly 5 miles, an easy ride for families with young children who are looking forward to ice cream and cold drinks at the store.

Besides enhancing recreational opportunities for area residents, the New Milford River Trail will be a vital link in the Western New England Greenway, a network of trails in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont that will one day connect Montreal with New York City.

Sega Meadows Park is on land given the town in 1992 by the late Art Sega, a prominent businessman and civic activist. Sega’s gift comprised the park’s original 23 acres along the Housatonic River and today, Sega Meadows totals 88 acres.
Hamden “buying” into ordinance update for more efficient purchasing

Responding to the rising costs of – well – just about everything, the town of Hamden has revamped its purchasing ordinance to make the process more efficient and cost-efficient over the long-run.

Town Purchasing Agent Philip Goodwin said the old thresholds that would trigger the bid process and which were on the books for 40 years were “too low to be effective.” Town departments had been required to get three quotes for items greater than $500 and go out to bid when the item or project exceeded $2,000.

Goodwin said the process would be more cost-effective with the new thresholds of $2,500 for quotes and $10,000 for competitive bidding. Recent CCM data showed that 10 out of 17 municipalities in Connecticut were going out to bid when costs were greater than $10,000.

Town officials are hopeful that the new ordinance will be an incentive to use local businesses and say that department heads will benefit by the new process because there will be less time spent on paperwork such as applications and reports.

“It makes their jobs more efficient,” said Goodwin, who has been Hamden’s purchasing agent since April 2013. “At the same time, it continues the control and oversight processes that allow the town to work hard to get the best price on all items being purchased with public dollars.”

The updated ordinance, Goodwin said, is a sign of the times. The town budget was $29 million in 1974 compared to $200 million in 2012-13.

“What you could buy for $500 forty years ago is going to be significantly higher now,” Goodwin said.

Putnam taps into homegrown resources to spur growth

Putnam officials have begun planting the seeds for robust economic development with a new program rooted in the town’s own resources.

The town created an Economic Development Trust Fund, a program similar to the one that exists in neighboring Killingly but one that is uniquely Putnam. With a population of just under 10,000, the small eastern Connecticut town provides a high number of services for a town its size. Town Administrator Douglas Cutler said the Putnam industrial park is nearly full and that several businesses are expanding.

“It would be another tool the town has in being able to help fund infrastructure improvements the new tech park and the existing industrial park need, and to be able to assist the Economic and Community Development Department to market the town,” Cutler said. “It’s flexible in terms of the types of things that the deposited funds would be useable for.”

Seed money for the fund will come from land sales. Officials also have plans to sell gravel taken from the site of a future technical park and use those proceeds for the trust fund.

“It’s a way to reinvest economic development funds into economic development,” said Delpha Very, Putnam’s director of economic and community development.

Most recently, the town identified a parcel for sale that would add about $200,000 to the fund, pending voter approval. Projects that tap into the fund must first be approved by the Economic Development Commission and amounts of $10,000 or more would go to a town meeting.

“The money still has to be appropriated and has to go through whatever processes we have for making payments,” Cutler said.

Taxpayers recognized the benefits of this type of fund when they approved it earlier this year.

“We have a lot here,” resident Sara Belloit said. “If this helps keep that going, it’s a great idea.”
The “drawing board” in North Branford just got more intense and a bit more crowded.

Officials have ramped up efforts to redesign and reinvent a town center that evokes the quintessential, attractive New England community. Using a cutting-edge planning approach, the town has enlisted the help of Yale’s Center for Urban Design Research and its noted architectural and design expert Professor Alan Plattus to help shepherd the town through the process.

Plattus began collecting townwide input by setting up a “charette,” an intense brainstorming of citizens, designers and others who collaborate on a vision to identify a course of development that would create sustained value. Much of the change is centered on the main artery of Route 80.

The professor, who has consulted on projects from New Haven to China, is confident the small town of farms and quarries will be able to maintain its character while still boosting its tax base through economic development.

“I don’t think there’s really a conflict in this case because it’s going to be a little town in any case,” Plattus said. “I don’t think there’s the possibility of new development that would really change the town significantly into, let’s say, an urban area or a suburban town on the scale of Hamden or North Haven.”

Plattus said the most important part of this inclusive planning process is to build a partnership with townspeople and underscore the notion that it is their project – not just a plan put forth by economic development officials. He intends to share examples of best practices and similar-scale developments that have succeeded.

Town officials are hopeful that the collaboration with Yale and the visionary planning process will create a look and feel unique to North Branford, enhancing the quality of life and economic opportunity.

“This is a great opportunity to partner with residents and stakeholders to guide the development so that the final product fits with the overall character of the town,” Town Manager Mike Paulhus said.

North Haven rescuing buildings before they’re history

Martha Culver understood the benefits of historic preservation in her hometown of North Haven – and that was nearly 150 years ago. The daughter of a prominent local family, Culver bequeathed her mid-19th century home to the town. The building now houses a library, a collection of agriculture artifacts and is the center of educational activities of the North Haven Historical Society.

But the Culver House is also the poster child for the town’s initiative to aggressively preserve more historic buildings by creating a commission and ordinance to regulate the process of when or if a historic building should be demolished.

First Selectman Mike Freda is working closely with the local Historical Society to develop an inventory of historic buildings to evaluate their condition and create a formal process for historic preservationists to become involved.

“They pointed out the Martha Culver house that is in disrepair,” Freda said. “We don’t want this town’s historic buildings to be in disrepair, so they suggested that a commission should be put together, and I have encouraged them to form a list of candidates to report to me.”

Historical Society Secretary Sue Iverson said the town has to move quickly to save historic buildings from the wrecking ball. The Historical Society had not been able to step in to save certain structures because the town had no formal process of notifying the Historical Society.

She said a special Demolition Permit Application Process would be part of the initiative. The building would have to be evaluated by a “Historic Significance Review Board” and then if it is determined to be not significant, a demolition permit would be issued. However, if the building is considered significant, a 90-day period would follow for further documentation. At the end of that period, the building would either be demolished or preserved.

Iverson said the commission that would determine a building’s eligibility for demolition or preservation would be comprised of individuals with knowledge of North Haven, an understanding of engineering and design and keen familiarity of historic value.

“We are looking for homeowners, architects, engineers — all with an in-depth knowledge of North Haven,” she said.

Perhaps someone just like… Martha Culver.
Neighborhoods brighten from Hartford’s anti-blight initiative

When is a coat of paint more than just a coat of paint? When it is a change agent that can revitalize entire neighborhoods.

“I believe in the broken windows theory,” Hartford Mayor Pedro Segarra said. “If you let one house not get the TLC it needs, it could really be invasive.”

The city’s anti-blight program is spreading plenty of TLC these days. The program provides loans of up to $30,000 to homeowners to help them keep up repairs. The loans will be forgiven if the owner maintains the property, pays taxes on time, and stays in the home for at least five years.

The program is part of the city’s livable and sustainable neighborhoods initiative that Segarra launched to combat blight. So far, program staff has refurbished more than 100 properties in the Capital City. In the long-run, the city-wide initiative is aimed at stabilizing property values.

“One of the biggest concerns that we always have is the ability to be able to maintain a healthy housing stock and making sure that our homeowners, to the extent that we can, are supported,” the Mayor said.

It also helps local businesses. The city hires Hartford contractors for the anti-blight work.

The city funds the loan program with monies collected from blight citations, private property cleanups, and reimbursements for demolishing or boarding up vacant properties. According to Mayor Segarra, the loans are drawn from a revolving fund that has about $300,000.

To be eligible for a loan, the property must be owner-occupied and must be a one-, two-, or three-family home. Commercial properties are ineligible.

Resident Donna Nelson was among the property owners who qualified for the program. She couldn’t afford all of the upkeep and repairs on the two-family home she has owned for 35 years. With the loan program and a little TLC, the house now has a tidy lawn, a remodeled porch, and a new coat of paint. The transformation has been remarkable, Nelson said.

“I got a lot more than I bargained for,” Nelson said. “I was quite astonished.”

Protecting property, preserving history are driving forces behind Brooklyn regs update

Clarity and simplicity are at the heart of a top-to-bottom review and rewrite of regulations that apply to Brooklyn’s Village Center.

The village district was initially created to protect the town’s historic center which features colonial era stone walls and architecture and is a National Register Historic District. The Town Hall is also located in the Historic District.

But the Historic District is currently only about half the size of the village district and it is the village regulations that are in place to protect properties. First Selectman Rick Ives said the town wants to ensure that the regulations are “simpler for people to understand” and easier to navigate while still protecting the area.

The Planning and Zoning Commission is looking at changes in language that include agriculture use, commercial use, definition of a vendor, and the stone walls that officials have identified as “unique assets and historic and cultural resources.”

The public will have an opportunity to first view the draft regulations once they’ve undergone a legal review and are posted on the town web site. Ultimately the town will hold a public hearing on the changes in early 2015.

P&Z Commission Chairman Carlene Kelleher said the town wants to make it clear to property owners that the regulations will not mean they have to apply for special permits or come before the commission for the simplest of changes to their homes, such as adding handrails or other minor fixes.

As an example of what she wants to fix, Kelleher said this past fall the commission had five issues before it on a single night – all related to the Village Center District.

“I want to make sure you don’t have to file a site plan to put a vegetable garden in your backyard,” Kelleher said.
Greenwich aims to increase housing stock for employees

Greenwich officials are hopeful that a number of new proposed development incentives and regulations will position the town as a place to call home for many municipal employees and teachers.

With an emphasis on more workforce housing for moderate-income families – the people who work for and in the town but cannot afford to live there – a community development partnership is putting the finishing touches on a plan first laid out in 2009.

“Our most essential workforce people in the town are given the very first priority,” said Planning Committee Chair Mary Ellen LeBien.

Developments of four or more residential units would be required to designate 20 percent of the units for moderate-income residents. Eligible households would have an income below the median annual wage of full-time town employees and teachers. Preference would be given to town employees, teachers, and people who work for non-profit agencies in Greenwich.

Monthly rent would be limited to 2 percent of the median town wage, which was about $69,000 in 2011. Units intended to be sold could not have sale prices that exceed four times the median wage. Officials said limits would increase with the size of the household.

“The proposed regulations will be similar, not in detail, but in idea, to what exist in many municipalities,” said LeBien.

Incentives for developers include fast-tracking the pre-application vetting process if moderate-income housing is included in their projects. Additionally, the town’s Planning Committee has recommended that developments with moderate-income housing would be allowed to exceed existing height limits by one story and density limits in business zones.

For those developers who opt not to build moderate-income housing, the town is proposing they pay a buyout fee to a housing trust to fund low-income and affordable housing projects.

Hamden branching out with new tree commission

The town of Hamden didn’t have to go out on a limb to fill all five spots on its new tree commission. The town found five people eager to serve who were already engaged in environmental endeavors.

Mayor Scott Jackson said the new appointees bring the right balance of background and ideas to the task of enhancing and protecting the town greenery.

“I didn’t want five people who think all the trees in town should be saved and I didn’t want five people who were terrified of storms and think that all the trees should be taken down,” Jackson said.

Created by an ordinance this past spring, the new volunteer commission serves in an advisory capacity to the town and, among other duties, is tasked with conducting a tree inventory and creating and updating an Urban Forest Master Plan, and developing education and outreach programs to raise awareness of appropriate tree care.

The ordinance also created a “Commemorative Tree Fund,” where contributions from the community will be deposited for the purpose of maintaining the wooded character around town. The new tree commission has no fiscal responsibility but can recommend appropriate expenditures from the fund.

“I hope we make the town proud,” said new Commissioner Susan Sternberg, a certified master gardener. She is eager to connect with residents and provide more environmental education opportunities by creating an arboretum or hosting tree forums.

“Trees need more care and that requires commitment from people,” Sternberg said.

New Commissioner Andrew Brand, who is education coordinator for Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, said the group is coming on board at the right time because the utility company, United Illuminating, has a new vegetative management program to help mitigate storm damage to power lines.

“There’s an opportunity right now to do something with UI’s tree-trimming plan,” Brand said. “There’s a strong backing right now and I think grant money would be available. We’d be able to pursue various avenues to get more planting to align with power lines.”

Other appointees are Jill Nathanson, Kyle Delucia, and Thomas Parlapiano.

“I’ve known all five personally and professionally for a long time,” Mayor Jackson said. “They’re folks who believe in this town and are happy to volunteer their time without glory or compensation.”
New Ansonia ordinances take a bite out of blight

Ansonia officials have put some big teeth in their blight ordinance.

“This new ordinance unleashes the Godzilla of anti-blight laws in Ansonia,” said Corporation Counsel John Marini. “The new anti-blight program is intended to greatly increase the effectiveness of Ansonia’s blight remediation efforts.

Increased penalties and other sanctions are giving officials more tools to get tough with property owners who need a little more “motivation” to maintain their buildings and lots. Penalties include $100-a-day fines for violators, increased to $250 a day if the fines aren’t paid within 30 days.

If the owner doesn’t address the mess within 10 days of the notice, the city can use either an independent contractor or city workers for the clean-up. The cost of the clean-up will be filed as a lien against the property. Property owners do maintain the right to appeal within 10 days of the notice of violation.

