

# PM

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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# WORKING TOGETHER OR GOING ALONE

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# WORKING TOGETHER REGIONALLY

## HOW MAINE COMMUNITIES ARE COLLABORATING ON SERVICE DELIVERY

By Nat Tupper, Nathan Poore, and Amy Lamontagne

**C**ities and towns in Maine have a long history of independent governance. With a state population of 1.33 million, Maine has 492 cities and towns managed by staff and elected officials. Many of these communities have shrinking populations and are located in rural areas.

According to U.S. Census data released in 2015, Maine has the oldest population in the country. While the

median age in the United States is 37.7 years, Maine's average age is 44.2 years.

The state has held this unique distinction for many years, and all data suggests that the trend will continue into the future. As the population ages and fewer people migrate to the state, it becomes more difficult to provide services without increasing taxes and fees on the smaller population.

Although county government exists in Maine—there are 16 counties in

the state—it provides fewer services compared to the county model that exists in other parts of the country. Many communities, however, have discovered that working together with a county decreases the cost of providing resident services and provides increased staffing in a state with a shrinking workforce.

### **Seeking Ways to Enhance Services**

As local government managers, we are constantly called upon to find better and

more efficient ways to deliver services. In the authors' collective experience as managers in Maine, we have found that regionalized service delivery often makes financial and practical sense.

It can offer efficiencies and economies of scale, leverage greater capacity and reliability, and give access to expertise otherwise out of reach for one community to achieve alone.

We also recognize that regionalism is sometimes not the correct choice. There could be diseconomies of scale, loss of accountability, inefficiencies resulting from a larger bureaucracy, and perhaps insufficient political will or support.

When deciding to work together, communities must have a shared trust and vision. Trust, rather than suspicion or resistance, is needed from managers when their staff, elected officials, and the public generate ideas and strategies for collaboration.

These groups might see things that managers overlook. Although we manage communities in a specific geographic region, there are issues that may not be currently relevant or not as high a priority for some places.

Perhaps one community is taking the lead on opiate addiction and others are not yet at the table. In this case, there may be a select few communities or only one community that decides to work with others outside the geographic region. Other communities not yet ready to participate should accept and encourage the leadership and interest of those who do lead such efforts.

Working together should not be limited to abutting communities, manager-manager efforts, staff-staff projects, or other typical arrangements. If your eyes are open and you are willing to expand the spectrum of possibilities, regional opportunities might be available for your community.

### **Foundation for Working Together**

Regionalization or working together is not a new concept and is in practice throughout the world. This article isn't meant to sell the reader on why region-

alization or working together is a model worth consideration. We hope you have already experienced the success of working together.

Our focus here is to share the experience and the lessons we have learned. We think that to achieve success when working together, you need to have a great deal of trust. Our four groups of trust are: trust with **peers**, trust with **staff**; trust with **elected officials**, and trust with **residents**.

These four trust groups are essential for success. There is no standard recipe. Each collaborative effort should include all four groups of trust, but the amount of time and effort within each group will depend on the objective. We will explain more about this ahead with examples.

Before working together, while working together, and while evaluating the success or failure of an effort on regional projects, communities must have a solid level of trust with the four groups:

**Trust with peers.** In Cumberland County, we enjoy a high level of trust among managers and regional directors. Although everyone has different personalities, priorities, approaches, and skills, we also share a common bond of friendship and respect and the commitment to do what is best for our communities.

Managers have worked together for many years and this shared history is an advantage when considering collaboration opportunities. Frequent access to each other through meetings and networking will create trust.

It can also provide unexpected opportunities for creative collaborations. If you are not doing so already, we encourage you to start building those relationships with your peers.

Active and positive participation in the existing regional structures and work groups is one great way to build trust and a greater understanding of each other and the issues and challenges in the region.

**Trust with staff.** Regional efforts will not succeed without the implementa-

tion work that is (usually) done by staff. This group is able to look past the short-term economic issues and the difficult politics of change to see the possibilities of how resident services can be improved and sustained.

Staff do not have to balance and honor the various agendas of elected officials and constituencies. Although popular cynicism assumes that staff is most interested in protecting their jobs, turf, or resources, experience tells a different story.

