

# National League of Cities



A Report from  
NLC's  
CityFutures Program

## Guide to Successful Local Government Collaboration in America's Regions



ALLIANCE *for*  
REGIONAL  
STEWARDSHIP

*Co-sponsored by the  
Alliance for Regional Stewardship*



## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES AND THE CITYFUTURES PROGRAM**

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more than 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing more than 218 million Americans.

This document is a product of NLC's CityFutures Program. The CityFutures Program engages city officials in analysis, outreach, and impact on the trends and changes affecting America's cities now and in the future. The program seeks to connect public and policy discussions to the reality of what is happening in America's cities. It was undertaken with the belief that significant economic, demographic, and other changes are transforming the contexts in which city governments function. In essence, the program seeks to strengthen government by providing new perspectives on public issues and by challenging current assumptions. [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org)

## **ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR REGIONAL STEWARDSHIP**

The Alliance for Regional Stewardship (ARS) is a national, peer-to-peer network of regional leaders working across boundaries to solve tough community problems. These regional leaders come from the business, government, education, and civic sectors, and they share a common commitment to collaborative action and achieving results. ARS has embraced the challenge of the late John W. Gardner: "No more regionalism for its own sake. We now need pragmatic regionalism with a purpose."

As a national nonprofit organization, ARS serves these regional leaders and regional initiatives in three ways: 1) by administering the ARS Learning Network and convening regular National Forums, developing civic leaders as practical boundary crossers who can work across sectors to drive significant change efforts in their regions; 2) by serving as strategic advisors to regional civic initiatives and campaigns – working with individual regions and communities to organize and carry out significant civic campaigns or change efforts; and 3) by carrying out action research that tracks regional trends and builds and communicates insights into the nature of effective regional collaboration and initiative. [www.regionalstewardship.org](http://www.regionalstewardship.org)

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**October 2006**

**John Parr, Joan Riehm, and Christiana McFarland**



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The National League of Cities and the Alliance for Regional Stewardship are pleased to present the *Guide to Successful Local Government Collaboration in America's Regions*. The goal of this guide is to help local elected officials better understand new opportunities for improving service delivery and quality of life in their communities through local government cooperation across city, county, and state lines.

This guide offers a range of collaboration options from communities across the country, plus lessons learned from those who are using these options today to improve services, lower costs, and improve their economic competitiveness. The guide also provides a step-by-step approach to help local elected officials and regional partners meet current and future challenges and ensure that the public is engaged in the process.

We thank John Parr, Senior Counsel, ARS, and Principal, Civic Results; Joan Riehm, Deputy Mayor, Louisville Metro Government and Board Chair, ARS; and Christiana McFarland, Senior Research Associate, NLC, who developed this report. We also thank all of those whose contributions, comments, and suggestions led to the successful development of this guide, including: Jane Hansberry, Amy Carrier, Shawn Johnson, Christopher Hoene, William Barnes, William Woodwell and Gideon Berger. And we thank the members of NLC's 2006 CityFutures Panel on Community and Regional Development and other city officials for their valuable insights.

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This document is a *work in progress*. Just as challenges to local governments are always changing, so too are the solutions to deal with those challenges. ARS and NLC welcome your feedback about this guide, and we ask you to help us make it better with your ideas and suggestions. To share your comments, please email John Parr ([jparr@usa.net](mailto:jparr@usa.net)) or Christiana McFarland ([mcfarland@nlc.org](mailto:mcfarland@nlc.org)).

This guide is not a scholarly or definitive review of all cooperation and collaboration options or even the best examples of each type that we have identified. It is intended to offer insights to community leaders and other practitioners dedicated to improving the governance of our nation's cities, towns, and regions. We appreciate your interest in this important topic, and we wish you the best as you work to enhance local government cooperation in your region.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many public and private sector leaders would like to explore the pros and cons of various ways to govern and deliver services through intergovernmental or regional arrangements, but they do not have an easy guide to the options, or examples of communities that have tried them. To remedy this situation, the Alliance for Regional Stewardship and the National League of Cities developed this *Guide to Successful Local Government Collaboration in America's Regions*.