The city defines blight as anything “from uncut grass to broken windows to garbage strewn lawns and sidewalks.”

“This will give us some added enforcement tools, and will also help support the work of our building department and zoning enforcement officer to help eradicate blight,” Mayor David Cassetti said.

City officials didn’t stop at blight. New or revised ordinances also took aim at graffiti and all-terrain vehicles on public property. Graffiti, vandalism, and defacement fines are set at $250 for each violation.

Motorized vehicles, such as ATVs, quads, dirt bikes, and snowmobiles on city property have sparked numerous complaints over the years. The new ordinance bans these vehicles on public property. Officials explain the ban will help reduce noise and air pollution.

“Altogether this omnibus of ordinances is going to help set the future of Ansonia’s recreation and clean-up process, which will help entice future business and homeowners to want to relocate to a new and improved Ansonia,” said Ordinance Committee Chairman Alderman Matthew Edo.

A capital idea: Hartford launches anti-littering campaign

Adding more trash receptacles in Hartford is one way city officials intend to address littering, but the real key is changing attitudes. Simply put – litterbugs beware.

“It’s a pet peeve of mine,” said Deputy Police Chief and Hartford native Robert E. Ford. “A lot of my officers take it personally, as well, because no one wants to live in filth; no one wants to work in filth.”

The new anti-litter campaign, “Clean Hartford,” unveiled during Earth Day in April, means that police will issue more quality of life infractions for littering. Fittingly, the punishment for offenders is picking up trash.

The campaign leverages existing programs to address litter through enforcement, abatement, and education. The goal is to empower Hartford residents and businesses to take action in cleaning their communities, and improve the quality of life for everyone in Hartford.

Different from past anti-littering campaigns, “Clean Hartford” is a collaborative effort among city departments, community groups, students, and small businesses.

“We’re not going to let anyone make a mess of the city of Hartford and its public spaces,” Mayor Pedro Segarra said. “It’s our home and we should be proud of it. We need to make sure that we’re doing everything we can to preserve our home, so that it reflects the pride we have in our communities. We are also sending the message that if you disrespect the community by littering, there will be consequences.”

The city is installing campaign signs in its public parks that ask people to “TAKE THE PLEDGE ... I pledge to keep my trash until I find a garbage can.”

People may not have to wait long to find a garbage can. The city is compiling an inventory of some 800 trash cans throughout Hartford to determine which ones are underused and can be moved to more high-traffic areas. Eventually, officials expect to increase the number of trash cans by 10 percent.

Marilynn Cruz-Aponte, assistant to the public works director, said picking up litter takes time away from public works staff who should be more focused on beautifying and maintaining parks, city plantings, and forestry.

“They don’t want to feel like they clean up after people,” Cruz-Aponte said. “They want to do their job, but they don’t want to be ‘cleanup.’ As a mom, I don’t want to clean up my kid’s room. I want to teach my kid how to clean her room.”
Award-winning strategy revamping and revitalizing downtown Seymour

Seymour officials set a goal to turn their community into “The Best Little Downtown in CT.” Their efforts did not go unnoticed.

The town recently won top honors in the Connecticut Main Street Center’s 2014 Awards of Excellence. Seymour received the “Renewed Commitment to Main Street” award for its Downtown Action Strategy and Greenway Trail Plan.

“We’re very pleased that our efforts in downtown Seymour are being recognized and that the hard work of so many different groups is paying off,” First Selectman Kurt Miller said. “We are really making strides in changing perceptions of Seymour.”

With the help of a consultant, Seymour officials developed the Action Strategy in 2012 and since then have been turning many of the recommendations into reality, such as the establishment of a Downtown Committee and closer collaboration with merchants.

“Downtown Seymour is a treasure that is only just beginning to gain recognition,” Economic Development Director Fred A. Messore said. “We’re very grateful for this award and hope that people take notice of our dedication to realize our goal of making Seymour the Best Little Downtown in CT.”

The town is also moving forward with plans for its Greenway Trail that, when completed, will host a multi-use trail and park along the Naugatuck River in the downtown.

Messore, who applied for the Main Street Center award, said the plan took shape because of the vision and hard work among local, regional, and state partners. Ultimately, he sees this Naugatuck Valley town of about 17,000 evolving into a “destination for families to live in and a place for world-class companies to have business thrive in.”

The Connecticut Main Street Awards of Excellence were created in 2003 to recognize outstanding efforts to revitalize downtowns and commercial districts.

West Haven officials take to the street to fight blight

West Haven officials are literally covering a lot of ground these days in the battle against blight. Friday afternoons for Mayor Ed O’Brien and a broad contingent of City Hall zoning, building, public safety, and health staff have turned into a working and walking tour of the town.

The group has been meeting with businesses, fielding concerns from merchants and in some cases, doing a little cleanup on the spot. Mayor O’Brien said the goal is to help merchants better understand the anti-blight and zoning ordinances.

“We’re asking everybody for their help in bringing West Haven back, as far as cleaning in front of their stores, the blight, the graffiti on their buildings, taking care of their buildings, just sprucing up the downtown,” O’Brien said.

The walk-and-talks have been well-received by merchants – both newcomers and many who have been established for decades in the city.

“Been here for a very long time. It’s nice to hear from the Town Hall,” said Ray Ross, owner of Ross Copy.

The City Council adopted a blight ordinance two years ago that gives officials greater enforcement powers. The ordinance defines blighted properties as any place that is “dilapidated,” a fire hazard, the site of illegal activity, threatens community safety, or has damaged or missing walls, roofs, or floors. Violators will be fined $100 a day and must remedy the problem within 30 days.

The walking tours are also helping city officials compile a “to-do” list of city projects that will help enhance the downtown. For example, they learned that one merchant has a bus stop in front of his building but no trash bin for people to use while they wait for the bus.

Large ceramic planters had no flowers and instead were filled with trash. They were on a stretch of a thoroughfare that had few trash receptacles. Adding more trash bins and planting flowers would help address the trash issue while beautifying downtown.

O’Brien’s message to downtown businesses is straightforward: “We’re going to turn around the center and we need your help.”

Long-time business owner Carolyn Sires Halaszynski appreciates the city’s interest and commitment in making a difference.

“This is the first time I know that something is going to get done,” she said. “The mayor says there’s no choice.”
Greenwich officials are continuing to take pro-active steps to collect and analyze Superstorm Sandy data as part of their ongoing efforts to help residents recover from the storm, including some who are still not back in their homes some 16 months after it devastated the northeast coast of the country, with New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut bearing much of the brunt.

The town’s latest initiative in a long line of recovery activities is a new online survey being conducted by the Conservation Commission that asks for residents’ opinions on flood assistance. The hope is to better assess the impact of Superstorm Sandy and specifically to identify long-term recovery needs in the community. The survey is a result of work being done by the Commission in assisting local residents to apply for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. All residents who were impacted by the storm are being encouraged to participate in the survey, especially those who still have unmet needs. Individuals who participate in the survey will also be put on a list to receive future updates for flood assistance as new programs continue to be introduced as part of the long-term community process of recovery and building resilience to future storms.

“We have residents who are not back in their home after 16 months or that have suffered significant financial losses as a result of the storm,” said Greenwich Conservation Director Denise Savageau. “The more information we have on what residents need, the better we can communicate that to state and federal officials.”

Other recovery and preparedness efforts in Greenwich include working with the Connecticut Rises program – an umbrella program for all of the non-governmental organizations that work on disasters such as the American Red Cross and Salvation Army – to encourage residents who were impacted by Sandy to register with Connecticut Rises by calling 2-1-1. Connecticut Rises is a long-term recovery group serving the State of Connecticut that works to:

- Identify disaster-caused unmet needs of individuals and families
- Identify available resources from voluntary organizations
- Coordinate delivery of appropriate resources to resolve identified needs
- Identify and support preparedness efforts for future disasters to individuals and families.

Griswold aims to boost business with low-interest loan program

The Town of Griswold doesn’t have to look far to capitalize on successful economic development initiatives. The Borough of Jewett City, the small village within Griswold’s borders, created an effective low-interest program that helps local businesses grow and provides incentives for others to make the move onto Main Street.

And now Griswold is looking to follow suit.

“My vision is that we’re able to entice a small or medium-sized business to relocate because we have money to loan at an enticingly low interest rate,” Griswold Economic Development Commissioner Chairman Tom Giard said.

Jewett City has a program that offers five-year loans with interest rates between 4 and 5 percent. The revolving fund was established through a discontinued U.S. Department of Agriculture economic development grant.

Restaurant operator Susan Longlois used the Jewett City program to update her business and sees the potential of something similar on a town-wide basis.

“It just might give people that extra boost they need to get things started and keep it all in town,” she said.

Griswold officials are looking to fund their revolving business loan program with proceeds from the sales of town-owned property. Giard said there are 52 unused commercial and residential parcels that could be used for seed money.

Merchant Bob Lamothe is among the borough business owners who took advantage of the Jewett City program. He used a $25,000 loan to develop two rental properties.

Lamothe is among the many local business owners sold on this small eastern Connecticut town, which offers the best of both worlds - quiet rural character and close proximity to an interstate – not to mention the loan program.

“You couldn’t beat the interest rate,” Lamothe said.
GOVERNANCE

History and future of agriculture at core of Preston outreach

Farms come in all sizes in Preston and – big or small – they are essential to the quality of life in this small rural town.

That’s the message at the heart of the Conservation Commission’s series of agriculture forums for local farmers, “whether you farm 1 acre or 100.” The forums are in line with the town’s goal of preserving its agriculture heritage. Farmers have the ability to discuss opportunities and issues affecting them.

The most recent agriculture forum provided information on the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program and other strategies for saving open space. Conservation Commission Chairman Gary Piszczek said the forums also provide valuable information for zoning officials and members of other town committees.

“What they do affects the farmers, and what the farmers do affects the town,” Piszczek said.

The town’s commitment to agriculture includes a tax break that was approved in 2012. The provision allows farmers to take an exemption on buildings used exclusively for farming that are assessed up to $21,000.

Like many towns in the state where farms and farmland have given way to housing developments and businesses, Preston has lost about a dozen working dairy farms since the 1980s. There are five dairy farms remaining, operations that require open space for feed production and pasture.

A recent town survey of dairy farms found there were about 600 dairy cows, producing 2,100 gallons a day. The farms required 450 acres for feed production, 160 pasture acres for grazing, and some 220 acres in hay to produce approximately 30,000 bales.

Preston agriculture is marked by its diversity. In addition to dairy, Preston agriculture also includes vegetable farms, hay and ear corn cash crops, nursery and greenhouse crops, Christmas trees, equine operations, beef and poultry farms, and wineries.

North Haven’s revamped ordinance takes a bite out of blight

The activity around North Haven’s recently beefed up blight ordinance is really picking up. Just ask Lynn Sadosky, the town’s Public Works director who oversees the Blight Prevention Appeals Board.

Since 2011 when the ordinance was revamped, the town has investigated about 175 properties and issued citations on 27. The five-member appeals board meets every month and can issue fines of $100 a day until the property is brought into compliance. Town officials say the intent behind the ordinance is not to generate revenue but to protect property values and enhance the quality of life for everyone.

Sadosky says the program aims to “deal with everybody equally: residential, industrial and commercial.”

A blighted premise in North Haven is defined as “real property, including any building or structure located thereon, which is and continues to be in a state of disrepair or is becoming dilapidated.” Inspectors look for broken or boarded up windows, rodent infestation, and trash piles when determining a property’s state of disrepair.

Blight prevention officers work with property owners once a problem is identified. Once a notice is issued, property owners are urged to contact the blight prevention officer as soon as possible to discuss remedies. Property owners have 30 days to either fix the problem or appeal the violation. If there is no action, the meter begins running at $100 a day until the problem is resolved.

To the town’s delight, the response from the public has been one of cooperation. In many cases, say town officials, neighbors have been willing to pitch in and help a property owner address the blight.

Lynn Frederickson, chairman of the Blight Prevention Appeals Board, says when given the choice of sprucing up the property or paying a fine, “most people will do what they need to do.”
Cheers! Bridgewater’s 79-year-old ban on alcohol sales is history

Bridgewater residents answered with a resounding “Yes” when asked on Election Day if the town should repeal its long-standing ban on alcohol sales. The landslide vote – nearly 3-to-1 in favor of lifting the ban – ushered out Bridgewater’s distinction of being the last dry town in Connecticut.

But perhaps most importantly for municipal leaders and the town’s small business community, it ushers in the promise of more economic development.

First Selectman Curtis Read called the vote “a little bit of progress.”

“We want to be perceived as an up-and-coming town, and I think this definitely helps that,” he said.

The ballot measure that passed does not establish liquor stores or allow alcohol to be sold in convenience stores. It essentially allows “the sale of alcoholic liquor in all establishments operating under restaurant or café permits.”

Consequently, the next step has the town turning its attention to tweaking the zoning ordinances to allow the establishment of restaurants. There are currently no restaurants permitted in this town of 1,700, but there is keen local interest in opening some.

