
A Brief Primer on Regional Collaboration

Collaborating Communities are Competitive Communities **Centers for Regional Excellence** **Building Models for Regional Collaboration-A Brief Primer**

On June 28, 2005, more than 70 people gathered in Lansing to talk about regional collaboration. Half represented communities from all over Michigan who had long participated in a variety of regional projects. These were our experts. The other half represented people interested in the issue: interest groups, Governor's staff, university faculty, who wanted to learn more about the practical applications of regional collaboration. These were the listeners. Following is a summary of those discussions.

GETTING STARTED:

What prompted the collaborative effort?

Often it was an incident or crisis of some sort: a regional millage that failed, a declining transportation system, etc.

While no one has to "create" an incident, the current financial condition of most of our municipalities certainly qualifies as reason enough to begin collaborative efforts. For those who feel a need to have a reason to invite others under one umbrella, this can clearly be it, and may be helpful in getting the attention of the general public and media. Many groups became more formal after years of social contacts-joint area meetings, lunches, etc., i.e., knowing each other helps. Start with just getting together to talk.

Start small, think big.

Put a number of potential collaborative projects on the table and narrow down to the most immediately achievable. This gives your group the confidence of early success and helps with credibility in the public and media. For example, many very active and extensive models today began with joint purchasing: easy (comparatively) to put together, not politically charged, etc.

However, don't lose sight of larger, more complex goals. And don't allow budget to sacrifice your goals: what you can't do now, you may be able to do later under other conditions.

Whatever you do, agree to keep talking, no matter what!

Do you really, really need a professional study?

While some people may push for political consolidation to be the end product, this will inevitably cause many communities to stay away. Sharing services may well accomplish the same benefits in terms of cost savings. Leave consolidation conversations, if you even want to have them, for another time.

Most areas said it took anywhere from nine months to two years to form a collaborative group and become productive in their joint efforts. Projects such as joint purchasing take the least amount of time.

Infrastructure collaboratives are likely to show much greater financial benefits than human services collaboratives, but the latter are also beneficial to your community. For credibility, you will ultimately have to show some bang for the buck.

All of the effort and work you do upfront really saves you (grief, money, effort) in the end.

Who should be involved and the structure of the board if there is one

While one collaborative suggested starting out with only a few people in private consultation to avoid immediate push back from those opposed to these efforts, the majority urged for a broad coalition, including, but not limited to, area chambers of

commerce, large employers, local media, non profits, the foundation community, public safety representatives, the faith community, local school and colleges, representatives of ethnic groups, community and constituency groups, etc. These people can often provide instant validation for your efforts. The Cool Cities model can be used to help teach people how to collaborate.

In many areas, the business community has been the driving force. Businesses are regional, no matter where their physical location, so their interests are directly served by collaborative efforts.

Leadership is key and it must come from the communities but that also includes the business and nonprofit groups. In fact, a leadership triumvirate reflecting these three entities is probably best. But someone has to take the first step. In a number of areas, it is one of the nonpolitical entities that is convening the meetings.

Any community or other entity that might be affected by collaborative efforts should be at the table, at least initially, and you might want to consider unions among that group since jobs or job descriptions may be affected as well. If everyone feels a part of the initiative, public support will be broader.

Further, since elected officials are sometimes averse to risk and often change with local elections, having others provides much needed continuity. Business and nonprofit/community representatives are often viewed as representing their communities, but are not subject to the winds of politics.

When creating formal boards to oversee projects, some collaboratives form more than one: an oversight board made up of elected officials from each participating entity as well as a technical board that oversees the day to day running of the program (also with one representative from each entity). For example, a regional dispatch system may have an oversight group of city and township officials, but it is run by a board of public safety officials. Another example: the board of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance is made up of mayors and city managers, but the representatives on their Redevelopment Ready Communities project are economic development people from participating communities. These more technical boards, often authorities, become the more visible entity and responders to public questions

Should you form an authority or other legal entity? That depends on what you're doing. It may not be necessary for initial explorations, but almost everyone has formed some kind of inter-local contract. The institutionalization this provides can be helpful to provide validity. These groups also have the benefit of removing daily politics from the program, not threatening individual "turf" and preventing numbers of ad hoc collaboratives from forming.

Try to cover every possible base in your agreement to keep it free of political influence. It can always be amended later.

In some cases, this institutionalization was achieved by becoming affiliated with the county. Other groups felt that affiliating with their county was too threatening to local communities. It depends what works best for you in your area.

