Intergovernmental Cooperation

VISION TEAMS

Imagining Allegheny County's Tomorrow

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County of Allegheny

Executive Summary

Recognizing that intergovernmental cooperation facilitates efficiency and effectiveness, the Intergovernmental Cooperation Vision Team concluded that such outcomes would be best realized with the active engagement and leadership of the county. Although historically the County has served in this capacity, the Vision Team determined that a redesign of its interactions with municipal governments would enhance the economic vitality and sustainability for all.

In light of this, the County should:

Serve as a Communications Center

- Develop and implement a comprehensive communications package, including educational and informational forums
- Replicate the County Pension summit for other issues of concern
- Conduct municipal tours in collaboration with the Council of Governments, (COG) including officials from the Federal, State and local governments; assign a priority level to projects reviewed

Function as the Coordinated County Data Center

- Inform local governments on a continuous basis about the date resources available to them
- Provide best practices and consultation services
- Consider partnering with the Governor's Center for Local government Services for assistance and support in initiatives
- Develop an integrated comprehensive and compatible data information system between the county and local governments
- Spearhead community engagement via a branding campaign that promotes intergovernmental cooperation
- Designate a staff member in the Executive office to serve as a liaison or ombudsman to work specifically on intergovernmental cooperation issues.

Act as a Resource for Local Governments

- Offer a defined, voluntary service cooperation package to local governments by which municipalities would obtain services at a reduced rate, while the County would gain much needed revenue. Emphasis should be given to the consolidation of "back office" functions such as information technology, joint purchasing, tax collection, health insurance, pensions, road maintenance, County police, etc.
- Examine how COGs could work on a contractual basis with the County to perform service delivery functions.

Study Financing Options Related to Intergovernmental Cooperation

- Explore securing funds for such initiatives from the private sector (foundations and corporations) along with state and federal funding

- Investigate the possibility to leverage recently signed public-private partnership (P3) legislation as a potential means for financing local government projects, specifically related to transportation and infrastructure.

Explore Ways to Enable Voluntary Municipal Disincorporation for Municipalities

- Play a major role in assisting some of the most severely disadvantaged communities that lack internal and external capacity to be sustained.
- Work collaboratively with state officials to craft enabling legislation for voluntary municipal disincorporation.

Vision Team Charge

The Intergovernmental Cooperation Vision Team is charged with determining whether the mechanics are in place to encourage efficiencies and, if not, to make recommendations as to what the county should be pursuing to encourage and support intergovernmental cooperation efforts.

Each vision team, within its charge and conversation, is expected to address sustainability, intergovernmental relations (recognizing existing relationships and identifying potential new ones) and diversity/inclusion. Each of these items should be folded into the recommendations and report made by the team. Additionally, for each recommendation that is made, the scope must be within one of three fields for which the county has a role: the county performs, or should perform, an administrative function related to the recommendation; the recommendation pertains to a financial interest or financial support of the county; and, the recommendation lends itself to advocacy by the county. Those recommendations that do not fit within one of those three fields should not be a focus of the vision team.

Scope of Work/Summary of Methodology

Between March and July, 2012, members of the Intergovernmental Cooperation Vision Team met on a monthly basis to discuss tools and methods that would lead to intergovernmental cooperation between the County and surrounding local governments. These meetings, which lasted approximately two hours each, were held at various locations in an attempt to introduce vision team members to different examples of local government structure. For example, one meeting was held in Carnegie Borough, while another was held in South Park Township.

In addition to the vision team meetings, the chair and members of the vision team reviewed previous County Executive transition team reports, performed literature reviews, and conducted interviews with appropriate stakeholders.

Based on the conversations conducted during the vision team meetings and information obtained from literature reviews, vision team members assembled a framework of recommendations that the County should adopt in an effort to increase cooperation between the County and local governments.

The following framework is divided into four areas. The vision team determined that the County should serve as a communications center and a resource for local governments. The vision team has proposed a set of packages bundled under those two categories that the County should adopt. While the vision team recognizes that the County currently engages in providing communication and resources to local governments, the recommendations found in this report are intended to enhance the efforts already underway.

Lastly, financing options and legislative changes were also discussed and are included in the recommendations.

1. County as a Communications Center

- The County understands and accepts the role of a communications center. To this end, the vision team has developed a comprehensive communications package, which should include the following items:

  - *Educational and Informational Forums*: The County should sponsor educational and informational forums for various elected officials. This should be done in conjunction with other local government organizations' efforts, such as those of the Local Government Academy (LGA), Allegheny League of Municipalities (ALOM), Councils of Governments (COGs), University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics (IOP), labor unions, etc.