Staff must feel supported and not be abandoned if projects do not work. Trust allows them to experiment, build their own peer relationships, pursue their own professional growth, and reach out for help when they are struggling or confused.

**Trust with elected officials.** If the relationship between the manager and elected officials is solid, trusting, and constructive, support for regional risk-taking can follow. This trust can never be assumed or taken for granted and the manager has to constantly work to establish and maintain it.

In our experience, building trust between a manager from one community and the elected officials from another is also necessary. Regional efforts often include a mix of managers and elected officials during both the opportunity exploration and the strategic planning stages. It's essential for elected officials

## **TAKEAWAYS**

- › With a foundation of support from elected officials, managers can take more risks and be opportunistic.
- › Regional collaborations can take longer than expected but well worth the effort if you have the stamina.
- › Don't forget to be a collaboration's biggest supporter. Talk about success stories to the media, the staff and the council. Do not forget about it and think all the work is done.

from one community to trust a manager from another community when both are at the table.

**Trust with residents.** Although many people are resistant to change and can feel threatened by regional initiatives, managers must educate the public about the success that can result from community partnerships.

Public opinion and resident demands can often be contradictory. The public wants accountability and control but also wants the presumed efficiencies and cost savings of regionalism. Regional service delivery is like any other form of sharing; both the powers and responsibilities of decision making as well as the costs and

benefits of the program are partly in the hands of others. The first is a project that once failed with many participants but later succeeded when it was reduced to a smaller group. The second began small but grew once others saw the value and wanted to be part of the effort.

The third example is emerging through a mix of leadership that is atypical but being observed by many as a possible collaborative worth joining once the lead communities can demonstrate success.

**Assessment.** In other parts of the country, this service is usually provided by county government or regional efforts. In Maine, where local control has been the preferred choice of service delivery,

was represented by proactive elected leaders. The town managers already had trust and mutual respect based on a lengthy shared work history.

Staff from all towns were involved in the model design to ensure no details were overlooked. Elected officials were briefed in person by each manager and in many public meetings.

Resident trust was built with one exception. One town had support except for a small group of dissenters. They vocally resisted the change by lobbying councilmembers and attending public meetings.

When their efforts failed with elected officials, they filed a lawsuit that later was dismissed by the courts. It was the overwhelming trust between managers, elected officials, and staff that helped overcome this resistance.

Other communities have since inquired about joining the collaboration. The town of Casco joined the group in the first year of combined services; however, the town of Cumberland left and decided to work with another community.

**REGIONAL SERVICE DELIVERY IS LIKE ANY OTHER FORM OF SHARING; BOTH THE POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF DECISION MAKING AS WELL AS THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM ARE PARTLY IN THE HANDS OF OTHERS.**

benefits of the program are partly in the hands of others.

It is ironic that often those residents and politicians who are most critical of local government and the assumed inefficiencies and duplication of services are the ones who challenge the potential for change and evolution by constantly undermining the trust necessary to take risks.

This group also includes some elected officials who claim to support regionalization until it's time to pass an order or resolution. Managers should continuously champion and talk about regional success stories and opportunities to keep the public informed so that they will be more willing to accept change in the future.

This ongoing conversation will also provide examples and lessons on how future initiatives can occur.

### Three Collective Efforts

Here are three specific examples of re-

individual towns or consulting assessors provide assessment services.

In 2009, a county government collaboration attempted to bring assessment services under one roof for all 25 communities in the county. It was too much, too fast, and quite overwhelming at the time.

Fast forward to 2014 when Cumberland, Falmouth, Yarmouth, and Cumberland County successfully joined forces to begin an effort that replicated the original collaboration goal but proved to be more workable with a smaller group of participants.

In the second, successful attempt, the first step was for four town and county managers to recognize an incredible opportunity when two local assessors left their employment, one to retire and the other to take on a new position.

This left an opening for restructuring, with good timing. Each community had the same software systems, similar demographics, and

**The Metro Coalition and a regional forensics laboratory.** In 2006, a group of six local governments formed a collaboration that was named the Metro Coalition. The communities included the state's largest city, Portland, and five surrounding towns and cities (cities of South Portland and Westbrook, along with the towns of Scarborough, Falmouth, and Cape Elizabeth). Representation on the Metro Coalition included chief elected officials (mayor or council chair) and town and city managers.