William Holland, who owns an X-ray equipment manufacturing business, is aiming to turn a vacant bank into an upscale restaurant. He said he will petition the Planning & Zoning Commission to amend the regulations and is hopeful that the new eatery will be up and running in a year.

The actual origins of the ban are unclear to many in this village with strong agricultural roots. But local lore points to problems that may have begun when prohibition ended in 1933 and bars reopened. The revelry may have gotten a little out of hand and crops suffered as a result.

Fast forward nearly 80 years and supporters are hopeful that ending the ban and boosting business will bring more young families into a town where the average age is 58.

Library Director Sandra Neary noted that change can be good for any community.

“I think it’s just what we need,” she said.

Colchester shedding higher-fee tax payment system

Paying taxes online for Colchester residents just got a little more convenient and a lot less expensive.

Beginning next year, the town will use the services of “Point and Pay,” a new vendor that will provide residents with updated, real-time tax information 24 hours a day. The system will also issue notices to taxpayers when payment is due.

Colchester is one of a growing number of municipalities in the state that provides online payment options for its residents. Tax collector Don Phillips explains that the third-party vendor system that the town currently uses for online payments charges a “convenience fee” of 3 percent for bills more than $1,000 and 2 1/2 percent for those more than $10,000. Taxpayers also have to be armed with a lot more information such as the bill number, certain codes, and the exact amount to be paid.

“You can’t look up your tax information and then click on an icon to pay the bill,” Phillips says.

Cyber-security is always a concern with any transaction but Phillips says the new vendor doesn’t keep transaction records. He also pointed out that in the electronic payment sphere the town has a small customer base unlike the major retail accounts, the typical targets of hackers. More than 30 municipalities in Connecticut are currently using the “Point and Pay” system.

The new system comes at no cost to the town and is more user-friendly, offering additional flat-fee payment options. Taxpayers can use a debit card and pay a flat fee of under $4 or pay by electronic check for $1.50.

Taxpayers also still have an old-fashioned option – a visit to Town Hall to pay in person.
Grant from New England Diary and Food Council helps Coventry students “Fuel Up to Play 60”

Eating healthy just got easier at an intermediate school in Coventry thanks to a grant from the New England Dairy and Food Council that supports a national nutrition and exercise program called “Fuel Up to Play 60.”

Coventry applied for the grant and when it received funding under the program, the town joined more than 73,000 schools nationwide who participate in “Fuel Up,” which encourages youths to consume nutrient-rich foods and to do at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

Coventry’s G.H. Robertson Intermediate School is using the grant funds to purchase a countertop refrigerator to display different varieties of yogurt as part of the meals program offered at the school. In addition, the school is purchasing a milk cooler barrel and will place it next to the cash register to encourage students to make milk their drink of choice with their meals.

Funding for the grant program is provided by the dairy farm families of Connecticut through a partnership between the Connecticut Milk Promotion Board and the New England Dairy and Food Council.

The effort to increase awareness of and access to nutrient-rich foods and opportunities for physical activities is being applauded by farmers throughout the country – as well as those closer to home.

Greg Peracchio of Coventry’s Hytone Dairy Farm, a program participant said, “As a dairy farmer, it is very rewarding to not only provide schools and families with healthy dairy foods, but to help our communities become healthier places overall.”

“Promoting wellness initiatives in schools across the country as well as right here in my home town of Coventry is a great way to give back to the community that supports us,” Peracchio said.

The idea behind “Fuel Up to Play 60” is based on the simple fact that too many children do not eat breakfast and often suffer the consequences in the classroom. Eating breakfast at school can help kids be more attentive, behave better, and improve their classroom performance. Accordingly, the program aims to make sure that all kids start their day with the fuel they need to succeed.

So while the call to “eat your vegetables” still rings true, it may be followed by “and don’t forget to wash them down with a nice cold glass of milk – and grab a yogurt for dessert!”

In Bridgeport, serving up the American dream – homeownership – also comes with a healthy dollop of education.

The city has partnered with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust to launch a down-payment assistance program that links homebuyer education, housing counseling, and closing costs assistance for first-time homebuyers.

Mayor Bill Finch said the city allocated $300,000 of federal housing partnership funds for its First Time Homebuyer Down Payment and Closing Cost Assistance Program for low- and moderate-income households.

“The city created this program to assist Bridgeport residents in realizing their dreams of owning a home here in the Park City,” Finch said. “We know that homeownership helps to stabilize our communities and improve our neighborhoods. I am thankful for the assistance of HUD and to our partner Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust for giving our residents the guidance and education necessary to purchase a home.”

Finch said the goal is to help 27 first-time homebuyers. The program also has a maximum $10,000 forgivable loan for each homebuyer.

Buyers must be income eligible at less than 80 percent of the area median income and must provide 2 percent of the home purchase from their funds. The program requires that homebuyers complete an education workshop administered by the Neighborhood Trust, which is a HUD-approved housing counseling agency. In the past decade, the organization has counseled more than 1,900 families and individuals and helped nearly 500 settle into homeownership.

“Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust is thrilled to once again administer the city’s down payment assistance program for first-time homebuyers looking to purchase in Bridgeport,” said Beverly Hoppie, homeownership education director at Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust.
Putnam teams with interfaith group to serve free summer meals

The Putnam school district has brought back a popular free summer meal program for children and their parents thanks to an ongoing partnership with a local interfaith group.

The Summer Food Service Program targets children who rely on free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs during the school year. During the summer months, free breakfasts and lunches are served Monday through Friday at a variety of locations.

Putnam Mayor Tony Falzarano said the program, provided in partnership with the Interfaith Human Services of Putnam (IHSP), benefits the entire community.

“We’ve got to keep these kids fed,” Falzarano said. “A hungry kid is not going to do well. A kid who’s been fed is a kid who can go out and play, get involved in sports.”

The interfaith group contributed $3,000 this year to allow parents to eat with their children. The program, also funded through End Hunger Connecticut and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, does not require identification or proof of income.

“We are extremely fortunate to be able to offer multiple opportunities to feed families with children during the summertime,” said Ann Kathi Peterson, IHSP secretary and community resource/volunteer coordinator.

In 2011, the program served 526 adults, thanks to a $1,500 donation from IHSP. That same year, it also served 1,000 children. In 2012, IHSP donated $2,000 and the program dished up 8,011 breakfasts and 12,518 lunches. Last year, there were 9,207 breakfasts and 14,758 lunches served, said Barry Sbordy, director of food services for Putnam schools. Nearly 1,500 meals were served to adults in 2013, Sbordy said.

The interfaith group has launched new fundraising efforts to enable it to contribute to the meals program. Mayor Falzarano said residents recognize the program’s importance and have contributed to its effectiveness.

“For a small town that is very poor, people bend over backwards to help their brothers,” Falzarano said. “Any time there is a fundraiser or a disaster they step up, and they buck up, and they do it time and time again.”
Norwalk charting path toward healthy community

Want to get healthy and fit in Norwalk? There’s an app for that.

Members of a task force charged with developing a safe, interconnected network of bicycle routes and walkways are putting the finishing touches on a plan that will be presented to the public in early 2015. It’s all part of the city’s Pedestrian & Bikeway Transportation Plan created in 2012.

Task force members are studying all the potential bike routes to include on the master plan and are turning to technology for a little help. City Health Director Timothy Callahan has been working with the group and suggests that data from the cyclist application MapMyRide can help point the project in the right direction.

“I’m sure a number of people in Norwalk use MapMyRide,” Callahan said. “Let’s find out which routes are the most ridden.”

Promoting a healthier lifestyle by creating safe paths to work, schools, and shopping is the driving force behind what the group envisions – neighborhoods and business districts “thiving with foot traffic from residents and visitors...and a hub of connected regional bicycle network that includes bike lanes, multi-use paths, and greenways.”

“We believe that more people would bicycle if they had a safe way of doing it,” Mayor Harry Rilling said.

The city’s Public Works Department is working with the task force to coordinate road repaving with bike lane painting and striping. The project also leverages the proximity of existing trails and greenways to connect the city with healthy pathways that include Norwalk River Valley Trail, the Merritt Parkway, and the East Coast Greenway.

The bike and walkway improvements anticipated in the 2012 master plan are estimated to cost about $4.1 million. Officials say about two-thirds of that figure is for sidewalk work. Ninety percent of the plan “is going to be paint” for bicycle striping, said Task Force Co-Chairman Michael G. Mushak.
Summer of hope: New Haven's ‘100 Day Campaign’ to reduce homelessness

Buoyed by the spirit of collaboration among governmental, charitable, and religious organizations, the city of New Haven intends to substantially reduce chronic homelessness in the Elm City by August.

Dubbed the “100 Day Campaign,” it is New Haven’s largest coordinated initiative to secure supportive housing for those in need by coordinating services and pooling resources among groups serving the homeless.

“If agencies break down barriers and galvanize behind the same model and goals, we can have a dramatic effect on housing a significant portion of chronically homeless people,” said Steve DiLella, the Director of Housing and Homeless Services.

The city launched the collaborative campaign in April after a two-day "boot-camp" – a workshop where groups emerged with a blueprint for the 100-day program and a leadership council to oversee and implement the plan.

Organizers have formed teams to identify and register homeless individuals and rank them based on their risk level. People who have been on the street for a year or in unstable housing for three years get the highest priority for housing. Officials estimate there are 140 chronically homeless people in and around New Haven and aim to find secure housing for 75 percent of them by July 30.

To help coordinate the campaign, city officials have tapped the expertise of Stamford-based nonprofit consul Rapid Results Institute, which has also led similar initiatives in other U.S. cities and internationally. The city is helping to identify prospective housing and is also providing administrative support.

“The mayor is hopeful the spirit of cooperation and collaboration will yield practical solutions for those struggling to find a place to call home,” said City Hall spokesman Laurence Grotheer.

Supporters say the lasting effects of a successful campaign are significant social and economic returns on investment. The costs of supportive housing are far outweighed by the savings on social services, health care, law enforcement, and shelters.

“It’s a win-win all around,” Housing Director DiLella said. “The cost of having someone homeless for a day is astronomical.”

Zero energy, big returns for first-time Hamden homebuyers

Thinking outside the box in Hamden has translated to a state-of-the-art zero energy home and a novel way to pay for it.

The Hamden Economic Development Corporation (HEDC) is banking on tax credits to help pay for the 1,800 square foot energy efficient home that will be offered to a first-time home buyer.

HEDC Executive Director Dale Kroop said he had “wanted to do a creative project,” and this one fit the bill. If a company invests in the house, the HEDC gets the money and the investor will get that amount credited to their state taxes.

The HEDC said funding in the amount of $462,000 will cover all costs of the project – from design and construction to the energy efficiency features. The HEDC has already secured $362,000 in construction financing and predevelopment funds from the Connecticut Housing Investment Fund (CHIF). The second part of the financial equation comes from a tax credit investment by Connecticut Light & Power. Kroop said proceeds from the sale of the house and the CL&P tax credit investment will repay the loans.

“That’s how this one works,” Kroop explained. “We’re thrilled to develop this important project with such generous partners.”

The home is also helping to “energize” the neighborhood. It will be built in the Newhall community, the focus of much revitalization after soil remediation. Nearby is a former community center that’s being renovated to house the Hamden Business Incubator. A recreational park in that same neighborhood is targeted for new baseball fields, tennis and basketball courts and a walking track. The first tenants are expected in the incubator next year and that project may bring in a total of 20 start-up businesses, more than 100 jobs and some $2 million in payroll.

“We’re excited about it,” Kroop said.

Town officials say the state-of-the-art home, recreational upgrades, and the prospect of some 20 start-up businesses for the incubator will improve the lives of residents and ensure long-term sustainability for the area.
One of the newest neighborhoods in Cheshire was a few years in the making. But Foote Commons was worth the wait for the diverse group of residents settling into the affordable housing units that town officials say will enhance the quality of life for everyone.

“We think it’s important to give seniors, the disabled, single parents, and other types of people who might not afford to live in Cheshire paying market rates, the opportunity to have a safe place to live and contribute to our community,” Cheshire Housing Authority Chairman Bruce Klein said. “This is something that they and the entire town should be proud of.”

Named after Civil War Admiral Andrew Hull Foote, the development features 14 new units and six rehabilitated ones. Part of the $3.7 million project included a restored historic home that was named after Admiral Foote. The new units range from 800 square feet for a single bedroom to 1,200 square feet for two- and three-bedrooms. Two units are handicapped accessible.

Cheshire Housing Authority Manager Ann Belcher said her office selected 47 applicants as the new tenants. They will pay a percentage of their monthly income for rent. To qualify for a one-bedroom, an applicant’s salary had to be between $28,959 and $37,200. For a two-bedroom, the income parameters were between $33,050 and $44,640 and for a three-bedroom unit, $37,200 to $51,570.

The Housing Authority began the project more than five years ago, shepherding it through a state approval process. From there it went before the local Planning and Zoning Commission and after an initial rejection was resubmitted and accepted.

P and Z Chairman Earl J. Kurtz, II, watched the project take shape and when it was completed, liked what he saw.

“They took dilapidated housing units and made them look nice, and the new buildings really look nice, too,” Kurtz said.

Klein, the Housing Authority Chairman, said the town paid for the project with a grant from Connecticut’s Department of Housing and a loan from the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority.

