

WASHINGTON COUNTY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

P. O. B O X 6 3 1 , C A L A I S M E 0 4 6 1 9
(207) 454-0465 * (888) 287-3006 * FAX: (207) 454-2568

Helping Washington County
Communities Plan for Tomorrow

Judy East, AICP
Executive Director

Senator Richard Rosen and Representative Patrick Flood
and members of the Appropriations Committee
125th Maine State Legislature

March 21, 2011

Dear Senator Rosen, Representative Flood and Honorable Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with input on Part ff of the Governor's budget concerning the elimination of the State Planning Office (SPO) and the establishment of a working group to develop proposed legislation to transfer responsibilities from SPO to other departments and agencies.

I wish to start by thanking you for your efforts and support last month to reinstate \$100,000 in financial support to the Councils of Governments/Regional Planning Commissions (COGs/RPCs) to allow us to provide technical assistance (TA) to municipalities statewide.

As I indicated to the State and Local Government Committee in testimony on January 24th, the Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG) receives ~ \$25,000/year to fulfill the requirements of Title 30-A M.R.S.A. Sections 2301-2321 wherein the legislature recognizes "that regional councils are uniquely qualified to assist in the development of technical capacity of local governments: to develop regional policies, services and solutions to meet local needs; and to serve as a vital link between local governments and the State." Given this language, I argued that the funds that the legislature intends for COGs/RPCs are channeled through SPO; they are not grants to be awarded at the discretion of SPO as SPO had argued in their report to you in November, 2010. Your decision to reinstate \$100,000 to the COGs/RPCs indicates that you agree. Thank you again from the municipalities of Washington County.

Currently there is no provision for COG/RPC funding in the Governor's budget and Part ff calls for the elimination of SPO. Last November, SPO recommended zero funding for the COGs/RPCs not only for the remainder of FY11 but permanently. Thus my primary purpose today is to request that the legislature continue to support the COGs/RPCs as the most effective and efficient means of providing municipalities, especially in the rural parts of the state, with technical assistance.

The arguments I made in January for reinstating the TA funds remain the same: WCCOG currently has funds secured other sources for regional projects¹ at least for this fiscal year. However these other sources of money cannot be used to provide the technical assistance that the towns need and that the SPO-channeled funds currently support. I am here therefore on behalf of the needs of rural municipalities and not only for my agency or the other COGs/RPCs. None of the municipalities in Washington County have professional planning staff; many have no full time staff at all, and some have no dedicated office space for municipal affairs. Their needs include the following:

¹ eg. USDA Solid Waste Management to increase recycling, USEPA for Brownfields Site Assessment to support redevelopment of sites with real or perceived contamination; HUD Sustainable Communities grant to create a Washington-Aroostook Regional Plan for Sustainable Development

1. **Training** to local volunteer Boards that would be otherwise unavailable or require significant travel (especially necessary in small rural towns that experience frequent volunteer turnover). This is critical to ensure predictability and respect of due process in the regulatory process.
2. **Responding to telephone calls from small rural communities requesting information on** everything from the effective running of a Planning Board meeting, using a computer program, public hearing procedures, and requests for model ordinances and permit applications.
3. Direct **technical assistance** to municipalities to draft shoreland zoning ordinances and maps: on-going since 1973 when Mandatory Shoreland Zoning was enacted and again in the enormous work demanded in the early 1990s and in 2006 when major changes were made to the Shoreland Zoning Act.
4. Facilitating **conversion of paper mapping systems to digital products** (parcel mapping, shoreland zoning) through collaboration with University of Maine GIS Service Center.
5. **Ordinance development and interpretation** necessitated by the State Subdivision Law, code enforcement, and increasingly, wind energy and telecommunications towers.
6. Research into, notice of, and assistance applying for, **grants** from multiple sources.
7. Providing a **local site** for Code Enforcement Officer Certification tests that saves CEOs and municipalities the time and expense of travel for a 6+ hour round trip to Augusta.

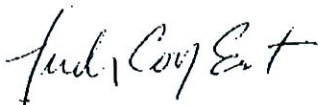
The WCCOG will be able to provide some of these services next year using municipal dues but at a much reduced level. To maintain the same level of service municipal dues will have to triple or hourly consulting fees will be charged.

My secondary purpose today is to request that the COGs/RPCs have some representation in the deliberations of the committee formed to oversee the elimination of SPO and the transfer of its responsibilities elsewhere to other departments and agencies. To provide technical assistance at the local/regional level the COGs/RPCs rely on the data and materials produced by most of the programs currently housed at SPO (Coastal, Land Use, Floodplain Management, Waste Management, Code Enforcement and Certification, and Economics and Demographics). For multiple purposes towns rely on us to find it, interpret it, and adapt it to their needs. We have a lot to offer to the discussion of where and how current responsibilities could be efficiently and effectively delivered.

Finally, please remember that the needs of rural municipalities will not cease on July 1, 2011. As the future of the functions of SPO are examined the towns will continue to rely on the COGs/RPCs for technical assistance. I understand that budget realities will force a reduction in state support for this activity but respectfully request on behalf of rural municipalities that it is not put on hold for 6 months or taken away entirely.

Thank you again for your time and this opportunity.

Sincerely,



Judy East, WCCOG Executive Director



Betsy Fitzgerald, President of WCCOG General Assembly