Fundamentals of Municipal Government
Presenter:

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- First Selectman, Town of Bethel, 2009 to Present
- Member, CCM Board of Directors
- Chairman, CCM Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
- Trustee, CIRMA
- Member, COST Board of Directors, Executive Committee
- Member, Western Connecticut Council of Governments, Executive Committee
- Chairman, Housatonic Resource Recovery Authority
- Member, Speaker’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Recycling
Today’s Program

• Compare and contrast the predominant forms of local government in Connecticut
• Explore evolution of Selectmen – Town Meeting government
• Understand how town meeting government functions
• Examine efforts to create regional efficiencies
• Discuss challenges facing local governments

Origin of Governmental Authority

- Powers of federal and state governments defined in the U.S. Constitution.
- Powers not specifically assigned to federal government are reserved to the states.
- The Constitution is silent on local governments
- Local governments are authorized and empowered only under state law.
Multiple Layers of Government
(sometimes called the “layer cake”)

Federal: Military, foreign affairs, trade policy, monetary and banking policy.

State: Transportation, higher education, judicial system.

County: Regional administration of state policy.

Municipal (towns & cities): Primary & secondary schools, local land use policy, local law enforcement, local road maintenance, enforcement of state and local health and building codes, local utilities, etc.
Empowering Local Governments

Home Rule vs General Rule

- **Home Rule**: Municipalities allowed to govern themselves in any manner that does not violate state or federal law.

- **General Rule**: Municipalities are permitted to exercise only those powers specifically granted under state law.
Cities and Towns in Connecticut

- Connecticut is a “Home Rule” state.
- Municipalities choose form of government via adoption of a Charter.
- The Charter serves the same function as state and federal Constitutions.
- Non-charter towns required to use “town meeting” form of government per state law.
The Legislative Body

Where the action is!

• The Constitution reserves power to the People via the concept of the legislative body.

• The legislative body differs in certain forms of local government.
The Legislative Body

- Federal level: United States Congress
- State level: General Assembly
- Municipal level: City Council or Town Meeting

The Legislative Body has the power to create and enforce law, levy taxes and fines, approve budgets and control expenditures. It is the source of all powers of government.
Local Government: 3 Basic Forms

- Mayor – Council
- Council – Manager
- Selectmen – Town Meeting
Mayor – City Council

- Mayor elected by popular vote
- Council elected by popular vote, has significant legislative authority
- Mayor may or may not have vote on council; may or may not have veto power
- Conforms with separation of powers defined in the Constitution
Types of Mayor - Council

“Strong” Mayor

Voters → Council → Mayor → Department Heads

“Weak” Mayor

Voters → Council → Mayor

Note: “Legislative Body” shown in yellow
Council – Manager

- Created in 20th century to combat corruption, provide professional management
- Council elected by popular vote
- Council hires town manager
- Professional degree & certification required
- No elected mayor or other CEO
- Most common form of local government in the US
Structure of Council - Manager

Voters → Council → Manager

Legislative Body
Employee
Selectmen - Town Meeting

- Oldest form of local government in US
- Based on direct, rather than representative democracy
- Complex, decentralized power structure
- Found exclusively in New England states
- Evolved from 1600’s colonial religious communities
- Relies on high degree of citizen participation
Evolution of Selectmen-Town Meeting

• 17th century church governance evolved into “town meeting” government

• Comingling religious and civil law

• Public funds used to build meeting houses that served as both church and town hall
17th Century Governance

- No separation between church and state
- Religious leaders held power of law
Main Features of Town Meeting Gov’t

• The **Legislative Body** is comprise of all registered voters within the municipality

• Powers delegated to executive branch tend to be more limited than in Mayor – Council governments

• Nearly all major decisions are made via **Town Meeting or Referendum**
Features of Modern Town Meeting Government

• *Significantly* decentralized
• Power is often shared between multiple elected and appointed boards, committees and commissions
• Boards function relatively independently from one another
• Separation of powers is sometimes unclear
• The Legislative Body consists of all voters; most major decisions made via town meeting
• Some towns have adopted Representative Town Meeting structure, a hybrid.
Structure of Town Meeting Gov’t

(Typical)

Voters

Elected Boards

Board of Selectmen

First Selectman

Appointed Boards & Commissions
Mayor-Council v. Selectmen-Town Meeting

Mayor - Council

Voters

Council

Mayor

Appointed Boards & Departments

Selectmen - Town Meeting

Voters

Elected Boards

Board of Selectmen

First Selectman

Appointed Boards & Commissions
Representative Town Meeting: A “Hybrid” form of Town Meeting Gov’t

- “Town Meeting” government provides broad access for public participation in a direct democratic process, but vulnerable to special interests if public participation is low.

- High resistance to adopting a representative form of government (town council) due to centuries-old traditions.

- Some towns have solved this problem via Representative Town Meeting (RTM)

- RTM members are elected by the public at large to “represent” their neighborhoods or districts.

- RTM’s can be very large. Example: Greenwich RTM has 240 members.

- Eight towns in Connecticut have adopted Town Meeting with RTM.
Town Meeting Gov’t with RTM

Voters

Elected Boards

Board of Selectmen

First Selectman

Representative Town Meeting (Legislative)

Appointed Boards & Commissions
## Prevalence of Local Government by Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Conn.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayor – City Council</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council – Manager</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>17% (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selectmen-Town Meeting</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>65% (110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Includes 8 w/ RTM)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(City Commission, General Manager, Board of Directors, Board of Representatives, others)*
Boroughs & Special Taxing Districts

- Boroughs and special taxing districts arose from need for special services within limited geographical areas.
- Special taxing districts provide funding for certain municipal functions, including:
  - Fire protection
  - Unique neighborhood circumstances or needs, such as lakeside or shoreline services
  - Public water and sewer services
- In Connecticut’s 169 municipalities, there are currently 305 special taxing districts.
Regionalism – State Level

• CT abolished county government in the 1960’s
• County boundaries still exist for statistical purposes
• Established 15 regional councils of elected officials (CEO’s) or regional planning authorities (RPA’s)
• 2014: Act of state legislature forced consolidation of CEO’s and RPA’s to form 9 Councils of Governments (COG’s)
• Town CEO’s are mandatory board members
Councils of Governments

Regional Councils of Governments in Connecticut

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2020 Population</th>
<th>Acres Miles</th>
<th>Municipalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitol</td>
<td>979,909</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower CT River Valley</td>
<td>175,685</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>933,094</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naugatuck Valley</td>
<td>148,738</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern</td>
<td>96,617</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central</td>
<td>123,247</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Central</td>
<td>579,965</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeastern</td>
<td>266,751</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>569,219</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regionalism – Federal Level

- All cities and towns belong to a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)
- MPO’s created under Federal law
- Regional transportation planning, administration and disbursement of Federal transportation grants
- CEO membership is mandatory
- MPO’s boundaries are not all concurrent with COG boundaries
Challenges facing local government:

- Uncertain state aid
- Need for regional efficiencies
- Need to address transportation infrastructure
- Overdependence on local property taxes to fund essential services
### Lack of Revenue Diversification

Municipalities in CT cannot use common revenue tools found in other states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>Connecticut</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property taxes</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle tax</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User fees, charges</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General sales tax</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective sales tax</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate tax</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income tax</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above: Comparison of avg. sources of local government revenue, PA vs. CT. (CCM, 2016)
Challenges of a Municipal Official

• Being an ethical leader who builds trust with people

• Enhancing the municipal organization to provide optimal public services

• Focus on bringing together citizens and municipal to enhance the public life
Questions?