“I’m excited about it, very proud of what we’ve accomplished,” Klein said. “This is the vision we had. The hardest part was not being discouraged by the bureaucratic process. I like to think of it as a legacy I’m involved in that will serve people for many years to come.”

Hamden is preparing to welcome a new wave of residents with the addition of more affordable housing units.

The future “Sanford Commons” is currently a vacant property but what the town envisions is a more vibrant and diverse neighborhood by the end of 2015 or early 2016.

Economic Development Director Dale Kroop said the town is working with the nonprofit New Haven Home Recovery Inc. (NHHR) to build a new 33-unit apartment building on the Sanford Street site. Kroop said a similar project went up a few years ago on Treadwell Street and now the town stands poised to increase its affordable housing base even more.

Town officials have seen first-hand the difference affordable housing can bring to a community. Just three years ago, the town transformed a 54,000-square foot blighted property – an old burned out perfume factory and bakery – into Highwood Square, a colorful artist community.

Kroop has said that the Highwood Square project is a “story of building hope in a neighborhood that has seen steady decline in the last 25 years.”

Town Planner Leslie Creane said potential residents of the new Sanford Commons housing must be within 50 to 80 percent of the town’s median income. The NHHR has secured a $7.6 million grant from the state’s Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative and approval from the Planning and Zoning Commission to move ahead with the project.

NHHR Executive Director Kellyann Day can attest to the demand for affordable housing in Hamden. She said there were over 450 requests last year for affordable housing, rental assistance, and homeless shelters. Her organization helps provide more than 100 units of permanent, supportive housing in the greater New Haven area.
Accessory apartments in Ridgefield are added value

Family ties are alive and well in Ridgefield thanks to a bit of tweaking on a little-used housing regulation.

The town made it easier for people to apply for accessory apartments on single family lots and the results have been profound. Since the regulation was changed in 2003, about 80 to 90 accessory apartments have been added, officials say.

“Many people are creating in-law apartments for their parents,” Town Planner Betty Brosius said. “We have had the opposite occur as well, where the parents are creating an apartment for one of their children to live in.”

The town offers an “affordable incentive” and a “senior occupant incentive” that allows the site plan approval to be done administratively in the planning office without a hearing or commission vote. The affordable incentive must be deed restricted to meet the state’s “affordable” guidelines for 10 years. The senior incentive requires that either the main house or apartment be occupied by someone 55 years or older.

Town Planner Brosius said about 80 percent of the accessory units are senior incentive apartments.

To address the increased interest in these units, the town’s Affordable Housing Committee published a booklet titled “Accessory Success,” with brief sections ranging from “What will it cost?” to “How do I find good tenants?”

Among the requirements:
- The apartments must be designed to maintain the single-family appearance.
- The owner must live either in the main house or secondary unit.
- The apartment can only be added to lots with a single dwelling.
- Apartments can be no more than 900 square feet and have only one bedroom.
- At least four off-street parking spaces must be provided for both units.

Local builder Reed Whipple praised the Planning and Zoning Commission’s move to permit more of these units, which have the flexibility to accommodate a family member, caregiver or provide extra income.

“I think the planning commission has done a great job being much more user-friendly when it comes to accessory apartments,” he said. “It has helped out seniors and it has also helped out our children, as well, who are looking for jobs and can’t find them, or are newly married.”

Whipple himself added an apartment for his in-laws who had been in assisted living and said it has been a benefit for everyone.

“By putting this accessory apartment on our property, not only has it cut their expenses down, it has changed their lives,” he said. “Being around family, the grandchildren, the pets — it makes an enormous difference. It’s what we did years ago, if you think about it. That’s how families always were.”
INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION

Putnam pitching partnerships in regional technical park

The more the merrier, and in the case of a planned technical park Putnam, the bigger the economic benefit.

Putnam officials are actively marketing partnerships in the first phase of its technical park to neighboring towns in order to maximize the state’s investment in it. If just one town signs on, state funding will increase from 50 percent to 75 percent under the Manufacturing Assistance Act.

The ultimate goal is to develop a 200-plus acre park that will attract more green manufacturing and industry with minimal environmental impact. The first phase – a 62-acre, six-lot parcel – will include a new YMCA and four additional lots that are available for sale. The town is offering 10 percent shares in the first phase for $80,000 and partner towns would get 10 percent of the land sales and park tax revenue.

It is an attractive idea for small towns looking for additional revenue sources. The marketing pitch is paying off. Brooklyn, Scotland, and Canterbury – towns with a combined population of about 15,000 – have all signed on to begin negotiations with Putnam.

Putnam Selectman Scott Pempek said that based on his town’s existing tax rate an investor could recoup the $80,000 in less than two years once all the lots are sold. Annual revenues would be about $8,400 after that.

The park would also feature passive recreational trails. Putnam plans to apply for state grants through its recreational trails program. Town officials say the trails and new YMCA would add to the recreational attractions already in the area. An easement along part of the popular Airline Trail allows for hiking, horseback riding, and bicycling.

Criminals’ ill-gotten gains put to good use among local police departments

Crime may not pay for the bad guys, but police departments around the state are putting funds from seized assets to good use on training, equipment, and other law enforcement gear that just may save a life someday.

The departments are making the needed purchases with funds received through federal and state criminal asset forfeiture programs.

New Haven received $71,159 in federal and $49,307 in state asset forfeiture funds in 2013 and used the money for cell phones, lease of undercover cars, informant money, management training, equipment for narcotics unit vehicles, and other tactical equipment, Witkowski said.

Bristol police purchased a $50,000 shooting decision simulator designed to prepare officers for potential deadly force situations. The Department had previously rented a simulator for $4,500 each time. The purchased simulator, which the Department began training on in January, features about 800 “shoot, don’t shoot” video scenarios. Officers use a weapon similar to their service weapon but one that splatters paint.

Purchases for other departments include:

- Middletown used state forfeiture funds to fix up undercover vehicles for confidential informants.
- Torrington used state forfeiture funds for narcotic “buy money,” the community outreach program “National Night Out,” phone system upgrades, a bite-suit for canine training, and policy upgrades.
- North Haven plans to use federal forfeiture funds toward the purchase of a decision simulator.
- Hamden used the funds to support its narcotics unit and to purchase a police dog, motorcycle safety equipment, and SWAT gear.
- North Branford police purchased an enclosed trailer for rapid deployment and it is used by both local police and the South Central Regional SWAT team.
- Shelton and Ansonia police both purchased new fingerprinting machines, which can take prints and quickly send them electronically to state and federal databases for identity checks.
- Orange purchased “Trent,” a drug detection Labrador retriever who is a recent graduate of the State Police K-9 Academy.
- Woodbridge police are using the funds to offset the purchase of a solar-operated speed sign used to remind motorists to slow down and reduce accidents.
Essex makes a ‘Sound’ investment in saving The Preserve

A few days after Old Saybrook voters overwhelming approved $3 million toward the purchase of a major piece of the unspoiled coastal forest known as “The Preserve,” Essex followed suit with its strong support. Applause broke after the unanimous “yes” vote at the Essex town meeting, where residents approved a $200,000 appropriation.

The nearly 1,000 acres lies along the shore of the Long Island Sound and its preservation for perpetuity has long been a goal of land trusts and conservationists.

The Trust for Public Land, in alliance with the Connecticut Fund for the Environment and other environmental groups, has a deal with the property owner, River Sound Development, to buy the land for just over $8 million.

The state has pledged $3 million. Those dollars, combined with the towns’ funds, federal grants, and private donations, lead land trust officials to expect the purchase to be completed by the end of the year.

Essex officials said the $200,000 would come from the town’s open space sinking fund. Essex’s portion of The Preserve would be owned by the Essex Land Trust. The Old Saybrook portion – some 930 acres – would be co-owned by Old Saybrook and the state. Officials said trails will be improved to enhance public access from all sides.

Lyme, Old Lyme tackling clean-up of Rogers Lake

Attacking pesky, pervasive weeds that mar the beauty and enjoyment of Rogers Lake, the 265-acre body of water flanked by the towns of Lyme and Old Lyme, with organic methods has not slowed the growth and now officials have begun plans to study the most optimal weed control methods.

Lyme First Selectman Ralph Eno says his town doesn’t want to continue with organic methods and dredging would be cost prohibitive considering all the money both towns have already spent. Instead, officials are looking at implementing an herbicide program, including an $88,000 study to assess the potential impacts of herbicides on human health and wildlife.

The study also includes mapping the plants and developing a protocol to monitor water quality and protect the watershed. Formed by a dam along Town Woods Road in Old Lyme, the watershed encompasses nearly 5,000 acres.

The towns formed a joint committee in the fall of 2013 to explore ways to control the aquatic weeds. Both have set aside funds in their respective 2014-15 budget for the study and have applied for a $148,000 Small Town Economic Assistance Program grant to cover the cost of the project and a watershed study. The towns have retained the services of a Massachusetts-based environmental consultant for the study.

Stocked annually with trout and popular with boaters and anglers, the lake and its surrounding area offer a rich habitat for wildlife and aquatic birds. The unwelcome visitors, however, are pervasive milfoil, fanwort, and southern naiad aquatic weeds. The towns applied organic methods such as suction harvesting and benthic mats, an approach that uses a weighted blanket that rests on the lake bottom to prevent sunlight from reaching the plants.

Regional trail connecting Preston, Ledyard, and Groton

Three towns, one trail and a common goal for healthier communities. That’s the driving force behind a 14-mile trail that will eventually connect Preston, Ledyard and Groton. When the trail is complete there will be no motorized vehicles allowed, but plenty of hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding.

Work has begun on the Preston end and will eventually finish up at the popular Bluff Point State Park in Groton. While intended to be used as a recreational trail, town officials expect it to also provide an avenue for alternative, healthy transportation.

“People who live in Preston and Ledyard and commute to Groton could ride their bike to and from work,” said David Holdridge, Chairman of the Tri Town Trail Association, which is coordinating the efforts among the towns and several civic recreational organizations.

As the first major regional trail for southeastern Connecticut, it will connect 4,000 acres of state and local open space. About one-third of the trail will cover public land. Organizers say it will affect fewer than 10 private properties and span just seven road crossings. Beginning at sea level at Bluff Point, the trail will eventually climb to 400 feet. Along the way, it will connect residential areas, economic centers, parks, and stunning natural resources.

One of the largest landowners within the 14-mile trail is the city of Groton, which owns several large and contiguous parcels in Groton and Ledyard. Much of the city-owned land contains reservoir and water treatment plants that are operated by the city-owned Groton Utilities.

The Tri Town Trail Association used a grant from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to secure easements and hire an architect for the design of the northern section.

“This will be a great opportunity for our local residents to take advantage of a new trail,” said Preston Parks and Recreation Director Amy Brosnan.
By the numbers: Killingly aims to improve emergency response time

When saving a life can mean a matter of minutes, Killingly officials are enhancing policies aimed at making every minute count.

The Town Council amended its building regulations to require 4-inch reflective street numbers for all homes. To add more teeth to the ordinance, the town is requiring that all new homes have the reflective numbers before a certificate of occupancy can be issued. A similar provision applies to landlords. Apartment owners are required to install the numbers before accepting a new tenant. Owners of multi-unit residences must display the numbers on apartment buildings and the individual units.

As a companion measure, the town also is providing $1,000 to the local ambulance company for the purchase of the numbers. Ambulance company personnel used a previous $1,000 grant to offer free numbers to residents but quickly depleted their supply. The company continued to offer the signs, but had to impose fees.

“Once we started charging the $8 and $15 for the signs, demand went down,” said Randy Daggett, the administrator of the ambulance company.

Council Chairman John Hallbergh said linking the occupancy requirement to the signage will help ensure a broader use of the reflective numbers, which have been required in town for some time.

“But there’s no punitive measures associated with the law,” Hallbergh said. “At some point there might be fines levied against those homes without the numbers, but not anytime in the near future.”

Daggett said the free sign initiative was a positive experience. It resulted in driving a lot of hits to the ambulance company’s website and fostered more interaction with the community.

“It’s allowed us to have conversations with people we normally wouldn’t have,” Daggett said. “Usually when we talk to folks, they’re in the back of the ambulance, so this is a nice way to strengthen community ties.”

Montville’s rookie narcotics officer has a well-trained nose

Police in Montville are going after illegal drugs with dogged determination. And it makes perfect sense because the newest officer is, well, a dog.

Narcotic detection dog Molly, a 2-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, and her handler Officer Addison Saffioti, began patrolling shortly after their graduation in June from the Connecticut State Police Canine Unit. They were among eight teams who completed the 11-week course. Half of the training focused on learning scents. The second half was spent with the handler.

“She can search rooms, cars, people, self-storage units,” Saffioti said. The department’s first search dog, Molly has also been trained to search for a wide range of drugs and other contraband.

Saffioti put Molly through her paces during her introduction at a recent Public Safety Commission meeting. Molly successfully sniffed out hidden contraband, locating the controlled substance behind a chair and then signaling her find by sitting next to it. She was rewarded with a treat.

The four-legged rookie also proved that she’s good at the real thing, too. In her first week at work, she was involved in five narcotics-related arrests.