This guide takes a closer look at the continuum of models for intergovernmental cooperation. A wide range of collaborative approaches has proven successful — from the informal Metro Mayors Caucuses in Denver, Chicago, and Atlanta; to contracts between Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, NC, to share specific government services; to the recent full merger of city and county governments in Louisville-Jefferson County, KY.

Regional approaches may not always be the best solution, but the approaches described here offer an array of benefits, starting with cost savings and new efficiencies. These regional approaches also present opportunities for improving service delivery, achieving social equity, empowering disaffected groups, and addressing regional-scale problems more successfully.

Each option comes with clear advantages and challenges, which are outlined in the guide. The options include:

## Easier Options

1. **Informal Cooperation** — This approach typically involves two local — usually neighboring — government jurisdictions that offer reciprocal actions to each other. An example is the Denver Metro Mayors Caucus, founded in 1993 as a cooperative alliance of the mayors of 31 cities and towns in the Denver metropolitan region.
2. **Interlocal Service Contracts** — These are widely used to handle servicing responsibilities, particularly between and among metropolitan communities. An example is the Tri-County Fire Working Group in Montana, formed in 1984 to educate the public about wildfire prevention and to train emergency response personnel in wildfire mitigation.
3. **Joint Powers Agreements** — These agreements between two or more local governments provide shared planning, financing, and service delivery to residents of all involved jurisdictions, with all jurisdictions receiving the same services from the same provider. An example is the Central Arkansas Transit Authority, a public corporation created in 1986 to serve Little Rock, North Little Rock, and other area towns.

4. **Extraterritorial Powers** — This approach allows cities to exercise their regulatory authority in surrounding unincorporated areas. As an example, a recent survey of 315 municipalities in North Carolina indicated that 62 percent use extraterritorial powers for regulating land development, including zoning, signage, watershed protection, and historic districts.
5. **Councils of Governments** — These organizations are formed by counties and cities to serve local governments and residents in a region through government cooperation. They usually are voluntary and involve no transfer of authority. An example is the Mid-America Regional Council, which serves as the association of city and county governments and the metropolitan planning organization for the bi-state Kansas City region.
6. **Federally Encouraged Single-Purpose Regional Bodies** — These originally were created in the mid-1980s to administer some federal-aid programs around poverty, aging, health systems planning, and criminal justice planning. Today, single-purpose regional bodies are primarily formed for transportation planning and funding. An example is the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, which serves as the metropolitan planning organization for the Philadelphia metropolitan region.
7. **State Planning and Development Districts** — These were established by states during the late 1960s and 1970s to bring order to the numerous federal regional programs affecting local communities. Most state planning and development districts are similar to councils of governments. An example is the North Delta Planning and Development District, which serves several counties in Northwest Mississippi.
8. **Contracting** — Local governments struggling to provide services with less revenue increasingly are turning to contracting with other governments, and/or with the private and nonprofit sectors. Camarillo, CA, for example, has become known as “Contract City” because the city purchases major public services through contracts with Ventura County and others.
9. **Regional Purchasing Agreements** — These agreements help local governments achieve cost savings while fostering more cross-jurisdiction collaboration. The purpose can be straightforward, such as bulk purchasing; or more complex, such as coordinating bidding and contracting for members. An example is the Strategic Alliance for Volume Expenditures, formed by 22 local jurisdictions in the Mesa, AZ, area to coordinate their purchasing and contracting.

## Harder Options

10. **Local Special Districts** — This approach is a popular option for providing single services or multiple related services to a number of jurisdictions. Special districts often remove from local government the policy control, technical specialization, and fiscal responsibility for providing services. For example, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago was formed in 1889 to keep sewage from polluting Lake Michigan and the Chicago, Des Plaines, Calumet, and Illinois rivers.
11. **Transfer of Functions** — This method is used to permanently change who provides specific services, with local governments releasing authority to other jurisdictions. Transfers typically are enabled by state statutes and created through intergovernmental negotiation. For example, Erie County, NY, over the last 70 years has transferred a variety of services from municipal to county government, including social welfare, centralized police functions, cultural facilities funding, parks, and libraries in an ongoing process of regionalization.
12. **Annexation** — Annexation has long been used to expand jurisdictions and service boundaries in the United States. For example, Sugar Land, TX, has grown rapidly through a series of annexations over the last 15 years, increasing its population by more than 150 percent.
13. **Special Districts and Authorities** — These are designed to address single issues such as mass transit, pollution control, hospitals, airports, or water supply on an area-wide basis, typically with a major urban area involved. They are the most popular form of regional government in metropolitan areas. An example is the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, which built most of New York City's modern infrastructure, including numerous bridges and tunnels connecting Manhattan to the city's outer boroughs.
14. **Metro Multipurpose Districts** — These districts establish a regional authority to perform many diverse functions, not just one set of related services as in earlier examples. For example, the Portland, OR, Metropolitan Service District was formed by the state legislature in 1979 and covers three counties, 24 municipalities, and several special-purpose agencies. Its portfolio includes operation of the regional zoo and convention center, open space and parks, economic development, solid waste, housing, transportation, recycling, and other environmental services.
15. **Reformed Urban County** — Counties seeking stronger executive leadership and broader representation in their legislative bodies have sometimes opted for this approach, which restructures county government with an executive

