

MINNESOTA

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Effective City Partnerships



Creating a Win-Win Collaboration

Potential Partnering Pitfalls

Collaboration Success Stories

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*Municipal partnerships are nothing new in Minnesota,
as many cities are already experiencing the benefits of collaboration.*

Here are a few success stories from cities in different areas of the state.

By Claudia Hoffacker

State legislators, citizens, and others are turning up the pressure on cities to cut costs and increase efficiencies through partnerships. But many Minnesota cities are way ahead of them.

The **City of Moorhead** is a perfect example. “We’ve been collaborating on different things for about two decades,” says Moorhead City Manager Michael Redlinger. “It’s been a little more elaborate the last 10 or 15 years.”

Crossing state lines

Moorhead has partnered with the city of Fargo, N.D., on many services, including river tree removal, transit, and staff development to name a few. Probably the most prominent collaboration, though, is the Red River Regional Dispatch Center (RRRDC), which opened in 2003.

The joint powers agreement, which was signed in 2001, involves Moorhead and Clay County in Minnesota, and Fargo and Cass County in North Dakota. The center is governed by its own Board of Authority and is the first regional dispatch center in the nation to serve entities in two different states.

“In our situation with Fargo, the state line brings another level of complexity,” Redlinger says. “You’ve got a whole host of liability issues when you’re dealing with two cities, two counties, and two states.”

Better quality of service

Despite these complexities, the goal of the partnership has always been to find common ground while joining together to provide a higher level of service for citizens. “The technology we’ve been able to get (for RRRDC) by collabo-



Moorhead’s Michael Redlinger and Dodge Center’s Lee Mattson will speak about their collaboration experiences during the session

“Partnering for Success”

at the
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rating is much better than any of us could get on our own. And the service is far above and beyond anything we could have done on our own,” Redlinger says.

Even though the initial cost was higher with the collaboration because of the state-of-the-art facility, Redlinger says, Moorhead is better off in the long run because with the collaboration, not only does the city have a higher quality service, it also has more buying power and greater economies of scale than it would on its own. In addition, the partners were able to secure federal grants to help cover some of those costs.

For **Dodge Center**, collaborating on ambulance service has also resulted in benefits from both a financial and quality standpoint. The Dodge Center Ambulance Service serves the cities of **Kasson, Mantorville**, and **Claremont** as well as Dodge Center.

“One advantage of the collaboration is that nobody has any money in this now. It is a self-sustaining service,” says Dodge Center City Administrator Lee Mattson.

The service, which includes a main facility in Dodge Center and a one-car garage in Kasson that houses one of the two ambulances, has annual operating costs of about \$460,000 and revenues of about \$550,000. Any extra goes back into the service for such necessities as supplies, equipment, and ambulance maintenance and replacement.

Dodge Center and other cities in the area previously received ambulance service from Gold Cross, a private service in Rochester about 20 miles away. In 1974, Dodge Center started its own ambulance service because officials wanted something closer. Neighboring Kasson and Mantorville liked the idea of a closer ambulance service as well, so city leaders requested that Dodge Center serve their residents.

In 1996, Claremont was running into financial trouble with its ambulance service, so officials approached Dodge Center about a merger, and the two cities entered an agreement.

Peace of mind

Along with cost savings, the cities’ residents enjoy better service and greater peace of mind knowing an ambulance is nearby when they need it. In addition to the four cities, the ambulance service also serves six townships. Its service area is 180 square miles with a population of more than 14,000. The response time is usually 10 minutes or less.

The ambulance service also started a training institute a couple of years ago. It provides training for emergency medical technicians, CPR, and other emergency skills. “Ours is one of three training institutes in Southeast Minne-

sota, so it's been a great advantage to the region," says Ambulance Director Dan Stensrud.

Although the ambulance service has run for many years at no cost to the cities, it may need to seek funds in the near future to improve facilities and to offer a small payment to on-call volunteers. In initial discussions with the other cities, the response has been very positive, Mattson says. "We never ask for money for the ambulance service, so I think people are a little more open to the idea."

In addition to the four-city partnership, Dodge Center also has mutual aid agreements with several other cities, Stensrud says. The services in the area respond for one another when needed, so no city is ever without coverage. "We have a really good group of people here in Southeast Minnesota. We have a great working relationship," Stensrud says.

Maintaining city identity

Putting citizens first is what leads to these types of partnerships, but for some services, partnering can be hard to do. "With law enforcement, for example, you could have some identity issues because it's such a highly visible service," says Redlinger. "With our dispatch service, there's no identity issue. The caller doesn't know if they are talking to someone in Moorhead or Fargo or somewhere else."

But for the **City of Circle Pines**, which has joint powers agreements for both police and fire services, the question of city identity never really entered into the equation. In fact, during a time when everyone is worried about the cost of government, Circle Pines City Administrator James Keinath says, the visibility of this shared service is actually a plus. "It creates a positive image because it shows that we are really making an effort to do more with less," he says.

"I've worked in other cities where the police cars have the city name on them, and you do take pride in that," Keinath adds. "But when you think of it from a service delivery standpoint, it's not a big hurdle because we're able to get a higher level of service this way."

Circle Pines collaborates with **Centerville** and **Lexington** for police service, which operates under the name of Centennial Lakes Police Department.

The city collaborates with Centerville and **Lino Lakes** for fire service, which goes by the name of Centennial Fire District.

The region is commonly known as the Centennial area, and the adoption of that name for the police and fire services seems to help with the identity issue. "I think having that name for both departments helps create a unified image," says Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay.

"When you enter an arrangement like this, you are sharing that total control you once had ... But we're getting a better service at a lower cost than if we were doing this on our own. For us, the trade-off is worth it, and it works."

—Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay

The longevity of the partnerships may also help. The police department agreement started 35 years ago between Circle Pines and Lexington. Centerville joined around 1995, first on a contract basis and then later entered the joint powers agreement. The fire service agreement has been in force since 1985.

Both the fire and police departments are freestanding agencies with their own governing bodies made up of the mayor and one city councilmember from each city. The city administrators make up the operations committee.

The governing boards create their annual budgets, and each of the three city councils must approve them. Each city contributes to costs based on call volume and population.

Control and culture

While maintaining identity might be an issue for some, a bigger issue for others is that of control.

"When you enter an arrangement like this, you are sharing that total control you once had," Bartholomay explains. "Sometimes people will say, 'I'm not comfortable having other cities drive this budget decision.' But we're getting a better service at a lower

cost than if we were doing this on our own. For us, the trade-off is worth it, and it works."

Redlinger agrees that with these types of partnerships, "governance is a challenge because you're now governing from a new distance. There's a bigger democratic process you have to work through for any changes because all the parties have to agree. You have to be willing to let go of having total control."

Another consideration when it comes to collaboration is culture, says Redlinger. "The culture of your organization is an important thing to consider. We're trying to show employees that we want their creativity and professionalism," he says. "We don't want to quell innovation by lumping things together if they don't work well together. The cultural fit has to be there in the partnership or else you're sending mixed signals to your employees."

Other considerations

Also when entering a new partnership, it's important that all partners have the same goals and expectations, Redlinger adds. What do you expect to get from the partnership and how do you evaluate progress? Having a way to measure results is imperative.

Another question to consider: what happens if the partnership doesn't work or circumstances change? "It has to be practical for partners to leave the collaboration if they want to," says Redlinger. "It shouldn't be too easy to walk away because you need the good faith effort of all partners involved. But you also need to realize that it's okay to return to the service you were doing before if that now makes more sense for your city."

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