“This was a long time coming,” Montville Mayor Ron McDaniel said. “She’s going to help take a lot of drugs off the street, which is good for us and also good for the community outside of Montville.”

Molly is also a hit with the very people she is helping to protect. Montville residents have begun a campaign to raise $1,600 to buy Molly a protective Kevlar vest.

“I’m really excited to do this,” said resident Krista Verito, who is spearheading the campaign. “We want to keep her safe while she’s keeping the town safe.”
Killingly aims to have firefighters train close to home

Killingly firefighters can save on gas mileage when training in the future thanks to a new training facility underway in town.

The training center, which will be built on former school-owned property, will give local firefighters an opportunity to train in a controlled environment without traveling to Hartford, Willimantic or even Auburn, MA. The land became available when the Board of Education agreed last year to relinquish the five-acre lot to the town for the training facility.

“It will give the newer volunteers a chance to familiarize themselves with the equipment and sharpen the skills of the older firefighters,” Dayville Fire Co. Chief Michael Hewko said. “And we want to do that in a controlled environment, not at a live fire. That way we can discuss it in training, see if we want to do something different before we’re called out.”

The rural Windham County town of about 17,300 people is served by six fire districts spread out across 50 square miles. The Dayville Fire Co. had been seeking to build a training center for some time and has applied for a $300,000 federal grant for the project. Additionally, Dayville district residents have approved $750,000. Town officials expect the training center to be an essential resource for all firefighters.

“It will be used by every department in town without firefighters having to drive to Willimantic or Auburn,” said Town Councilor Jonathan Cesolini, who is also a captain with the town’s Williamsville Fire Engine Co.

When completed, the center will be rated for live burns and will consist of a metal storage container with outside staircases and dividers inside to simulate rooms. The facility is being built on an unused parcel near an early education center. But fire officials say a wide buffer of trees will keep the center a safe distance away and expect minimal smoke during the controlled burns.

“The land is quite a distance from the school and only a small percentage of firefighters would use it during the day,” Hewko said. “Since they’re volunteers, most of these guys work during the day, so most of the training would be on nights and weekends.”

School safety an ever-vigilant, educational process in Redding

School administrators and police officials in Redding continue to stay on the leading edge of school safety programs, integrating best practices and continuing education.

The trio of town officials who recently attended a program offered by an internationally recognized expert in human aggression and the roots of violence, immediately recognized that many of the techniques being discussed were actions already employed in Redding schools.

“I was impressed that we had already implemented many of the strategies presented at the safety training,” Redding Elementary School Principal Carrie Wessman Huber said. “There are a few logistical changes or modifications that we will make at the elementary school in order to aid in the process of responding to an emergency, but for the most part, we will continue doing what we have been doing.”

Huber was joined by Police Chief Douglas Fuchs and middle school Assistant Principal Darlene Wallin at a free school safety program in Ridgefield that featured Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a former West Point psychology professor and Army Ranger. Grossman has helped train educators and law enforcement professionals around the country.

“He talked about strategies, mitigating risk, understanding dynamics of juvenile violence, and school violence,” Chief Fuchs said. “He did come up with other good suggestions that we can take with us and look at and discuss as well. Some were a lot more subtle and not things we’d discuss in public.”

Redding administrators and staff also participated in district-wide training and certification last summer in a simulated response to an armed intruder.

“It affirmed my unfortunate belief that given the magnitude of violent events that continues to happen in society, the only true deterrent at the moment is a police officer in the school building,” the chief said.
Passion for preservation: Regional initiative crossing state lines

Protecting natural resources is a numbers game, really. The more communities that get involved, the greater the expanse that can be preserved and protected. That’s exactly the focus of a major initiative in western Connecticut that’s connecting towns and crossing state lines.

The Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative (H2H) marshals the resources and harnesses the commitment of communities served by the Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership, Westchester Land Trust, Mianus River Gorge, and the Housatonic Valley Association. Funded by a two-year federal grant from the U.S. Forest Service, the participating groups will work with property owners in 13 areas to protect watersheds and wildlife habitats.

The Highstead Foundation, a Redding-based conservation group, is leading the effort and will work with more than two dozen local and regional partners. A 2010 Highstead report, “Wildlands and Woodlands,” noted that the unique New England landscape has been jeopardized for years by poor planning development. The H2H initiative sets out to reverse that trend.

Much of the land is held in small private lots and organizers say the key to ensuring clean drinking water and creating climate resilient habitats is to successfully engage the local landowner. The Greenwich Land Trust is among the partnership organizations. Land Trust Executive Director Virginia Gwynn says the project will educate property owners about the natural resources on their particular piece of land and its impact on the entire region.

Gwynn said the multi-town efforts will help to identify and preserve “an extraordinary collective of resources present in the northeast conservation community.”


Risky business: WCCOG towns updating Hazard Mitigation Plan

The calm before the storm is always the best time to prepare for the worst.

Officials from Weston, Wilton, and New Canaan are doing just that as they begin the process of updating their portion of the regional Hazard Mitigation Plan used by towns in the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WCCOG). Updating the plan every five years is not only mandated by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), it also keeps participating towns eligible for federal funding.

A recent workshop in Wilton helped officials from the three towns identify potential hazards and vulnerabilities and focus on ways to mitigate their risks.

They were joined by representatives from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the Nature Conservancy, and Northeast Utilities.

Officials looked at everything from generator capacity to roadside tree maintenance to using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology for road crews.

Weston Land Use Director Tracy Kulikowski said one of her big takeaways from the workshop was the importance of providing power to the entire town center. As a result, her town has identified a need for a more powerful generator, one that can provide electricity to the town hall, the library, schools, and a shopping center. Weston also plans to expand a volunteer communication program for small neighborhoods and may provide IT support to enhance it.

The public will play a key role in updating the regional plan, which was last updated in 2011. WCCOG Regional Planner Robert Sachnin said the update will also include a Natural Hazard Survey to gain public feedback on areas of greatest concern to residents.

“These are the people who are directly affected by disasters, and it’s important that their voices are heard,” Sachnin said. “The public’s feedback concurrently assists emergency responders, so it’s really a win/win for the community.”
New content, ease of navigation, interactive features, and frequently asked questions will soon be just a keystroke away for Fairfield residents as the town is set to launch its new Web site.

Each town department will have its own frequently-asked-questions (FAQs) section and a more concise description of department duties, saving time for both residents and employees.

“We’ve been collecting that information over the last six months. There will be a lot more content on the new website,” First Selectman Michael Tetreau said.

Administrative Assistant Kathleen Griffin is helping launch the site. She said citizens will see a better organized site and one that will allow them to submit requests for town services such as tree inspections, pothole repairs, and trash in the road. The new website will also allow citizens to sign up for meeting agendas and to receive press releases from their local government.

While the new web address will be the same – www.fairfieldct.org - the home page will get a makeover.

“The homepage is going to be more of a generic page of the website and you’ll go into separate sections,” Griffin said. “We’re trying to simplify the home page because it’s overwhelming.”

The town polled residents in 2012 asking for suggestions and some of those have been included in the new site. The suggestions included rotating photos, links to other government sites, easier access to forms and documents, e-mail notifications, online complaint filing and a First Selectman’s blog. Town officials expect the new site to be a work in progress and officials anticipate more citizens’ suggestions and feedback once the site is up and running.

“The idea is to make it a much more productive tool for our residents and town employees, and a more user-friendly format throughout so it’s easier to navigate,” First Selectman Tetreau said.

Volunteering for boards, commissions, the fire department, and other organizations that make up the fabric of the town of Monroe is just a key stroke away.

First Selectman Steve Vavrek has long wanted to find an easier way to gauge residents’ interest in their town and boost the ranks of volunteers. A new online campaign – The Monroe Volunteer Initiative – is helping the town do just that, Vavrek said. The town website, MonroeCT.org, now features a tool for residents to submit contact information and point out the volunteering opportunities that appeal to them most.

“A few towns do this already and it gets more people involved and that’s what we should be doing. This new system will enable the town to more effectively recruit for volunteers in the most efficient ways possible,” Vavrek said.

Residents can apply online for any openings on a town board or commission, political party, or community organization. They can also receive information on how to get involved. There are plenty of opportunities in this town of about 20,000.

There are more than 20 boards and commissions, ranging from A (Anti-Blight Appeals Board) to Z (Zoning Board of Appeals). The town also has opportunities for special appointments such as the town historian, emergency management director, and spots on the tax abatement and fire services committee. Volunteers seeking to roll up their sleeves in the community have nearly a dozen organizations from which to choose, such as the Volunteer Fire Department, Friends of the Library, Rotary Club, and more.

“Volunteering to serve on a local board or commission, joining a community group or a political party is an opportunity for our residents to become involved and help shape the future of Monroe,” Vavrek said. “I truly believe that volunteerism is one of the core attributes of a successful and vibrant community.”
“E-recording” puts Westport on the map for property transfers

Buying or selling property in Westport now means less paperwork in Town Hall. In an effort to streamline and simplify the process, the town has begun accepting land records that are electronically delivered, becoming the first community in Fairfield County to do so.

The town took advantage of new state regulations that allow for the electronic recording and delivery of documents. Connecticut became the 43rd state to permit “e-records.”

The new process is a big time-saver for buyers, sellers, and Town Hall staff. Land records can be transferred with the push of a button from a lawyer’s office to the town clerk.

“No paper is transferred at all,” Town Clerk Patty Strauss said.

Previously, her staff had to scan and process the paper document and then return it by mail. Strauss said sometimes documents arrived with problems that had to be returned and resent, costing her office time and postage. The new system is easy to learn and Strauss said her entire department can be trained in about an hour over the phone.

Strauss said the e-recording comes with no added costs to the town.

“I’m happy to tell you that I don’t have to ask for any funding,” Strauss told the Board of Selectmen during her presentation of the plan. Strauss said an electronic hookup that the town “long ago” agreed to purchase is all the equipment that’s needed.

“I’m all set up,” she said. “There’s no funding needed, now or ongoing.”

Selectmen unanimously approved an agreement with the companies the town clerk chose as the delivery agents for the e-recording of documents. Selectman Avi Kaner praised the new process, saying it puts the town “once again on the leading edge.”

Durham’s bright idea could be a cost-saver

There are savings in numbers – 400 give or take. That is approximately how many streetlights the town of Durham has on its electric bill. Although they are owned by CL&P, the streetlights cost the town approximately $40,000 a year to run.

Town officials are now hopeful that an expanded energy efficiency program offered by the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities will shed some welcome light on energy and costs savings. The town has entered into CCM’s streetlight retrofit program that could eventually replace the old halogen lights with more efficient LED lights.

The LED lights throw off a better quality light than other energy efficient lights. First Selectman Laura Francis said public safety officials generally lean toward LED lights because of their clarity.

The town had looked into the conversion once before with a smaller group of four other towns but Francis explained that the economy of scale wasn’t big enough to realize savings. The CCM partnership is a better option.

“We will never be able to do this on our own,” Francis said. “Even with five towns it was hard for us to get the capital investment down to where it was manageable. CCM is hoping to get enough towns to participate so they reach what they call critical mass to achieve the most savings.”

The first step is an engineering study of the town’s lighting, which would be done by Siemens, the electronic engineering firm competitively selected by CCM members. The firm would then provide a proposal of what the town spends now on the halogens compared to what Durham would incur to purchase and upgrade to LED technology.

The LED lights have longer life, lasting up to 20 years. Some towns participating in the program have reduced their kilowatt hour consumption in the range of 54 percent to 69 percent.

Durham’s Clean Energy and Sustainability Task Force had already given the program its nod of approval before the selectmen officially voted to proceed. Francis assured officials that there are no upfront costs and that the town is under no obligation to implement the retrofit.

“There is nothing here that requires us to go forward with the project. All this agreement says is if we do then we would do it with this program,” Francis said.
**Downtown Danbury is plugged into ‘wave of the future’**

Pull over and plug in. Danbury officials are hoping that fuel-conscious motorists will do just that in the near future. Downtown Danbury will soon be user-friendly for electric and hybrid vehicles. The parking authority is installing a charging station for electric and hybrid vehicles in its Patriot Garage that motorists can use for free.

With an average charge time of about three hours, motorists will have time to shop, dine and visit the town. Valued at about $5,000, the charging station was donated by Nissan USA thanks to the efforts of Wilton Nissan dealer Bruce Bennett.

“It’s the wave of the future and we’re very excited,” said Parking Authority Director Deborah Pacific. “We believe this will help to attract more people into the city’s downtown.”

She said the station can recharge an average electric car battery that’s about 80 percent depleted in three hours. The Parking Authority will publicize the service on websites that offer charging station locations around the state. Having one in Danbury can be an inducement for some travelers to visit Danbury perhaps for the first time.

“They can come downtown and spend a few hours visiting area shops, the museum, walk around the streets or have a bite to eat at a local restaurant,” Pacific said.

Garage patrons will be allowed to recharge for free but will likely have to pay the regular parking fee. Other parking authorities in the state provide free charging, Danbury officials estimate the cost of a charge to the city will be about $2 to $3, a small price to pay for the potential of a more positive economic jolt.

