

**Senator Jamie Eldridge**

**Remarks on the Opening of the Second Annual Regionalization Tool Kit Conference  
September 2, 2010**

Good Morning and Welcome. Massachusetts is well known for its historically strong and independent municipalities --- sharing a tradition of citizen-oriented local government that has contributed to the economic, cultural, and residential diversity that characterizes the Commonwealth.

Whether a mill town or farming village, a growing city or quiet suburb, each town has its own town meeting, own budget, own zoning laws, union contracts, and town hall. To say nothing of a strong, independent point of view!

That strong tradition of local governing has brought excellence in local services. I'm proud of our libraries and schools and public works programs, our firefighters, and police departments. Often, services delivered within a municipality are worth fighting for, and we shouldn't force regionalization just to save money. Our focus must be on delivering the best service to the people of the Commonwealth, and it is important to fight for this balance.

But as budgets get tight, more and more cities and towns are considering collaboration and regionalization, and quickly discovering that --- because our statutory and regulatory framework flows from the home rule tradition --- there are inherent obstacles that hold towns back from common sense solutions.

You are here today because you recognize that there are significant benefits to collaboration. You are looking for the cost savings and the potential for excellence. But you also know that there are significant challenges to overcome. You know how hard it is to work your way through the legal impediments to negotiating agreements, sometimes requiring separate town meetings, collective bargaining, or even special legislation to set up a program with a neighboring town.

In the Legislature, we are trying to clear the obstacles to your progress. For example:

In 2008 we passed a simple bill with huge promise. The bill amended Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40 Section 4A, regulating inter-municipal agreements between two or more towns. These agreements can now be executed with the approval of the board of selectmen without going to town meeting, and can be up to 25 years in duration. The inter-municipal agreements statute also lists financial safeguards that must be provided in the contracts.

This spring, the Legislature was able to sustain funding for the District local Technical Assistance program at two million dollars in the FY 2011 Budget. As you know, this program

funds projects that encourage regionalization, and is administered by the division of local services.

This summer, we passed some new provisions in the municipal relief bill that moved the ball in the right direction.

- First, we established a statewide mutual aid agreement to allow municipalities to more easily share fire, police, emergency medical, and public works services in emergencies.
- Second, we established a statutory mechanism to allow for the creation of joint assessing agreements, and the sharing of assessing staff.
- Third, we clarified that a municipality entering into an inter- municipal agreement under Section 4A of Chapter 40 is solely subject to a vote of the municipality's elected body, and not a vote of bargaining units.
- Fourth, the bill establishes a 16 member commission to study effective strategies for transitions to new regional school districts.
- Fifth, the bill allows school districts, including regional school districts, to select a superintendent jointly with other school committees, and the superintendent would serve as the superintendent of all the districts that select him or her.

And last but certainly not least, last summer, the Legislature appointed a bipartisan Legislative Regionalization Commission to take a systematic look at the opportunities, benefits, and challenges to regionalizing services. In April, the Commission filed its report with the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government.

It has been my honor to serve as the Senate Chair of that Committee for the last two years, along with my colleague, Representative Paul Donato of Medford, the House Chair. We promptly scheduled four hearings during the month of May, in Greenfield, Barnstable, Boston, and Ayer, and what we heard only confirmed the importance of the report, this conference, and all the individual efforts you as municipal officials are making to make regionalization a reality.

We recognize that there are more statutory hurdles to overcome, and I am committed to working on those items in the coming legislative Session. We will look at minimizing barriers and eliminating impediments identified in the Commission report.

Equally important, we in the legislature also need to do more in the budget process to encourage grant programs and pilot programs to provide both incentives and support for

regional programs. This is obviously difficult in the current economic climate, but the opportunities to leverage funding and find efficiencies in funding is never more important than when budgets are tight. As we look at upcoming budgets, we need to sustain and increase DLTA, and we need to require agencies to put a priority on regional solutions that save money.

Regional solutions aren't new. Municipal officials and regional planning agencies have been engaged in cooperative solutions for a long time. With characteristic creativity and determination, you have led the way toward regionalization, as evidenced by the agenda for today's conference. You are sharing health inspectors, assessing software, information technology, and ambulance services. You have established multi-town health districts. With the help of the invaluable District Local Technical Assistance program, you have shared your experiences, and figured out what is possible. I congratulate you for your accomplishments and encourage you in your continuing endeavors.