

# Don't Just Cut: Collaborate and Innovate!

*A column by Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay for the Quad Community Press Newspaper (3/22/2011)*

The path to a vibrant and fiscally sound community is through collaboration and innovation, not through the continuous cutting and starving of core public services.

Don't misunderstand me: we all know that budgets need to be adjusted to meet limited revenues in these tough times, and Circle Pines has done a tremendous job of holding the line on spending for many years. Over the last ten years our population has increased over 17% and the cost of fuel for our snowplows, fire trucks and police cars has more than doubled. Yet when adjusted for inflation, our city spending has actually gone up less than half a percent per year (if you choose to ignore the real impact of inflation on our city budget, it has still only gone up an average of 3.2% per year over the last ten years).

How are we and many other cities able to accomplish this? We are constantly searching out opportunities for collaboration and innovation in how we provide core public services. The following examples show how Circle Pines shares ideas and saves money by becoming more efficient and keeping taxes as low as possible:

- We are part of a 'Joint Powers Agreement' volunteer fire department and a Joint Powers police department; each serves three cities with quality service while keeping costs as low as possible for what is the largest portion of any city budget
- We rely heavily on local non-profit groups to provide valuable services to our community without tax dollars: the faith community and the Centennial Ministerial Association, the Centennial Area Education Foundation, the YMCA, the Centennial Area Food Shelf at Our Saviors Lutheran Church, Rotary and Lions Clubs, North Metro Television, and many, many more (please support them!)
- We share the high-performing Centennial school district that serves all or part of five cities
- We work through the County to receive important services that they can provide more cost-effectively because of the larger scale (such as library services, emergency dispatch services, and fiber-optic infrastructure)
- We collaborate with neighboring cities and the school district to learn new ideas and save costs:
  - The 'Centennial Mayors and Superintendent' quarterly meeting connects us to identify cost savings, share information, and appreciate the significant financial challenges faced by the school district
  - A new joint purchasing program through the North Metro Mayors Association buys common city supplies in larger quantities to save taxpayer money
  - We enter into agreements with other cities when we can save money by bidding together for larger purchases (working through the City of Coon Rapids we can get better pricing on street seal coating this summer)
  - We partner with the YMCA, the Centennial School District and the City of Lino Lakes to make recreation services available to our residents, rather than at city expense.

All of these examples (and many more) remind me of the challenges I face in the business world trying to market and sell for a small company without an adequate budget. What can you do? You improvise, you innovate, you get more bang for your buck whenever and wherever you can. And believe me when I tell you that is the same thing we do at the city level as we work to improve the quality of life in our communities.

Rather than focusing on cutting off city funding and micro-managing a city's ability to make decisions that improve their communities, politicians in St. Paul should look to cities for lessons on making smart, positive choices while living within their means. That's something our communities do each and every day.