“A vibrant downtown has many building blocks,” City Center Director Tom Devine said. “Some are large and some are small, but every piece adds up.”

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**Fairfield residents have a new “cyber-place” to gather**

Today’s technology has dramatically changed the way information is gathered and distributed, but the idea of the old town square is very much alive.

A new website for the town of Fairfield has created a virtual town square – a special cyber-place where residents can “gather” to ask questions, report problems, sign up for townwide alerts, acquire forms, register to vote, and access town officials with a keystroke.

“We feel the website is a vast improvement and hope it provides a product for the public that is more accessible, more transparent, and more interactive,” said Constituent Concern Coordinator Kathleen Griffin. “We haven’t had any issues since the website went live and from a user perspective, it went very smoothly.”

Each town department has its own page and news feeds. Links to boards and commissions come complete with agendas and minutes. The Town Clerk’s office is a virtual filing cabinet of licenses, forms, and records that can be read online. Commuters can visit the Parking Authority to pay fines, and to check on parking fees and wait lists. There is also the Fairfield “Knowledge Base,” which provides answers to frequently asked questions ranging from recycling policies to how to get a beach sticker.

Town events are featured on the home page along with news items on programs, grants, and other items of interest. The newest feature of the new site is the “Citizen Service Request System,” that allows residents to report potholes and damaged sidewalks and attach photos to their reports.

Officials say the hallmarks of the “virtual” town hall are more information and greater accessibility.

“You don’t have to come to Town Hall to get what you need anymore,” Griffin said. “This is where the public can reach us directly.”
Perched above the rotating photo gallery that greets visitors to the Town of Cheshire’s website is a clear sign of the times: “Join us!” It is a virtual invitation to be one of the town’s many “friends” and “like” what you see on the town hall Facebook page.

“We’ve wanted to do this for a while, but it has really been a matter of finding the time and manpower to do it,” said Public Information Officer Arnett Talbot. “You can’t just put up a Facebook page and walk away. You need to monitor what is being posted, respond in a timely manner and make sure all our departments are speaking as one voice.”

Talbot said many town departments, such as Parks and Recreation, Youth Services and the Cheshire Public Library, already had a Facebook page and the Town Hall followed suit. They are among the other municipal entities using the popular social media gathering place. Artsplace, which provides courses in the performing and fine arts, and the Youth Services Yellow House also have a Facebook presence.

Guided by the town’s Social Media Committee, the foray into social media is key to Town Manager Michael A. Milone’s goal to expand Cheshire’s informational outreach. Milone said the social networking site will allow officials to gather citizen feedback on town services and policies.

Both the Public Library and Parks & Recreation also are “tweeting” to keep residents informed through Twitter.

“They are our trailblazers,” Talbot said. “We are blessed to have a number of employees who are social media savvy.”

The e-recording eliminates the need for check-handling since recording fees and payments are electronically processed.

“It’s a cost-savings and a time-savings all around,” Town Clerk Essie Labrot said.

By taking advantage of this new technology, the town has replaced what was a time-consuming and costly procedure for the public. The documents previously had to be either hand delivered, mailed, or sent by courier in order to be filed.

Instead, the paperwork can now be scanned, submitted, reviewed, stamped, and recorded. If there is an error, the documents can be sent back online immediately rather than sent through the mail, which sometimes took days. Filers have shorter wait times, their rejections are handled quicker, and the document transfers are secure ones.

Labrot said e-recording of land records has been popular around the country and is beginning to be embraced more and more in the state. Connecticut was the 43rd state to allow for electronic recording and at least a dozen municipalities are now using e-recording.

“I really expect to see more towns jumping on,” Labrot said. “This technology just makes things much more efficient.”
Renewable energy: “Sun spots” expanding in Fairfield

Fairfield officials are looking to expand the town’s solar power footprint and to lower energy costs even further for their taxpayers with new installations of the green technology.

Current sites approved for solar panels are at the closed landfill, which will supply power to the town’s Water Pollution Control complex, and at the Fairfield Ludlowe and Fairfield Warde high schools.

New solar projects are also being considered for the Fairfield Tennis Center and a downtown train station. The town is in the process of working with neighbors on the planning and approval of the Tennis Center project, which would provide power to the tennis center and a teen club. The town is also working with the Parking Authority on the train station solar project which would generate electricity for a nearby middle school.

Assistant Public Works Director Ed Bowman explains that the projects will not need to go through zoning approvals because they are considered an accessory use and not a “change of use.” He said the planners have worked closely with the Conservation Commission on the landfill panels.

Town officials say the projects will be built with no cost to taxpayers and, when completed, all five sites would save some $285,000 in utility costs.

The expansion of solar power complements Fairfield’s ongoing initiatives to promote renewable energy for both the public and private sector. The town actively promotes a number of state and local energy efficiency programs such as Solarize CT, Zero Emissions Renewable Energy Credits (ZERC), and the Clean Energy Challenge, which set a goal in 2014 to perform 375 new home energy audits and 100 new home solar electricity installations.

“We have available to us programs that provide clean, renewable energy and some great savings for our taxpayers,” said First Selectman Michael Tetreau.

Easy does it: Monroe launches upgraded, user-friendly website

Call it simplicity with substance – a lot of substance.

Using scenic Great Hollow Lake in the background, the redesigned Monroe town website greets visitors with a simpler, cleaner design and sports functions that are easier to use on both the front and back end.

The site allows citizens to retrieve their town property cards from a database that is similar to Google earth. Problems on a particular road, such as downed power lines or debris in the road? No problem informing the appropriate town officials because a new function dubbed the “Q-Alert” lets residents immediately report such hazards. By simply typing the words “tree down” in the “Q-Alert” box, the user is automatically directed to the Department of Public Works.

The “Q-Alert” functionality can also be used for less dire situations. If a user types “my property taxes,” he or she will be directed to the page for the tax collector.

Preliminary work began last year when the town allocated money for the improvements. Jack Zamary, director of technology for the town and schools, admits that the old site was challenging at times in terms of finding information. By going with a simpler design, users can quickly locate what they need.

Zamary said the town is very pleased with the new geographical functionality. The built-in geographic information system (GIS) compatibility is able to pinpoint the location of the individual reporting an issue, Zamary said.

Not only is the site friendlier for residents, it has also made life a little easier for town employees, particularly the non-technical types. Using a simpler Content Managing System (CMS), non-technical people can add new information and refresh pages more readily. As a result, residents will have access to the most-updated and accurate information more of the time.

“Employees often needed the assistance of an IT specialist to make changes with the old CMS,” Zamary said. “The new CMS requires very little training for users to become proficient.”
Country roads: Durham residents on the move with expanded rural transit system

The town of Durham has signed on with a rapidly growing regional transit district, a move that will provide greater mobility and convenience for all its residents.

“I am happy to begin our business relationship with Nine Town Transit, which will allow all residents of Durham to get reliable, affordable transportation,” First Selectman Laura Francis said.

Operated by the Estuary Transit District, 9 Town Transit has expanded beyond nine towns and now provides fixed route and Dial-A-Ride services throughout Chester, Clinton, Deep River, Essex, East Haddam, Haddam, Killingworth, Lyme, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Westbrook, and most recently, Durham. The service will cost Durham $13,000 a year.

Prior to the 9 Town Transit arrangement, only Durham seniors and persons with a disability could use public transit and that was through an application with Middletown Area Transit, which will still continue to operate in the town for a while. Now, the general public, seniors, and disabled individuals all can use the new service. With 9 Town Transit, Durham residents can ride into Middletown for shopping, or to go to Middlesex Hospital and other medical facilities.

“The way we’re going to proceed for the next six months, at most, we are going to be serviced by both transit districts,” Francis said. “We’ll have 9 Town for the on demand, general population service and Middletown Area Transit for seniors and disabled.”

Founded in 1981, the Essex-based 9 Town Transit has experienced rapid growth in ridership and services. The largely rural system now travels about 550,000 miles each year, operates on a $1.5 million budget and provides more than 100,000 passenger trips annually.
Grassroots movement reaching New Haven homeless

A recent flea market on the New Haven Green offered goodwill and hope for the city’s homeless population.

For the last two years, Jesse Hardy and his grassroots Jesse’s Homeless Outreach Project (J-Hop) have provided a free flea market where people could find clothes, shoes, toiletries, and toys, get a free haircut, and in some cases, even find a home. Dubbed “Operation Love-A-Fair Freemarket for All,” the flea markets help the group maintain personal connections with the homeless with the ultimate goal of helping them secure housing. Finding affordable housing, Hardy said, is one of the main problems of homelessness. “They’ll go to jail just to stay warm,” Hardy said.

Hardy’s efforts are focused on finding local landlords who will offer free apartments for a while. Hardy screens the applicants to be placed in the homes. Community involvement plays a big part at the outreach events. Members of the New Haven Venom, the city’s new minor league football team have participated in J-Hop projects. Booker T. McJunkin, head coach of the Venom and a J-Hop volunteer, underscored the importance of not judging.

“There are many reasons why people have problems,” McJunkin said.

Hardy said the free flea markets also provide an opportunity for local youths to volunteer. High-schooler Daniel Hunt worked with Hardy for weeks, helping organize the last event.

“I like it because you’re helping out the community,” Hunt said.

New Haven Mayor Toni Harp was among the many supporters who donated clothes for the cause.

“It’s really important that we support the neediest in our community,” Harp said. “I think this is a great effort, and I want to commend Jesse.”

Clues to a profitable fundraiser are all over town in Plainville

Scouring and scavenging pays off in Plainville. Just ask volunteers at the local YMCA.

As they have every year for the last five years, civic-minded volunteers recently turned out to help organize an annual scavenger hunt to benefit the town’s Wheeler YMCA. As each item found was checked off a list, the entrants were one step closer to their $20,000 goal.

The scavenger hunt, dubbed the O’Mazing Race, is held around St. Patrick’s Day each year and is one of just a number of fun and interesting activities, sponsored by the YMCA.

“This is a very unique event,” said Bob Nenna, executive director of the Wheeler YMCA. “We have all different outings like golf tournaments, but this event is one of a kind. It’s fun and profitable.”

Volunteers from the YMCA as well as civic groups help organize the hunt, which has participants scattering across town for two hours. Some of the “discoveries” are not so much objects but activities, such as jumping into the YMCA pool, like many had to do last year. Participants never know from year to year what will be asked of them. But they know with certainty that they will enjoy it.

“All of my friends like to compete with each other,” participant Holly Peterson said. “It’s fun competition and it’s for a good cause.”

The Wheeler YMCA is one of 11 branches of the Greater Hartford YMCA, which serves more than 100,000 people each year, including nearly 70,000 children. The network is one the largest providers of child care in the state. Each summer more than 10,000 children in the region participate in day and residential camping.

Nenna said the money raised from the scavenger hunt is channeled right back into the community to support the YMCA’s many recreational, social, and educational programs.

“The money we raise here helps us do everything we do,” Nenna said.
New year ushers in parent leadership training in West Hartford

After ringing in the New Year, next comes the resolutions – lose weight, exercise more, and finish home projects to name a few. But a group of West Hartford parents can actually resolve to become a community leader and have plenty of help to do so.

The third Parent Leadership Training Institute, offered by the Bridge Family Center, kicked off at the start of year. The 20-week course is funded by a $38,000 grant from the State Education Resource Center and the Connecticut Parent Information Resource Center. The class is free and accepts up to 25 people.

“PLTI gives people who care about kids in West Hartford a way to channel their passion and advocate for kids by doing community service projects,” said Deborah Zipkin, director of the Family Resource Center. “They can have an impact on life here in town and on the life of children all over town.”

The stated goals of the program are:

- Helping parents become the leaders they would like to be for their children.
- Increasing positive parent-child interactions
- Improving child success through parent involvement
- Training parents to be active participants in the democratic process and participate in policy development when a community problem arises.
- Program participants have an opportunity to learn how state and local government works. There are sessions on public speaking, budgets, and understanding how economic trends affect families. The program culminates with individual service projects, which can cover a variety of interests. Past projects have included safe teen driving, book drives, math tutoring programs, and school fundraising events.

Zipkin said course graduates have gone on to make their mark on the community and become more active citizens.

“We’ve had people who have become PTO presidents; we’ve had people who have helped run campaigns; we’ve had people who voted who had never registered to vote,” Zipkin said.

Founded in 1969, the Bridge Family Center began with outreach to at-risk children and has expanded into an organization with a broad range of services for children and their families. The center provides services to more than 7,000 children and families a year.

Old Lyme “second responders” tap into local talent

What began as neighbors helping neighbors in Old Lyme in 2012 has evolved into a corps of committed individuals willing to share their talents and expertise to help those in need in surrounding communities.

The Mentoring Corps for Community Development (MCCD) underscores the community’s diversity – from dog trainers, to business owners, to lawyers, authors, educators and more. Organizers wanted to create a means to give back to the community and that included mentoring students, assisting nonprofits, helping those affected by natural disasters and advising small businesses.

“We will work with any organization that applies to us for help if we feel we can add sparkle to the region,” said Chairman Richard Shriver.