and legislative branch, but leaves municipalities and other local governments within the county unchanged. Allegheny County, PA, for example, developed its urban county home rule charter through special state legislation in 1997.

**16. Regional Asset Districts** — These are special tax districts used to fund regional resources, such as arts and cultural institutions, entertainment venues like sports stadiums, and even parks and libraries. For example, Denver voters in 1988 created the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, covering seven counties in the metropolitan area, to provide a consistent source of unrestricted funding to scientific and cultural organizations.

**17. Merger/Consolidation** — This option involves a variety of approaches that result in the creation of a new region-wide government, reallocation of government powers and functions, and changes in the political and institutional *status quo*. Options range from incremental approaches to city-county mergers to consolidations involving multiple counties. An example is the 2000 merger of Louisville and Jefferson County, KY, the first large metropolitan consolidation in three decades.

To help make regional collaborations more successful and sustainable, local elected officials and community leaders must involve all stakeholders, from citizens to business partners to religious leaders. This guide outlines key steps for engaging stakeholders, along with lessons learned from communities that have attempted various forms of local government collaboration.

# INTRODUCTION

At a recent conference of local elected officials, a special session was held on regional cooperation. As the audience settled in, the speaker asked: “How many of you ran for office as a regionalist?” There were only a couple of nods from the 30 or so present.<sup>1</sup>

“Okay,” the speaker said. “Think of the three biggest challenges facing your community. Can any of them be solved by only your local government, without working with neighboring jurisdictions?” The answer, local officials admitted, was that it was difficult to think of a single important issue they could solve all by themselves.

This is the great dilemma of regional approaches to governing. They are almost universally considered the best hope of solving many problems facing communities. But they are the least likely to be embraced.

Government collaboration is not a foreign concept in most communities. There are special districts for transportation or water and sewer services, public authorities that run airports and industrial parks, joint purchasing agreements among multiple governments. However, increasing numbers of elected officials and others are sensing a need for other forms of collaboration. From townships to counties, local governments are expressing a new willingness to explore a range of regional cooperation options that start with informal working dialogues and go all the way to formal structure change. Interest in this topic also is increasing at the state level. Legislation seeking to encourage and facilitate intergovernmental collaboration has been considered and/or adopted over the last several years in a number of states, including West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa.

**“This is the great dilemma of regional approaches to governing. They are almost universally considered the best hope of solving many problems facing communities. But they are the least likely to be embraced.”**

This guide offers descriptions and case studies of 17 approaches to intergovernmental cooperation, ranging from solutions that tend to be more politically feasible and less controversial to those that are more structural and difficult to implement. The goal of the guide is to help local elected officials explore their options as they consider the possibility of working with other governments in their regions to deliver services more efficiently and achieve other benefits.

In many instances, intergovernmental collaboration allows localities to achieve better results than they could by working alone. A 1994 study of more than 50 instances of community collaboration found that successful collaborations have four major outcomes: they achieve tangible results, generate new processes that lead to solutions

where traditional approaches have failed, empower residents and groups, and fundamentally change the way communities deal with complex issues.<sup>2</sup>

If regional collaboration has proven to be an effective strategy, why have more communities not embraced regional governance? Kathryn Foster, Director of the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at the State University of New York at Buffalo, notes five political challenges of regional action that are important for local officials to consider.<sup>3</sup> These include:

