

# Smart Government Means More Regional Planning and Shared Services



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*"We can do government much more efficiently if we look at things differently."*

~New Jersey State Senate President, Stephen Sweeney

Shared services and consolidation are often cited by both local and state officials as a way to save money, principally to rein in rising property taxes. Beyond cost-savings, though, there is the prospect for achieving smarter, better services. Many municipalities already share functions—courts, police, fire and rescue services, animal control and trash collection—with neighboring towns and, in some instances, school districts, through service agreements. Other municipalities have merged functions and departments altogether.

There is opposition to sharing or consolidating services across the state, but, at the same time, there is strong public support for smarter ways for government to operate. A recent poll (Fairleigh Dickinson University's Public Mind: May, 2011), for example, found that 71 percent of New Jersey voters believe that sharing police, fire and school administration is a good idea.

By removing legal and other hurdles, moreover, new law (e.g. the Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act of 2007) has made consolidation easier. And, earlier this summer, Senator Sweeney proposed legislation that would go even further: The bill he sponsored, S2794, ([www.njleg.state.nj.us/2010/Bills/S3000/2794\\_11.HTM](http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2010/Bills/S3000/2794_11.HTM)) would not only "promote the more effective operation of local government and the sharing of services among local units," it would apply sanctions—i.e., reduce state support commensurately—when municipalities refuse to share or consolidate.

It's clear that what services are shared, what functions are merged and how shared services and mergers are structured matter a good deal. It matters not only in terms of the details (e.g. how civil service regulations are managed), but also in how well plans are devised, decided and implemented.

That decision-making process could use some help. State government has a greater role to play; its educational and technical assistance efforts are essential. Local government officials need to be well briefed on what a good process entails and how it can help them achieve optimal results.



Initiating and supporting the use of intermediaries or facilitators to assist localities in voluntarily negotiating shared services and merger agreements would help to advance serious discussions. Facilitators can help “the parties” explore areas for shared services, suggest, for example, pilot programs prior to advancing more permanent arrangements, leverage private resources where it makes sense to do so, help deal with conflict as it (inevitably) occurs during negotiations, help parties frame issues to address their needs, and, finally, they can help think through implementation issues and “post-merger” monitoring. The Department of Community Affairs, where the Local Unit Alignment Reorganization and Consolidation Commission, LUARCC, (<http://nj.gov/dca/affiliates/luarcc/>) is housed, may be the proper place for these responsibilities.

The process for negotiating shared services agreements—in order to produce outcomes that pass muster and work well—must be grounded on a number of general principles. As noted, we recommend the process be collaborative and, where the parties agree, managed by a knowledgeable and experienced facilitator. In addition, we’d emphasize the following elements:

- All legitimate stakeholders participate (including those who currently provide the services to be shared);
- Participants trust that the process is fair and inclusive and agree to act in good faith (those who vote to approve/reject proposed plans will want to know that the process that produced a proposal was a good one);
- Participants focus clearly on their objectives, needs and interests, and remain flexible about the means by which those objectives can be met (e.g. to get more police officers on the street may be the objective; how to accomplish that outcome may be achieved through consolidation of back-office operations, consolidated calling operations, and so forth);
- Implementation of agreements is assured (and monitored when in place).

There are some “best practices” examples available on the LUARCC website ([nj.gov/dca/affiliates/luarcc/pdf/SHARED\\_SERVICETHemes%20final.pdf](http://nj.gov/dca/affiliates/luarcc/pdf/SHARED_SERVICETHemes%20final.pdf)) that highlight shared services agreements

that have received wide community acceptance and support.

To add efficiency and effectiveness to shared and consolidated services and to solve problems that cross jurisdictional lines, consider thinking regionally to accomplish common objectives. Here are two examples that suggest the rich potential of thinking differently:

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JURISDICTION BASIS.

Representatives from Route 1 corridor municipalities between Trenton and New Brunswick, via the Central Jersey Transportation Forum, took steps to improve the efficiency and quality of their decision-making functions to allow for collective action in response to critical issues in the region. They established “action teams” and adopted a voting structure to help tackle their shared problems, including work-

force housing, transportation and environmental protection and adoption of a common regional growth strategy. In this case, the Forum received support and assistance from the private, non-profit group, New Jersey Future.

The second example is a unique partnership of corporate, civic and governmental leaders, serving on the board of an organization known as Morris Tomorrow. The group, which disbanded after 25 years, devoted its time and efforts to improving the quality of life in Morris County. The collaboration among leaders allowed for a more comprehensive approach to the county’s problems, beyond the “home rule” approach that is normally adopted by elected politicians. The group was able to accomplish much more than any one municipality could have alone. It created employee van pooling programs for both public and private entities in the county; forged a housing partnership to help low income families find housing; formed compacts to address watershed issues and helped build models for collaboration and consensus, including one that lives on: The Ten Towns Great Swamp Watershed Management Committee.

For more than a decade representatives from these ten towns have been operating together to reconcile their upstream and downstream interests to stem flooding and prevent water quality degradation caused by devel-

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opment. The group, by inter-municipal agreement, has written model ordinances, for example, to protect stream banks, wetlands and steep slopes. Its work served as the model for the state's standard for storm water management.

Both the Middlesex and Morris county examples demonstrate the value of a voluntary collaboration. They satisfy, moreover, the "good process principles" for shared services negotiations that are outlined above.

The League of Municipalities, in a statement released in March, 2009, supports this approach as it draws from current research and analysis to observe:

For services that show economies of scale, such as infrastructure based services (water utilities, for example), contracting with a regional provider (including shared services), regionalized special districts, centralized services, joint board or regional policy groups may be more efficient and effective than directly delivered services. If regional coordination is beneficial to the delivery of the service, such

as land use planning, regional efforts are more appropriate than local efforts. This could take the form of regional policy groups, joint boards, regionalized special districts, or county or other centralized services.

Many policy and planning issues, after all, occur regionally and are unlikely to be resolved well on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction basis. Problems rarely fit neatly into existing political structures.

Nationally, variations on the conflict resolution theme are being used with increasing frequency to develop policy and legislation. Agreements have been reached on broad issues such as education and transportation policy as well as on more discrete issues such as highway location, port development, water resource management, urban renewal plans and locating cell-phone towers and power-generating plants."

So, why not use these approaches for the issues that face municipalities in the challenging "new normal" era, and, not only for short-term savings, but for longer term results?

The city of Camden's intention to join the Camden county police force occasioned a visit by Governor Chris Christie, in early August, to say the following:

"Today marks a critically important milestone on the path to making regionalization of police services a reality and innovating the way government works..."

For effective consolidation and mergers of municipal services to occur, and, for regional perspectives on policy and planning to produce value, local level involvement is critical. Voluntary, good faith participation is a must. With encouragement and support from state agencies, municipalities may well become more receptive to the value of shared services.

As we know, fragmented and uncoordinated decision-making, often produces poor results. Likewise unnecessary duplication absorbs resources that could be used elsewhere. Regional policy-making and planning, and smart, less costly, municipal government may well prove to be innovative, efficient and effective government strategy. ▲



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