One of their initial challenges was helping local residents in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. With more than 200 houses rendered uninhabitable, MCCD members rolled up their sleeves.

They helped a homeowner navigate the complexities of the recovery process. They contacted several organizations and agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency. They also developed a list of recovery resources such as social services and legal aid.

Dubbed the “second responders” of the community, the MCCD has expanded its reach throughout New London and Middlesex counties. The group recently joined forces with the 50-year-old International Executive Service Corps, which has about 10,000 members. The alliance allows the MCCD to connect those they are helping with experts from throughout Connecticut and Rhode Island. As a result, the MCCD can help individuals or businesses leverage those expert services pro bono or at a reduced cost.

MCCD co-founder Harry Sedgwick was among those personally affected by Superstorm Sandy and the group’s outreach. As flood waters submerged his house under 2 feet of water • 30 residents helped fill sand bags

“I never felt as much embraced by a place,” Sedgwick said.

“It was a magical time.”
Colchester volunteers usher in spring with town-wide cleanup

With the long, seemingly endless winter finally over, Colchester residents got busy in a hurry with what has become an annual rite of Spring.

Volunteers by the dozen turned out for the 9th Annual Spring Cleanup. Sponsored by the Parks and Recreation Department, more than 120 volunteers fanned out to spruce up the town, beautifying the grounds of numerous facilities.

“We’ve got a great town crew that takes pride in their work, but there is only so much they can do,” Selectman Stan Soby said. “The annual Spring Cleanup gives us a great sense of community.”

Residents took up the tasks with their own rakes, wheelbarrows, shovels, and other implements and went to work around the town library, senior center, town hall, youth services bureau, and the town green.

“It helps clean places we don’t necessarily have time to get to. It says a lot about the community. People care,” said Cheryl Hancin, the town’s recreation manager.

It was easy to spot the cadre of community volunteers. Clad in bright green T-shirts, the volunteers pulled weeds, collected trash, and mulched. With each project, the volunteers put the memories of the harsh winter behind and helped usher in the warmth and colors of a most welcome spring.

“This is great. It’s just about everybody working together. It’s just awesome,” said Police Sgt. Rob Suchecki, who also chairs the youth services advisory board.

The annual cleanup has become a source of pride for Colchester and draws volunteers of all ages.

Seven-year-old Hanna Collins and a 5-year-old friend found their niche outside the library where they pulled up weeds. It was the best of both worlds – cultivating stewardship and just having some plain fun.

“It helps the Earth,” Hannah said. “And sometimes I like playing in the dirt.”

Community gardening sprouting up in Weston

On your mark, get set – grow! That might aptly describe Weston’s latest community project – one that involves dozens of volunteers and more than a few green thumbs.

The town recently broke ground at the Lachat Town Farm, the historic home David Godfrey House built in 1770. The town is developing the property in phases, using grants, matching funds, and volunteers, to help reconnect residents with Weston’s agriculture heritage.

The first phase included a recent work day to lay the foundation for the community gardens that will be available to the public this summer. Other projects in the first phase include farm field preparation, a children’s garden, and a pick-your-own produce operation.

“We modeled Lachat after Wilton’s Ambler Farm and Westport’s Wakeman Town Farm to become a community resource with a rich agricultural environment and experiences for residents of all ages,” said Lachat Committee member Amy Kalafa. “The goal now is to create a model of a sustainable farm.”

Residents turned out to build raised beds, clear rocks, pull weeds, prepare the soil, and provide general cleanup and beautification.

“This is really a vision come true for our town,” said Michelle Fracasso, a local farmer and member of the Lachat Committee. “This gives our children a place to learn about food systems and growing food.”

Organizers plan to rent “plant-ready” garden plots for a $75 annual fee. The plots will be filled with a mix of soil and compost and ready to be seeded. Residents who obtain plots can maintain them by visiting two to three times a week between June and October.

The community gardens are just the start of what the Lachat Farm will offer, said Committee member Ellen McCormick.

“The majority of the people really wanted to see the community gardens,” McCormick said. “Then we’ll have a production garden to serve the food bank and perhaps schools and a CSA – community supported agriculture. A CSA is where you could have a subscription for the season and every week come pick up your box of vegetables of what’s available. That’s only a portion of it. We have a lot of other ideas as well.”
North Haven embraces citizen’s crusade to keep children safe

North Haven resident Ray Fowler can’t erase the searing memory of rescuing a little girl from an abusive home. That was nearly 50 years ago. For the last few years, Fowler has had a big impact in town by raising awareness of child abuse and garnering support from the schools, town officials, and just about everyone he meets.

“Since 2012, the most compelling thing is when he walks into a supermarket and people will come up and say, ‘Thank you, I was abused as a child.’ People are stepping out that may have been afraid to admit it. People are thanking him for giving it exposure,” said First Selectman Michael Freda.

Each April during National Child Abuse Awareness Month numerous pinwheels are placed in front of Town Hall.

“It’s to remind people that April is National Child Abuse Awareness Month and that the town of North Haven supports it,” Freda said.

Fowler came face-to-face with the horrors of child abuse when he was in the military during the Vietnam War. While stateside he was called to a “disturbance” in a family housing unit on base. What he saw there changed his life.

“When I got there, there was a girl around 5 or 6 years old. She was emaciated, her cheeks were sunk in. She was burned, beaten, and bruised,” Fowler said. “The child never said a word, but with her eyes said, ‘I don’t know if you’re here to hurt or help me, but please get me out of here.”

Fowler now distributes countless pamphlets about how to report child abuse cases. He has also spearheaded a candy bar campaign in memory of a 9-year-old Alabama girl who died in 2012 after her grandmother and stepmother allegedly forced her to run for three hours as punishment for eating a candy bar.

Fowler gives away the candy bars free of charge, but “we tell people to enjoy the chocolate, but frame the wrapper to remind you that abuse is an ongoing thing.”

Parents bring passion and vision to new Preston playscape

It takes a village to build a playscape.

Plans for Preston’s new playscape have taken shape, representing a true community effort. With support from the town, the Board of Education, the Board of Finance, and a group of motivated parents, students at Preston Veterans’ Memorial School will reap the benefits when school reopens this fall.

A previous playscape was torn down due to safety reasons and replacement costs for a new one came in at around $250,000. Undaunted, several parents took up the cause, presented ideas to the town and eventually were able to reduce the cost to about $149,000, said First Selectman Bob Congdon.

“They did an incredible amount of work to drive down the cost,” he said.

He said the manufacturer also cut another $23,000 off the price tag if the town does some of the site work.

The Board of Education showed its support for the new playscape by allocating $28,000 in surplus funds toward the project. Those funds were placed in a special capital fund earmarked for the playscape. The town plans to allocate the balance from a capital improvement line item.

The Board of Finance has asked the school board to maintain the playscape and make sure it can be used by the community outside of school hours.

The parents’ involvement drew high praise from a number of town officials.

“The schematics they’ve come up with are very impressive,” said school board Chairwoman Jan Clancy.

Selectman Michael Sinko said the parents’ work was the key to the project and they freely presented their ideas to selectmen.

“They were very passionate,” he said. “They were given a challenge, and they met it.”
Plainfield raising the bar on fun with special needs playscape

Plainfield officials and a group of parents have teamed up in a public-private partnership that will ultimately remove barriers that stand between special-needs children and the basic need of all children - just having fun.

Private fundraising is underway to build a new playground for special needs children. First Selectman Paul Sweet said the town will support the construction and maintain the new playground if the money is raised privately. Volunteers, many of whom are parents of socially or physically challenged children, have set a fundraising goal of $300,000 to make the “Wonderland at Lions Park” playscape a reality.

Project founder and parent Renee Toper said the group has raised nearly $7,000 so far and hopes to start construction next year.

“It’s going well so far,” she said. “We’ve been out making our presence known at a lot of community events and we’ll be out at a lot more. And this playground isn’t just for those children with special needs, but for all-ages. We also have an aging population that this will serve, allowing grandparents to easily navigate a Playscape with their grandchildren. We’re moving forward.”

The group is negotiating with The Arc of Quinebaug Valley Inc. to determine if the organization can act as a fundraising conduit.

The fenced-in playscape will be approximately 60 feet-by-60 feet when complete.

“Once the money is raised, it will be turned over to the town in the form of a grant, donation, or gift,” First Selectman Sweet said. “The town, in turn, will use the bid process for design and construction. Once completed, it will be our responsibility to maintain it and keep it insured.”

Sounds like a win-win for kids of all ages!

Backpacks in Branford bringing home more than books

For Johanne Pantani and many others in Branford, the thought of one child going hungry is unacceptable.

Pantani and a group of friends have launched an initiative to provide weekend meals for students by confidentially stuffing their backpacks with nutritious food each Friday. Dubbed “Feed Branford Kids,” the program began in November with 10 deliveries but quickly grew with each week.

The volunteers saw a need and realized there was already a similar backpack nutrition program in the state through the Connecticut Food Bank. About 18 towns currently use the program and the hope was that Branford could be included. However, the Branford group learned that they didn’t qualify for the program.

“We didn’t have enough hungry kids,” Pantani said, “but if you have one hungry kid, you have one too many.”

Undaunted, the group set about starting their own program, at first using seed money from family donations. But as word spread, so did the pace of donations. The group received help from Branford Cares, a $5,000 donation from the Branford Community Foundation, and a $20,000 contribution from the former Chief Operating Officer of Edible Arrangements, who happens to be a Branford resident.

Students who are identified by school officials receive a bag of food that is placed confidentially into their backpacks each Friday by school staff.

Volunteers collect food weekly at the library and YMCA and also welcome monetary, tax-deductible donations.

Optimal food donations include individual servings of soups, tuna, prepared pastas, stew, macaroni and cheese, cereal, juice boxes, fruit/pudding cups, granola/cereal bars, and small shelf-stable milk cartons.

Feed Branford Kids volunteer Pat Andriole notes that school administrators have enthusiastically welcomed the help.

“They’ve seen the need for quite a long time,” Andriole said. “The important thing is none of us want to see any child go hungry. We also know when they’re hungry, they can’t play the way they’d like to; they can’t learn the way they’d like to.”
VOLUNTEERS

Shelton garden club sprouts goodwill year round

Sometimes the seeds planted by the Olde Ripton Garden Club sprout more than flowers.

A scholarship for Shelton High students who plan to study horticulture is among the many philanthropic projects that club members support. Each holiday season, the gardeners make nearly two dozen wreaths for all of Shelton’s municipal buildings, decorate the town green, and adorn a room at the Osborne Homestead Museum in Derby.

Founded in 1976, the organization is dedicated to environmental protection, promoting appreciation of horticulture, providing educational opportunities in landscaping, garden planning and nature studies, and beautifying the community.


Martial arts students tidy up Torrington

Torrington martial arts instructor Keith Mutch wanted to find a community service project for his students. Torrington’s Conservation Commission was interested in holding a second citywide cleanup day, but needed volunteers.

What resulted was the state’s first ever “Clean Up the World Day” as dozens of residents and city groups fanned out to tidy up Torrington.

“Over 90 participants helped make our city a cleaner place,” Mayor Elinor Carbone said.

A past volunteer of the city’s Earth Day projects, Mutch said he wanted to provide that same type of activity to get his students more involved in their community. Anyone can be an “armchair ecologist,” Mutch said, but actually doing something about it – picking up trash, beautifying neighborhoods – is what makes a difference.

Mutch met with town officials from both the Park and Rec and Conservation Commissions and they learned about the opportunity to take part in Clean Up the World Day, a United Nations environmental initiative. With the theme, “Our Place, Our Planet, Our Responsibility,” the global event includes some 130 countries and more than 35 million volunteers.

Conservation Commission staff member Rista Malanca registered Torrington with the organization making the city the first Connecticut town to take part in the international initiative. The city has one annual cleanup but Malanca said the Commission had been hoping to organize a second and with the addition of Mutch’s group joining in, getting volunteers would be no problem.

The idea caught on and several organizations participated, including Cub Scouts, Girls Scouts, Brownies, a group home, and the Torrington Trails Network, a group that helps establish walking, biking, and hiking trails around the city. Merchants donated gloves, trash bags, and lunch.

Torrington Trails Network officer Kathy Ross called it “a great way for us to help make the place where we live better.”

The current educational theme for the Federated Garden Clubs of Connecticut focuses on some of the smallest creatures that deliver the biggest impact for all growers, whether it’s the backyard gardener or commercial farmers. It’s all about the birds and bees.

Club members are learning how to “Be Kind to Pollinators,” explained Club President Renee Marsh. Each month the club highlights native pollinators such as bats, flies, wasps, moths, butterflies, and of course, the birds and bees.

Judith Wise, a member for seven years and former club secretary, says the organization is a great way to meet people. One of her responsibilities includes making the holiday wreaths and decorating the green.

“I enjoy doing this for my town,” Wise said. “Working for the earth is good for your soul.”

Harwinton playground benefits from Scout’s project

The Eagle Scout oath is clear in its three-pronged purpose. A Scout must always strive for better citizenship in his troop, community, and in contacts with others.