You have to cede power to get power. In almost every case, each community involved, no matter what its size, has one vote on the board. This may be different when a major urban area is involved, but even then, those urban areas would be wise to not insist on board seats reflecting their numbers. Trust is critical. Egos need to be checked at the door.

Townships are essential to many collaborative projects. They must be assured at the very beginning that annexation, dissolution or any other kind of land or tax grab is off the table.

Everyone has to understand everyone else's motives and needs.

Work to keep everything nonpartisan.

If race is an issue in your area, confront it immediately and head on. If your initial organizing group is truly broad enough, your minority communities will be represented.

Remember, you only need two communities to get started. You can always build from there.

Generally, new members are brought in by a vote of current members. Having third party facilitators might be very helpful, especially in the beginning. One suggestion is to turn to your local universities for help with this.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

Bringing your constituencies into the process at the very beginning is critical to your future success

Hold special public meetings where you explain both the problem(s) and potential solution(s).
Invite people to attend visioning sessions. Ask them where they want their communities to be in 1, 5 or 10 years.
Use community email lists, newsletters, whatever form of communication you have available.
Use media conferences to help with the education process
Once your board(s) is up and running, hold regular public meetings
Whatever you can do to put regional collaboration on the public's radar screen, and keep it there, will benefit your efforts in the end.
Work hard at rumor control
Demonstrate the money being wasted and/or threats to services.
Following through is the key to credibility. Once the first project works and citizens see the benefits, the next ones will be much easier to accomplish.
You need a good evaluation process to show if the situation really did improve. This should be worked out at the beginning.
In addition to costs savings and more efficient services (as well as maintaining services that might otherwise be cut), frame the issue in terms of economic development.
Collaborating communities are competitive communities.
Consider regional marketing to encourage other communities to join (if you want them) and to advertise your competitiveness over other regions.

MEDIA OUTREACH

Select one person from the group who will be responsible for talking to the media. If technical questions might arise, as in the case of dispatch, have one person responsible for responding to those.
Make a list serve of all elected officials and people working on the collaboration to give notification of the questions being asked by the media and the answers given.
Have an invitational relationship with the media.
Have a kick off event for both the media and general public.
Following through with collaborative efforts will be the best way to win the attention and support of both the media and the general public.
Make your local press a part of the process. In some states that are far ahead of us on regional efforts, some reporters have begun writing stories at least monthly about their own processes and others going on around the country. This certainly keeps the issue in the public eye.
Provide tours of facilities or tours of areas that are successful examples of collaboration, such as a central dispatch facility in another county.

FINANCIAL MATTERS

(We are waiting for additional information to come in on this topic.)

Set aside resources to support the effort, even with limited resources, devoting just a small amount to the effort will send a signal that this is important

There may be some foundation dollars to help you get started. This is especially true if you have generated your own start-up funds first.

Purchasing collaboratives often ask vendors to provide the financing of that network in exchange for access to member units.

Having your own revenue source is helpful, such as with dispatch and 911 monies, but that is often not the case, unless the project was voted on with a special millage attached, thereby creating a regional taxing authority.

Create strong financial data to indicate potential financial payoffs

Determine who or what the fiduciary is. If you are dealing with state funded entities, such as public health departments, that might be the state. If you're working with a county, that might be the best bet. Otherwise, it will be the legal entity you create.

State funding

There is obviously little money here, but available dollars would more appropriately be placed in implementation, not studies

The revenue sharing statute expires at the end of 2006. There may be potential to create monetary incentives for collaboration in the new language.

Use transportation funding as a carrot since all communities are connected by transportation infrastructure.

STATE HELP AND HURDLES

Provide a resource to help people understand their options

Cool Cities was less about the money, more about the process, and this is where the state can help

There are sometimes frustrations with state agencies

The state can serve better as a resource center than anything else (see, for example, the idea of the website below).

The state should not make long-term promises if it cannot keep them

There really are no laws that are barriers. In fact, there are many laws that encourage and allow collaborative efforts

Provide a tax rebate to communities for service costs cut.

Would it be possible to have joint tax abatement policies?

Offer MEDC tools

OTHER IDEAS

Create a how-to manual that's available to everyone.

Establish a mentor program: identify key actors from ongoing partnerships and use them to "spread the gospel" of collaboration through a speaker series, one on one coaching/guidance, etc.

Create a website that includes how-to information, a clearinghouse of successful projects, potential mentors, state tools and public acts that are helpful, and how to use/understand those tools and laws, etc.

Assess progress of Land Use Leadership Council to date

Can the participating municipalities work toward having all of their contracts expire at the same time?

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