This group's purpose was to explore collaboration opportunities in an effort to provide more efficient and improved services to the community. Shortly after its inception, local police chiefs suggested the Metro Coalition's first project.

Portland's police chief announced the need for an expansion and renovation of the city's existing laboratory. Other smaller communities in the area had historically relied upon the state crime lab. The police chiefs worked together and

offered a presentation to the Metro Coalition that proposed a regional forensics laboratory. A new regional laboratory was needed for these reasons:

- Backlog of cases being processed at the state crime lab.
- Replacement of Portland's current facility was needed.
- Greater efficiency with a laboratory that is close in proximity to each community.
- Modernization of equipment.
- Cost savings by working together.
- Ability for detectives and other forensics professionals to share information on related cases in neighboring communities.

In 2009, the first regional forensics laboratory opened for business. Since that time, the two towns of Yarmouth and Windham have joined the regional crime lab partnership.

Trust for this effort started with representatives from each city and county. This group was unique because it was the first time that chief elected officials and chief administrative officials had agreed to collaborate.

After the crime lab's success, the Metro Coalition continues to meet and research collaboration options that include regional economic development initiatives and better coordination between fire and emergency medical services departments.

**Streetlights.** In 2002, this article's author Poore met a former public works director from Massachusetts and learned that Massachusetts had recently passed state laws to allow municipal streetlight ownership. There are only a few states that allow local governments to own streetlight fixtures on utility-owned poles.

The public works director then proceeded to explain the great savings achieved by this change in state law. Attempts to change Maine laws failed for the next 10 years. In 2012, I was now managing a different community,

Falmouth, and started to give up on any hope that Maine laws would change.

In 2012, the community development director from South Portland contacted me and asked if I was willing to try one more time. We formed a partnership and later found a third partner, a city councilor from Rockland, so the three communities were now working together from three different positions and levels of expertise.

Unlike the assessment and forensics laboratory collaborations, these communities were not in the same geographic area. This partnership was atypical but again required a mix of trust in each other, trust from elected officials in each participating community, and trust from managers not present at the negotiating table. The expertise was mixed and each person contributed in different ways.

This trio took the lead and were finally successful in 2013 when state laws were changed to allow municipalities to own and maintain street lights on utility-owned poles. Although the law change was a victory, there was much work that needed to be completed through the state utility regulatory commission.

This work required attention to matters that would impact the benefits to communities in the future. Those details included technical aspects of lighting, fixtures installation, liability, engineering design, and finances.

In September 2016, regulations were adopted by the state regulatory agency and the communities are positioned to begin the process of converting streetlight systems to energy-efficient LED fixtures that will be owned by the communities. We believe this project will be a great savings and reduce the energy needed to operate street lights.

In some cases, communities will be able to save 40 percent of their annual streetlight costs and will have greater options when selecting fixtures and advanced control systems.

After recently issuing a joint request for qualifications, when this article was written the streetlight group was ready to sign a contract for services with a private

company to audit existing systems, design a new system, and manage joint procurement and installation. Although this has been a long process, trust was formed early and the manager in the group diligently communicated with the other managers.

At one point during the process, trust started to weaken in one community for a number of reasons. That community was in transition and did not have a permanent city manager so the manager in the streetlight group was invited to attend a meeting of the elected officials in that community.

Trust levels are now strengthened again and objectives seem clear—work together, save money, achieve greater policy goals, and continue to maintain trust.

## It Takes Time

It is not always easy to provide regional services. It takes time to build, implement, and evaluate the model. There is an element of risk-taking and a commitment to not taking the easy way out. Managers must be prepared for failure, as well as success.

With trust, communities can work together, share expertise, and provide superior service. Each successful collective effort will raise the level of trust, which creates an environment receptive to more collaboration. Regional success now will provide future opportunities as communities prepare for the challenges associated with current and emerging issues.

Although some of these challenges might be unique to Maine, any community can benefit from regional collaboration and adapt the model that is most successful for its interests. **PM**



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