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**Comments to the ECS Task Force Regarding Funding for the City of Norwalk**

**Bridgeport, July 12, 2012**

Good evening, Co-Chairs Barnes and Stillman and members of the ECS Task Force. Thank you for holding this meeting in Fairfield County and giving the public an opportunity to offer comments.

I am here to discuss ECS funding for the City of Norwalk.

You already have substantial material on the subject:

- You should have by now received a letter from the Norwalk legislative delegation mentioning the need for a more equitable ECS allocation for Norwalk. It explains that Norwalk's demographics have changed over the years and that the current formula's weighting of the grand list distorts the formula's characterization of Norwalk's wealth.

- You also have a letter from Norwalk's Director of Finance, Tom Hamilton, which includes plenty of data on Norwalk, including poverty levels, measures of educational need, median income, and Norwalk's low level of funding compared to that of the other towns in its District Reference Group.

I will therefore not repeat what is in that material, and stick to a few other points.

When we highlight Norwalk's distinctiveness for ECS purposes, we're not just arguing that Norwalk is less wealthy than its neighboring towns. It is important to note that what

really distinguishes Norwalk is the disparity between its property values, which put it in the top 25% of all Connecticut towns, and the income level of its residents, which puts it in the lowest 50%.

During the 2012 legislative session, we discussed ECS funding for Norwalk and other towns with the same circumstances on March 29 in the Appropriations Committee, when I introduced an amendment to a budget bill, HB 5014, which proposed adjusting the weight of the grand list in the ECS formula. The discussion made a number of views clear, and they are worth addressing here.

Senator Harp, whose remarks were quite thoughtful, agreed that the disparity was indeed very real, and was a problem for several communities. She felt, however, that there might be ways other than using the ECS formula to address these communities' educational needs. I agree with her that certainly other measures do help. Norwalk, for example, has just been granted funding for 50 additional early childhood seats. The community appreciates that, and I, as a member of the Education Committee who has advocated strongly for early education and literacy, appreciate that. But I would submit respectfully that it doesn't solve the overall funding issues.

I have spoken with many Norwalk residents in the past two years, and many more in the past few months. Over and over again, they tell me that their incomes have fallen and their property values are shaky. Parents and grandparents are concerned about the schools – not because people who work in or for them are not doing a good job, but because there is simply not enough money to go around to meet the needs of such a large, diverse, urban school system. Several of these people have told me that they are moving away, to towns like Fairfield or Trumbull. Many more have said they would like to, if only they could sell their houses at prices that weren't lower than what they paid for them.

A community like Norwalk, for example, needs security personnel in many of its schools. It needs educators who understand the issues for ELL students and have the extra time to give them. It needs to deal with the problems of students who don't have anywhere safe to go after school. The list is long. But please believe me, Norwalk is not Darien or New Canaan or Westport or Fairfield or Trumbull. As we discussed in the Education Committee's public hearings, it is much more similar to Danbury, where the property values are a bit lower. And Danbury receives more than twice as much ECS funding as Norwalk.

During the March 29 Appropriations meeting, another member said that the proposal to adjust the grand list's weighting in the formula reflected an agenda of bringing more ECS funding to wealthy towns in Fairfield County. The comment was disappointing and inaccurate, and I'm concerned that it may reflect more widely held perceptions. Only two towns in Fairfield County were on that list: Norwalk and Stamford. Those two have a grand list/income disparity; the others do not. You have the data: Norwalk is not a wealthy town, and certainly not a town with ample liquid assets. The comment was also made that changing the weighting of the grand list ran directly counter to the findings in the landmark *Horton v. Meskill* case. In fact, while *Horton v. Meskill* says property values

are a significant measure of town wealth, nowhere does it say that they must be the only measure. So I would like to ask the Task Force to keep that in mind.

This is not about an agenda. It is about Norwalk's 11,000 students, who are every bit as deserving of a quality education as students anywhere else in the state. If their families can't find one in their City, they will look elsewhere. They should not have to.

I will mention one last thing. When I began, I thanked the Task Force for holding this meeting in Fairfield County. That is where we are. Like Norwalk, Bridgeport is a coastal Fairfield County town. It has wonderful geographic assets -- the main New Haven line, Long Island Sound, a location between New York and New Haven. Meaning no disrespect, would any of you call Bridgeport a wealthy town today? But it was once prosperous. Norwalk has many of the same assets. We must not squander them.

I thank the Task Force for its work this year, and as you review the ECS formula, I ask that you keep these comments in mind.