    These forums should be structured and include a pre-determined agenda designed to address a specific issue(s).

    These forums should expand on some of the models currently in use by the County, such as the County Pension Summit.

  - *Municipal* Tours: The County Executive should utilize the eight COGs to schedule and coordinate municipal tours throughout the County. These tours will offer the County Executive and his department heads the opportunity to meet one-on-one with local government officials to discuss issues impacting their municipalities. These tours should be used as an initial tool and if they are shown to be effective, the administration should continue these tours on a monthly or otherwise frequent basis.

    The local municipalities being visited will collaborate with the County on an agenda prior to the tour that both parties are comfortable with and agree to. Recognizing the limited resources of the County, there will be no expectations placed on the County Executive in terms of financial support for projects discussed during these tours. However, the agenda agreed upon by the local municipality and the County will include discussion and/or visits to projects that promote economic development and to large scale projects that have long-term impacts for the municipality in question.

    The day will conclude with a meeting between the County Executive, his team, and elected officials, where all parties can discuss their actual needs in an informed setting. This allows the County Executive and his staff to get to know the representatives of local governments and their concerns, as well as offers the County Executive the ability to assign a priority level to the array of projects that are viewed throughout the day.

    All elected officials from the area, including federal, state, and local should be invited. This includes the County Council member from the district where the tour is taking place, as well as the two at-large council members. Lastly, this not only allows the County Executive to interact with local elected officials, but also allows local elected officials from different municipalities to demonstrate what projects, if any, they are working on collaboratively.

  - *Coordinated County Data Center:* The County should be the main link for local governments to learn what data and information are available to them. The County should perform the following functions regarding data information:

- ✓ The County should continually inform local governments about the data resources that are available to them.

- ✓ The County should provide best practices and consultation services to local governments in an effort to have local governments improve and better utilize the data systems available to them. One suggestion is for the County to partner with the Governor's Center for Local Government Services, which provides local government officials with assistance and support in a variety of areas. One of their programs that would be related to data services is the Peer-to-Peer Management Program, which provides on-site professional peer consultants with special knowledge to assist municipalities with specific issues, such as data collection and services. This service is available at no cost to the municipality.

- ✓ As a long-term goal, the County should move toward the integration of data systems so that the County and local governments have a comprehensive and compatible data information system.

- *Dedicated Staff:* The County Executive should designate a staff member in his office to serve as a liaison or ombudsman to work specifically on intergovernmental cooperation issues. The dedicated staff member should promote the County as a forum for additional coordination between local government organizations, such as ALOM, LGA, COGs, Congress of Neighboring Communities (CONNECT), as well as state level organizations, such as PA League of Cities and Municipalities (PLCM), Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners (PSATC), PA State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS), PA Association of Boroughs (PSAB), and County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP), etc. The focus of this coordination should be on developing "best practices" for good government at the local level. This should include the County researching ways to help facilitate functional consolidation of services among municipalities.

  - *Specific Issues:*

    - Delinquent Property Owners – Municipalities need to be able to track and monitor property through technology. Code enforcement should be digitized. The County should assist in this regard by facilitating the coordination of delinquent property offenders and the locations in which they own property. By collecting and tracking this data, municipalities should work together to bring offenders to justice. This is yet another example of the County acting as a data sharing resource. Additionally, the County should revise the current system by permitting a municipality to search property listings by the owner's name on the assessment website, which would aid in finding delinquent property owners.

      Many municipalities and organizations are beginning to work on the inventory of vacant properties. The County should help to facilitate the coordination and cooperation of these efforts.

  - *Community Engagement:* The County should brand this communications effort in an attempt to garner public support around increased communication and efficiency between the County and local governments. Getting the public involved and educated about why intergovernmental cooperation is important is paramount to the success of this endeavor. Currently, the "brand" that Pennsylvania has in regard to local governance is generally

viewed as fragmentation. Engaging the community around this project should focus on eliminating that perception and instead focusing on building a sense of the County as a cohesive community. The engagement strategy should highlight best practices that are already taking place, while building upon them with new, innovative ideas to raise awareness to the next level. The steps for a successful community engagement campaign should be the following: build awareness, engage the public, and advertise the initiative.

The County should start the education process early by reaching out to local school districts, colleges and universities to inform them as to what intergovernmental cooperation is and then to offer them a chance to get involved in naming a slogan for this communication branding endeavor.

