

WASHINGTON COUNTY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

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Helping Washington County
Communities Plan for Tomorrow

Judy East, AICP
Executive Director

Senator Douglas Thomas and Representative H. David Cotta
and members of the State and Local Government Committee
125th Maine State Legislature

January 24, 2011

Dear Senator Thomas, Representative Cotta and Honorable Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with the perspective of the Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG) regarding the proposal by SPO to meet their budget reduction requirements through zero funding to the Regional Planning Councils (RPCs).

In a rural area like Washington County the impact of this loss of funding will be felt less by the WCCOG itself than by the municipalities we serve. The 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 in statute my first premise is that the funds that the legislature intends for RPCs are channeled through SPO; they are not grants to be awarded at the discretion of SPO.

Ironically the WCCOG is currently well placed to withstand the loss of funds as we have 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. 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. **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.

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

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 going forward using municipal dues but at a much reduced level. To maintain the same level of service municipal dues will have to triple, hourly consulting fees will be charged and non-municipal members will pay for all services.

Please be aware that I am a former SPO employee (2000-2002), I consider many at SPO to be my colleagues and friends, and I recognize and rely upon their high quality Technical Assistance materials as I provide assistance to municipalities. There is a definite municipal need for the data and materials produced by the Coastal, Land Use, Floodplain Management, Waste Management, and Economics and Demographics Programs. In addition, the Land for Maine's Future Program and the Code Enforcement Training and Certification Program are most effectively provided by a central office in Augusta. However, providing this information, while critical, is insufficient.

Municipalities need assistance in finding, interpreting and using this information. Municipalities, especially small rural municipalities, have frequent, on-going and detailed needs that are not addressed by publications, web sites and people that are 3-5 hours away. RPC offices and staff are located within an hour (+/-) of the municipalities they serve. We have long standing relationships with the municipal officials in our regions. They are based on writing grants, Comprehensive Plans and ordinances together, reading the same local press, attending the same public hearings, and being part of the same community, on *Facebook* or at benefit dinners. In many cases we interact with the same municipal official as a WCCOG Board member, a Selectman, an assessor, a regional committee advisory member, and, a former Planning Board member. The result is at least knowledge of local decision makers; more often it is a network and insight into those who can be relied on to share their experience and get things done. Accordingly it generates trust and acceptance that a particular solution will work.

SPO recommends absorbing municipal technical assistance services in the Coastal Program in Augusta. Given the statutory limitation on using coastal funds for inland towns SPO says they will attempt to be resourceful in the use of coastal funds and create technical assistance resources that may also be applicable to inland communities. The RPCs have long standing relationships with municipalities and can serve the entire state (not just the coastal communities) effectively and efficiently.

Thank you again for your time and this opportunity.

Sincerely,



Judy East, WCCOG Executive Director



Betsy Fitzgerald, President of WCCOG General Assembly