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Is Multicommunity Collaboration a Possible Answer?

by

Ron E. Shaffer

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IS MULTICOMMUNITY COLLABORATION A POSSIBLE ANSWER?

Ron Shaffer*

The increased integration of rural communities into the national and global economies, combined with the increased state and federal mandates for public services, raises a few major questions. Namely, can small towns across America survive? If so, can they maintain their identity? This issue of *Community Economics* does not debate those questions, but instead explores one possible response that many communities are testing—multicommunity collaboration.

Wisconsin's local units of government have long benefitted from the state's "Joint Powers" statute (Chapter 66.30) that allows separate governments to share in the provision of municipal services. Some enduring examples include rural fire districts, solid waste disposal, road maintenance equipment, etc.

While these powers to share have existed for some time, they are often not used. A recent study by Beverly Cigler** suggests reasons for sharing and the different levels of sharing. Attempts to share or collaborate are often stimulated by community fiscal stress; by the presence of a political constituency for cooperation, and by supportive programs provided by external agents (such as state government, professional and municipal associations, and university programs). Additional stimuli include economies of size, which prevent smaller municipalities from providing the service, and the fact that service delivery is not greatly impacted by political boundaries. Rural fire protection and solid waste disposal sites or collection are prime examples. Another Wisconsin example is the informal sharing that occurs among some clusters of rural counties. This suggests another key insight from the study—variations in intensity and in form of sharing or partnerships.

The study suggested community sharing occurred across a spectrum of progressive partnerships, ranging from *networks* (most elemental), to *cooperation*, from there to *coordination*, and finally to *collaboration*. Along this continuum, each category differs in level of complexity (information sharing vs. complicated joint problem-solving); in intensity of linkages (based on common goals, decision rules, shared tasks and resource commitments); and in the formality of agreements reached (informal vs. formal structures, policies and procedures).

Networks are organizations with very loose linkages, and generally exist primarily for information exchange. Members join or disconnect with ease and without threatening the partnership's existence. Informality governs the procedural and structural patterns; member units can maintain their own organizational autonomy. The resource sharing involves the exchange of ideas, news and reports.

* Community Development Economist, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

** Drawn from Beverly A. Cigler's "Preconditions for Multicommunity Collaboration," pages 53-74 in Multicommunity Collaboration: An Evolving Rural Revitalization Strategy, P.F. Korsching, T.O. Borich, & J. Stewart (eds.). Ames, Iowa: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, RRD 161, July 1992.

Cooperation also represents relatively low-level intensity linkages and agreements regarding the sharing. Sharing can include one or more activities, and is not greatly affected if a member withdraws. Cooperative partnerships generally incur minimal costs to participants and are staffed by middle- or lower-level personnel.

Coordination of partnerships represent a more closely-linked connection among participants. Tasks at this level require a commitment of resources beyond information sharing and entail specific shared, common goals established by the member units. Membership is more stable, with attention given to who joins and to the consequences of member units leaving. More formality surrounds process and structural patterns. Importantly, each member unit agrees to some loss of autonomy, and acknowledges any possible resulting effects on internal organization. Because resource commitments tend to be made (time, funds, personnel, facilities), higher-level officials tend to participate and the tasks or activities require a higher degree of tangible processes and structures.

Collaboration involves strong linkages among members. The purpose is specific, often complex, and usually long-term. Membership is very stable; adding or reducing members may significantly and detrimentally change the partnership, perhaps even causing its failure. When a collaborative partnership emerges, each member unit delegates considerable autonomy to the collaboration and commits significant resources. Collaborative efforts are highly visible to others in the community or region. Finally, formal process and structural patterns of collaboration are usually expressed in writing, often as legal documents.

Multicommunity sharing often takes the form of the less-intense partnerships outlined above. These less-intense partnerships can be part of the evolutionary phase before true collaboration occurs, but there is no predetermined course towards true multicommunity collaboration. Often the level of sharing required to meet the needs of the partners is far short of full-fledged multicommunity collaboration.

The research summarized some preconditions related to the emergence of collaborative efforts. These include: early and continued support by elected local officials who set institutional agendas and who are empowered for action; a clear demonstration that cooperation has advantages for the participating governments; the emergence of a policy entrepreneur(s) to promote partnership formations; an early focus on visible effective strategies; and an emphasis on collaborative skills-building by those involved in the partnership.

Multicommunity collaboration involves more intense linkages than have been the tradition. This includes increased resource commitments, sharing tasks and decision rules, and common goals. In its purest form, multicommunity collaboration implies a shared destiny and response. The more intense the linkages the more important it is to nurture an ability to network (people, money, and other resources). Viable multicommunity collaboration requires that the actors and organizations involved support collective action.

Ron Shaffer
Community Development Economist