2. County as a Resource for Local Governments

- The County should offer a service cooperation package to local governments. The package would be a) defined, b) voluntary, c) have the infrastructure needed for the success of the package in place before moving forward, and d) promoted (County should have a method of educating and promoting the package to the municipalities).

  The County should promote the eight COGs to facilitate this service cooperation package to local governments. Municipalities would obtain services at a reduced rate, while the County would gain much needed revenue. When creating this package, the County should work cooperatively with local municipalities to incorporate their suggestions and ideas on how to frame this incentive package in order to optimize the success of the package.

  The incentive package should look at the consolidation of "back office" functions. Some suggestions for functions that could be easily and logically combined include, but are not limited to, the following: information technology, joint purchasing, tax collection, employee health insurance, phone support, human resources administration, pensions, road maintenance, County police, detective services, etc. Those involved in crafting this incentive package should continue to look at ways to consolidate these types of functions for maximum efficiency and cost savings, including continual investigation of opportunities available for local governments to cooperate and share services.

  Cuyahoga County, Ohio has recently begun modeling their regional cooperation efforts after work done in Los Angeles. The Ohio County is looking at methods similar to the ones suggested above to eliminate duplicative services and to save money over the long run. Cuyahoga County has established a menu of offerings for consolidated services that their County Executive is currently promoting to cities located in the County. Out of 57 municipalities located in the County, 10 cities have already taken advantage of at least one of the services offered on the menu.

- The County should examine how COGs could work on a contractual basis with the County to perform service delivery functions. The County should look at specific services that could be contracted out. For example, municipalities could utilize the existing County sign shop for their purposes rather than contracting out to a private company.

3. Financing Options

- The Vision Team determined that financing options, while important, should be subject to further study. Until exact costs of programs around intergovernmental cooperation are determined, it is difficult to estimate how much funding is necessary. However, the Vision Team recommends that exploring funds from

the private sector, such as the foundation community and corporations, should be investigated, along with funding from state and federal government. The City of Pittsburgh has historically been very fortunate in having the private sector financially support local government and intergovernmental initiatives.

The recently signed public-private partnership (P3) legislation should also be investigated as a potential means for financing local government projects, specifically related to transportation and infrastructure. The legislation enables any government entity at the state or local level to enter into a P3 agreement. Approved projects can provide new capacity, as well as rehabilitate or modernize existing infrastructure/operations. At the end of the P3 agreement, the "facility" that the project is based on must be returned to the public entity in the partnership agreement in a condition that is either as good as or better than when the P3 agreement began.

4. Legislation Possibilities

- The diversity of municipalities within Allegheny County and across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania range from those which are models of public service provision and fiscal capacity to those who face the challenge of severe fiscal stress and are only able to provide minimal services to their citizens. Allegheny County should play a major role in assisting some of the most severely disadvantaged communities. One means of enabling the County is to explore ways to enable voluntary municipal disincorporation to municipalities that want to pursue that option.

  Voluntary disincorporation is not a new idea here. In 1994, former Allegheny County Controller Frank Lucchino directly addressed the lack of enabling legislation in Pennsylvania that would allow citizens to identify opportunities for disincorporation despite the fact that the Commonwealth was provided with the authority to form and disincorporate municipalities in the 1968 Pennsylvania constitution.

  Voluntary disincorporation is not about an attempt to usurp any powers of municipal governments within Pennsylvania, but a means to give citizens options to reform their local government should they so choose. As the Lucchino report *Reclaiming Hope, Voluntary Disincorporation in Allegheny County* (1994) summarized:

  > *Voluntary disincorporation means giving municipal residents the power, if they wish to use it, to dissolve ineffective municipal governments which would then become unincorporated territory within the County with municipal services temporarily administered by Allegheny County.*

  Any effort at municipal disincorporation would only be effective in coordination with an expanded capacity at the County level to coordinate the provision of essential public services to certain municipalities. As it stands now Allegheny County, as with all counties in Pennsylvania, is limited in how it can address the situation in the most distressed municipalities. Efforts to work with state legislators to craft enabling legislation for voluntary municipal disincorporation should then lead to Allegheny County providing an example of a new and effective path to address situations of municipal distress. Counties across Pennsylvania should be the effective intermediary in coordination with, or even in the place of, Act 47 recovery efforts at the municipal level.

Next Steps

Members of the Intergovernmental Cooperation Vision Team have expressed interest in continuing to meet as a group after this initial Vision Team report is released. They view the recommendations found in this report as the beginning to a larger conversation around intergovernmental cooperation.

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