

Team Up For Savings

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Detroit gets most of the attention because of its size, but many Michigan cities are facing unprecedented fiscal crises. Cuts in state revenue sharing, escalating health care and pension costs, a slumping economy and shrinking federal support have forced cities to lay off police officers and firefighters, end recreation programs, eliminate bus routes and propose higher local taxes. The Headlee Amendment and Proposal A, restricting property tax increases on existing development, further squeeze older, established cities.

Washington and Lansing have to help. But local leaders also need to adjust their attitudes toward sharing resources -- and expenses. To do more with less, local leaders need to look beyond their borders, as dozens of Michigan municipal officials learned this week at a Creating Collaborative Communities conference sponsored by Wayne State University and the Michigan Suburbs Alliance.

Cooperation rare, but essential

Municipal boundaries are more suited to the 19th Century than to an era of distant commutes and instant communication. Southeast Michigan has 241 local units of government that too often compete instead of cooperate.

Five years ago, three struggling municipalities in the western Upper Peninsula merged into one city, giving residents leaner government, economies of scale, a broader tax base and greater bonding authority. Most cities don't have to go that far. Municipal collaboration can be as simple as sharing a police dispatcher or chipping in for a new fire truck.

While such steps are rare in southeast Michigan, the region has a growing number of examples. This year, Mt. Clemens disbanded its police force in favor of contracting with the Macomb County sheriff, who also has contracts with four townships. Financially strapped Highland Park saved roughly \$1 million a year by contracting with the Wayne County Sheriff's Department. Fire departments in Plymouth and Plymouth Township merged a decade ago, saving \$6 million and reducing response times.

In 2003, Keego Harbor, Orchard Lake and Sylvan Lake improved firefighting and EMS services through an agreement with the West Bloomfield Fire Department. Oakland County's Courts and Law Enforcement Management Information System provides a database used by more than 150 agencies in six counties.

Public safety operations, because of their high costs, provide some of the best examples of municipal cooperation, but there are others, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments reports. A telecommunications system shared by the Macomb Intermediate School District, the county and 21 local school districts has saved money and improved instruction. A GreenWays Initiative is connecting more than 70 southeast Michigan communities. And the city and charter township of Northville, along with Northville Public Schools, created a joint Parks and Recreation Department.

State can add incentives

Local leaders should learn from these models, and the state should encourage them. Gov. Jennifer Granholm's new Centers for Regional Excellence program, which will provide small grants to support such efforts, is a good step. But the state can do more by providing ongoing financial incentives to municipalities that operate more efficiently.

Unfortunately, hard times, when cooperation is most needed, seem to push communities farther apart. Livonia, for example, might pull out of a regional public transportation system.

Moreover, negotiating agreements between governments takes time and money. Payoffs might not come for two or three years and politicians don't always take the long view.

Collaboration between local governments is not a panacea. But sharing resources can provide taxpayers better services at lower costs. In good times or bad, that's what government is supposed to deliver.