1. **The Challenge of Regional Identity.** Regional identity is highly important for regional success. Researcher Anthony Downs has observed (1994) that meaningful regional reforms are impossible without “effective metropolitan area solidarity.”<sup>4</sup> However, regional identity is notoriously weak because allegiance tends to be “closer to home” in localities or neighborhoods.
2. **The Challenge of Political Strategy.** There is no consensus on the best political strategy for seeking regional change. Some favor incremental, consensus-based steps over the long term, while others favor aggressive timetables, mandates, and bold proposals.
3. **The Challenge of a Big Tent.** Regional efforts generally are more successful and stable when they mobilize a broad base of support across multiple interest groups. However, identifying an issue and reconciling competing goals across these groups can be politically difficult.
4. **The Challenge of Consensus.** Similarly, coalitions tend to sustain themselves by favoring issues of consensus over conflict. For example, regional efforts focused on economic development tend to be less contentious and more widely supported than regionalism based on issues of equity and growth management.
5. **The Challenge of State and Federal Policy.** Inconsistent federal and state policies, often resulting from changing administrations and responsiveness to multiple constituencies, may simultaneously promote regions while undermining them. For example, in the greater Louisville region covering north central Kentucky and southern Indiana, regional air pollution issues are handled in Indiana by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office in Chicago, and in Kentucky by the EPA office in Atlanta — adding more layers to consensus decision-making on regional action. Moreover, laws in many states discourage local government collaboration — especially involving structural change — by erecting statutory hurdles. These include: requirements for prior state permission before localities can begin formally discussing major change; new legislation to authorize the intended change; and large voting majorities in multiple districts to enact the change.

Regional action is difficult; it requires participating governments to confront and overcome all of these challenges. But those who have embraced regionalism in some form feel it is well worth the effort. The key consideration: whether a regional approach is the best solution to the challenge at hand. In the area of service delivery, for example, Foster notes that regional action is appropriate in a number of specific circumstances — for example, when a public service can capture economies of scale; when it requires ample cross-border coordination; and when it warrants a standardized level of service. Service areas that are ripe for regional governmental solutions, she says, typically include: sewer and water service, utilities, airports, highways, harbors and ports, garbage disposal, transit, environmental planning and management, tourism and marketing, criminal investigation, public health, and public assistance.<sup>5</sup>

Locally provided services, on the other hand, tend to be those that cannot achieve the same economies of scale, that require relatively little cross-border coordination, and that do not have to be standardized. Examples include: police patrol, fire, community development, local planning and zoning, schools, parks, recreation, garbage collection, youth programs, senior services, and libraries.<sup>6</sup>

So the question remains: Can any of the biggest challenges facing *your community* be solved only by your local government, without working with neighboring jurisdictions? We suspect the answer is no. And, in the following pages, we offer regional governance options with examples, as well as a step-by-step approach to help local officials lead regional change with stakeholder involvement.

### **Service Delivery — Rules of Thumb for Regionalism and Localism**

#### **Regionalism makes sense when a service:**

- Can achieve economies of scale
- Has big “spillovers,” that is, affects areas outside the service territory
- Requires cross-border coordination
- Has a narrow range of preferences, that is, consumer desires vary little
- Warrants a standardized level on equity grounds