For Ken Flugrad, that checklist was complete as his journey through Scouting brought him back full-circle. His troop: No. 55. His community: Harwinton, and a key contact: Suzanne Stich, the Director of Harwinton’s Park and Recreation Department. All three converged recently to help Flugrad as he nears completion of the highly respected Eagle Scout badge.

Flugrad sought Stich’s advice when plans for his initial Eagle Scout project – constructing a boardwalk along trails at a popular local pond – proved too large a scale. Stich had the perfect solution with a project that was just the right fit. She suggested sprucing up at the town’s Charlotte Ryan Memorial Playground. The equipment needed re-painting and the entire playground needed a new base of mulch.

The project also gave Flugrad the opportunity to pay a heartfelt tribute to his father, who died in 2012. An avid outdoorsman and scouting supporter, Ken Flugrad was always very proud to watch his son advance through scouting ranks.

“Flugrad was able to raise enough money to cover the entire playground in three-inches of mulch and repaint benches. He also enlisted the help of his fellow scouts and during one recent Saturday in the fall, members of Troop 55 turned out to work on the park. It was familiar ground for Flugrad who joined the Cub Scouts 10 years ago and remembers camping at the playground as part of his earliest scouting activities. He grasped the significance of this, his final project, taking place where it all began for him.

“It’s the place where I am kind of finishing up as well,” Flugard said.
Darien forum opens lines of communication between parents, teens

Darien town officials, parents, and educators were all ears during a recent “Community Conversation” with local teens.

Sponsored by the all-volunteer nonprofit Community Fund of Darien, the forum gave teens an opportunity to talk candidly about the various stresses in their lives. Together with parents, schools, and the community, they discussed ways to address those issues.

“Darien and our residents have unique characteristics that some might argue add to a more stressful community, but I think the pressure kids feel exists everywhere,” said First Selectman Jayme Stevenson. “It’s all in how we teach our kids how to handle it. We need to teach our children solid coping skills and as parents, teachers, coaches and adult mentors, we need to be positive role models.”

One high school senior described the pressure she is under while juggling athletics, exams, homework, and preparation for getting into college. “Especially in a town like this where everything is so competitive and everyone is competing against each other,” the teen said. “I know a couple of my friends who have gone through a lot of things.”

The Community Fund supports a number of initiatives in town, including its Thriving Youth campaign, which fosters opportunities and positive experiences for children. In a survey of local youth, the organization reported that students say they experience high levels stress from many different sources, including academics, extracurricular activities, peer pressure, and parents. That stress can lead to risky behaviors, including substance abuse, eating disorders, and lack of interest in school.

First Selectman Stevenson, who is also a mother of five, underscored the importance of keeping lines of communications open.

“Kids have important things to say and if we listen and value their thoughts and feelings, we can help navigate a more positive path to successful adulthood,” she said.

In Fairfield, mom knows best that kindness matters

Students participating in a recent campaign at a Fairfield elementary school embraced a simple credo – be kind, be nice and do it every day.

But it was more than just words. The students and their school carried out an action plan that featured a Kindness Committee, “Kindness Matters” stickers and flyers, and even Kindness field trips. There were also special “appreciation days” for bus drivers, custodians, lunch staff, and aides.

The Board of Selectmen even proclaimed a special “Random Acts of Kindness Week,” all spearheaded by a local mother who wanted to teach her two young children about the importance of being kind every day.

Veronica Mollica said she wanted her children “to remember on a moment-to-moment basis that everything we think, say and do makes a difference.”

“I believe kindness is the core of our emotional well-being and that while the recipient benefits from kindness, the person who is on the giving end benefits even more,” Mollica said. “We are always modeling behavior to our kids, either positive or negative, so we hope to help parents remember to be conscious and aware of what they do and say with their kids.”

Mollica’s children attend North Stratfield School, which adopted a Kindness Matters motto, a Kindness Zone, and a Kindness Pledge. The pupils also made greeting cards and baked goods and delivered them on “Kindness Excursions” to the Police and Fire departments, the Department of Public Works, Town Hall, and the Senior Center.

“I can think of nothing more appropriate in honor of our 375th anniversary celebration than participating in Random Acts of Kindness,” First Selectman Michael Tetreau said. “This makes our town a friendlier and more welcoming community. It is an act of giving, rather than receiving, which is in total keeping with Fairfield’s character and volunteer spirit.”
YOUTH

Bridgeport invites teen input on city projects

The city of Bridgeport is bringing some young voices to the table – the Mayor’s table, notably.

Mayor Bill Finch has announced the formation of a Mayor’s Youth Council that will be comprised of 10 high school students from across Bridgeport public schools and vocational programs. They will assist city officials in the development of community projects from the perspective of city teens. It is also an opportunity to provide local youngster an up-close and personal look at the workings of local government.

“My office is committed to building a new generation of young leaders who demonstrate a desire to be change agents in the Bridgeport community,” Finch said. “As members of the council, youth will be required to attend city council meetings, participate in skill-building workshops, and job shadow high-level city officials.”

Keeping the students interested and engaged in the process will assist the city in being responsive to the needs of its younger citizens. Importantly, the Mayor’s Youth Council creates the vehicle for open communication. Participants will build leadership skills, gain a greater understanding in policy, and work on community service projects related to education, violence, bullying, and environmental stewardship.

Applicants for the Council must be nominated by a teacher, guidance counselor, or other education administrator. They can also be nominated by a church or community leader. Members are selected based on their desire to promote social change and leadership within their community.

The Council is a program of the Office of Education and Youth Policy department in partnership with the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership, Junior Achievement, Career Resources, VIP College Prep, and other nonprofit supporters.

East Haven offers juveniles a positive path to rehabilitation

More than 40 years after its inception, East Haven’s Juvenile Review Board (JRB) is continuing to help young people turn around their lives.

A pioneering program – one of the first in the nation – the JRB offers community alternatives instead of juvenile court. Family members also are brought into the process and the youngsters have a chance for a fresh start. While the opportunity is there, the choice to take it is up to them.

“If I am a kid and I go out and get caught smashing a mailbox and I tell the police I won’t go before the JRB, then they send me right over to Whalley Avenue (home to New Haven Juvenile Court),” Youth Services Bureau Coordinator Bob Petrucelli said.

To facilitate getting juveniles into the program, each East Haven police officer carries a special ticket book. Youngsters found breaking the law are not immediately arrested but instead issued a special ticket to appear before the JRB.

JRB Member Laura Lynn, who is also an elementary school principal, said the goal is to positively address past mistakes.

“Neither fluff,” she said. “It’s not called community service. It’s called retribution. It’s rethinking what you’ve done and rehabilitating your actions.”

The JRB is comprised of community leaders, local clergy, school board members, and Police Department personnel. After having the charges read before the board, the juvenile must tell board members what happened. Unlike court, there is no presumption of innocence.

Prior to any JRB meeting, Petrucelli said he and a police detective meet with the youth and the family “to get a better feel of the kid as a person.”

“Knock on wood, we’ve had great success getting the families involved, and everything is voluntary,” he said.

With a sense of collaboration and communication, the JRB meetings help the youngsters set goals and develop their own direction.

“It’s trying to get them to see what they’re doing now affects their future,” Lynn said.
New Britain teaching bicycle basics to city youngsters

New Britain officials launched the city’s first ever Bike Safety Day this summer, teaching the basics to youngsters while planting the seeds for expanded use of bicycling as alternative transportation.

In a city that has 11 miles of bike lanes that mainly connect to schools and parks, Public Works Director Mike Moriarty said the Bike Safety Day is one of several “bike-friendly” initiatives that New Britain is supporting.

“When you are promoting something citywide like this, the biggest thing is to get the kids involved,” Moriarty said. “We are trying to slowly promote biking as a form of transportation. People who are choosing mass transit and bikes can also cut the cost of living significantly. It’s also a very safe and healthy activity.”

About 150 youngsters who also take part in the city’s Camp Total Rec program showed up at the parking lot at New Britain High School for the event. With help from city police officers, the children had to navigate an obstacle course and they received discounted helmets, bike locks, reflectors, and other items as rewards for their participation.

Children also signed a pledge to always wear a helmet. It is the law in Connecticut for bicyclists 17 and younger. There were more than a few savvy young cyclists participating who take bike safety very seriously.

“My mom works for the Hospital for Special Care and she sees a lot of people who are hurt from riding a bike without a helmet,” said 10-year-old Kaylie.

In addition to police and public works, several city departments also were on hand for the 2 and a half hour event, including the Mayor’s Office, Parks and Recreation, the Health Department, the Community Health Center, and Bike New Britain.

The event offered the city an opportunity to stress the “fun” in fundamentals. Mayor Erin Stewart told the youngsters that she started riding a bike when she was 6 – and always wore a helmet.

“It’s important to emphasize bike safety, but also to have fun,” the mayor said.

New center in Brooklyn filling the activity gap for teens

A Brooklyn community center that once housed a daycare operation will soon be bustling again with the sounds of children. With programs and activities aimed at young teens, town officials say the new center will cater to an age group that often “gets lost in the shuffle.”

The project has the strong support of residents, who approved its addition into the 2014-15 Recreation Department budget. Brooklyn has appropriated $54,000 for programs and staff and another $10,000 for upgrades and equipment. One of the final pieces was put into place with the recent hire of new center coordinator Lisa Faria, who officials say brings expertise in grant funding and program development.

Scheduled to open this fall, the center offers games, television, study areas, and other special programs to benefit both teens and parents. First Selectman Rick Ives says the new Tiffany Street Community Center also will house the town’s resident state trooper, currently stationed in the Town Hall basement.

The center will feature support and programs for children from seventh grade through 10th grade. That demographic, the 13- to 16-year-olds, have aged out of the town’s summer recreation camps. The new teen center will step in and fill that void.

“We want to give them plenty of fun things to do both inside and out,” Ives explains. “We take care of a lot of kids through our recreation program and that’s probably one age group that gets lost in the shuffle.”

Community involvement has helped the center take shape with donations of equipment and furniture. Recreation officials also plan to develop service programs with local civic organizations such as the fire department and Quinebaug Valley Community College. Recreation Director Bucky Lohbusch said community service programs are important because many high schools require community service projects as a graduation requirement. The center would be an ideal facilitator for that.

The new center, says Lohbusch, “is a good fit for the space and the needs of the town.”
Youth group opens permanent teen center in Burlington

Space donated by a Burlington couple has literally opened new doors for local youngsters participating in the popular Safe Harbor Youth Services program that provides positive social and recreational outlet for teens.

The recently opened Safe Harbor activity center occupies about 900 square feet in the former Burlington fire station. The new hub provides a safe place for teens to gather for substance-free events. A two-town initiative of Burlington and Harwinton, Safe Harbor began three years ago – working in collaboration with the Torrington Area Youth Services Bureau – as a fun outlet for students at Regional School District 10. Several of the local high school students put in dozens of hours of “sweat equity” to help transform the former firehouse into the new official teen center.

“Prior to this we used different community buildings throughout the two towns,” said Burlington First Selectman Ted Shafer.

Safe Harbor also provides confidential counseling and features a Student Advisory Board, which evaluates needs and works with adult counselors to develop programs and services. The organization will continue to offer its counseling services out of Harwinton Town Hall, Shafer said.

“With it being a two-town initiative, we’re comfortable with the counseling offices being at Harwinton Town Hall and the teen center being in Burlington,” he said.

Formed in 2012, the group’s mission is to offer programs that address the needs of troubled youngsters and their families, develop and provide social activities that prevent delinquency, and strengthen families and coordinate projects that promote positive youth development.

“We have come a long way in the last three years since we first began the Safe Harbor Youth Services Bureau,” Shafer said. “It is an excellent resource for the youth in both communities to address any issues they may be facing with experienced adult counselors and attend alcohol- and drug-free events with their peers.”

Drop in drug use among Madison teens tied to positive reach of community coalition

Engaging parents, providing positive activities for youth, and raising awareness of the dangers of drugs are contributing factors in a very positive trend in Madison – the number of teens using alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco is going down.

Officials attribute the good news, in part, to the solid work of the Madison Alcohol and Drug Education Coalition (MADE). Established more than five years ago, MADE arose out of the nearly 30-year-old Selectmen’s Council on Youth Substance Abuse.

Recently released survey results from 2013 showed that local substance use dropped to a level below state and national averages. Madison high-school students take part in the survey every two years and the trend shows an overall decline since 2009.

“It’s definitely going down for us, which is great because it really shows that the work we are doing is working,” Coalition Coordinator Catherine Barden said. “One of the reasons that we wanted to take a look at the marijuana use in particular is because we knew that use was up for the state and the country. We’re happy with the progress.”

Madison Selectman Diane Stadterman is the board’s liaison to MADE and praised the results, calling the coalition an “invaluable” community resource.

“In towns that do not have something like MADE, the numbers aren’t dropping,” Stadterman said.

The group has established solid partnerships with the Police Department, the school district, and Madison Youth and Family Services. Outreach to parents is an essential cog in the group’s approach.

“Parents communicating with each other is important,” said MADE Chairwoman Tina Garrity. “There’s a lot of fear and parents don’t want to open up sometimes. When it starts and one parent communicates, it gives freedom to other parents to do that. We’ve worked awfully hard at trying to raise awareness to what’s going on.”
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.

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