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Article Published July 19, 2019

## **Born in Branford: CT's New State Coastal Resiliency Reserve Fund Law**

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In a demonstration of a municipal government working across the aisles locally and at the state level, the Town of Branford was the key to bringing about the state's new Municipal Climate Change and Coastal Resiliency Reserve Funds act signed into law by Gov. Ned Lamont in June and effective July 1, 2019. While the idea was born in Branford, the new law will benefit any town in the state with the ability to set up the fund.

As previously reported, in January 2019, based on the position that the impacts of climate change are a long-term liability, the Town of Branford set up a new Coastal Resiliency Fund, seeded with \$1 million in town money. Going forward, the fund will receive a percentage of property tax annually (for 2020, the amount will be \$300,000). Having the fund in place, and growing, will also help the town to avoid the need to impose bonding or other borrowing to respond to infrastructure needs created by climate change, said Finance Director James Finch.

"That's being on the right side of compound interest," said Finch.

However, without state legislation, Branford was looking at an annual investment interest return for the fund of approximately 2.3 percent. If backed by state legislation, the fund's investment options would greatly improve, allowing it to grow and compound at a faster rate. In addition, with bond rating agencies turning their attention toward how governments are addressing climate change and coastal issues, the legislation would demonstrate Connecticut's state and municipal commitment, Finch noted.

In February, Finch and First Selectman Jamie Cosgrove (R) developed a game plan to bring the idea to the state level. Cosgrove reached out to State Senator Christine Cohen (D, D-12) to seek legislation creating a Climate Change and Coastal Resiliency Reserve Fund. Cohen, who chairs the Senate Environment Committee, introduced the proposed legislation as substitute Senate Bill No. 1062. Ultimately, the proposed bill passed the General Assembly, including a unanimous senate vote. The governor signed the bill into law on June 6.

Cosgrove said the bill got through the legislature thanks to the work of Sen. Cohen and the support of Branford's legislative delegation of Representative Robin Comey (D, D-102) and Representative Sean Scanlon (D-98). Additionally, it was championed by the Council of Small Towns, in particular, among several municipal advocacy groups backing it, said Cosgrove.

While it addresses the hot topic of rising seas and climate change, at its heart, this legislation is enabling support for a needed municipal infrastructure fund; and that's how Branford approached the idea for the creating the fund at the town level, said Cosgrove.

"Think of this as an infrastructure fund, and knowing we're going to need to make significant investments in our infrastructure; not only near-term but long term," said Cosgrove. "How do we position Branford to address those impacts in a meaningful way?"

The progress Branford made to answer that question as a municipality ultimately kick-started the process which led the new state law.

"You saw it on the local level," said Cosgrove. "How we built the support with our Board of Finance; our Finance Director networking with our Town Engineer and the [Town] Planner's office really to identify what are our options are to address this. And this also came out of the Plan of Conservation and Development [POCD]. It was a concern in the community."

Branford's newly updated, 10-year POCD (2019-2029) calls for establishing a framework for addressing coastal vulnerability. Earlier, in 2016, the Town of Branford developed a Coastal Resiliency Plan prepared under a Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) grant awarded to the Town for Connecticut for coastal resilience planning in Branford, Madison, and Milford, Connecticut.

The new Coastal Resiliency fund gives Branford not only the ability to not only plan, but also to have an additional funding source to meet those future burdens, Cosgrove said.

"Branford does a tremendous job in addressing future liabilities," Cosgrove said, adding, "...give Jim Finch credit for coming up with the mechanism, for coming up with another tool in the tool box for addressing that, and, then bringing that forward, once we got local support through Board of Finance and RTM to create such a fund; and reaching out to our state delegation."

Finch said seeing the concept carried through to state law has been exciting, but the bottom line is it all worked because Branford is a "functioning local government."

"Perhaps lost in all of this is the simple notion that this is how our government is supposed to work," said Finch. "Our local engineers and planners identify the risks of sea level rise. The finding is then validated by public input and incorporated into Branford's Plan of Conservation and Development. The BOF and RTM respond by establishing the fund, and authorizing \$1 million from reserves, plus an additional contribution of \$300,000 in the 2020 budget. Finally, our state legislators, working with municipal advocacy groups, carry our proposal to the capital and create the enabling legislation. It sounds simple, but it was not easy. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that, despite our challenges, we are a functioning local government."