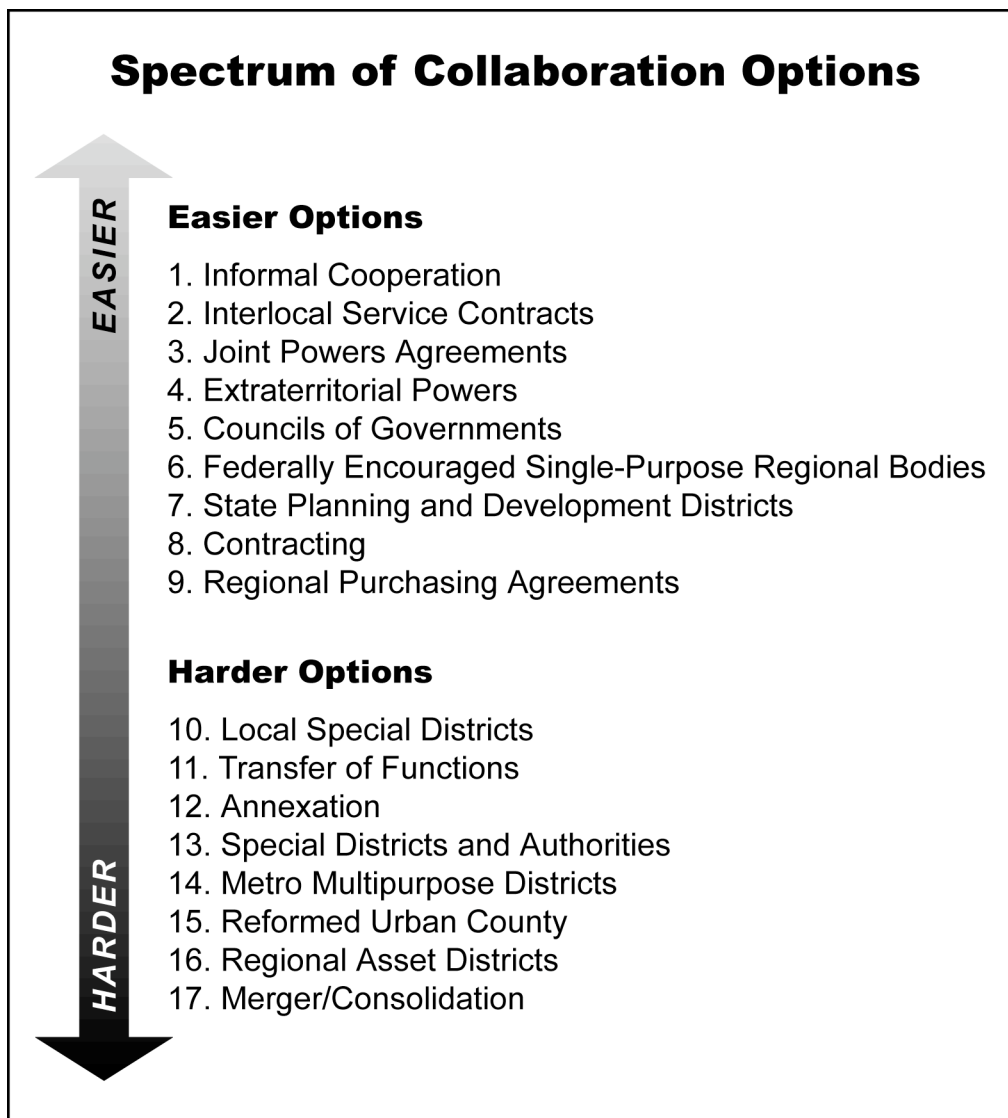
#### **Localism makes sense when a service:**

- Can achieve few economies of scale or might experience regional diseconomies
- Has small “spillovers,” that is, affects areas within the service territory only
- Requires little cross-border coordination
- Has a wide range of preferences, that is, consumer desires vary widely
- Does not warrant a standardized level on equity grounds

Source: Foster, Kathryn. 2001. *Regionalism on Purpose*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, p. 20.

# REGIONAL COLLABORATION OPTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

This section presents 17 regional collaboration options for local governments, based on the work of University of Connecticut Professor David Walker and the Alliance for Regional Stewardship. Each option includes a description, examples of localities that have implemented the option, and advantages and challenges associated with each approach.<sup>7</sup> The options are organized along a continuum, ranging from those that require the least structural change (likely the most feasible and least controversial) to those that require more structural change and may be more difficult to implement. Case studies were drawn from research files, interviews with practitioners, and the National League of Cities' City Practices collection.<sup>8</sup>





## Easier Options

The first nine options on the continuum of local government cooperation offer opportunities for initiating collaborations and learning to work together in ways that should be feasible for participating governments and should cause a minimum of controversy. The main drawback of many of these approaches is that they often are limited in focus; as a result, localities may want to consider other options that can achieve more enduring and more substantive collaboration.

### 1. Informal Cooperation

This approach typically involves two local — usually neighboring — government jurisdictions that offer reciprocal actions to each other. Adding private or nonprofit partners to the mix can increase the acceptance and impact of informal cooperation within a region. Further, there is good reason to believe, as author William Dodge does, that cooperation on intercommunity problem-solving can lead to intercommunity governance.<sup>9</sup>

#### Examples

**The Denver Metro Mayors Caucus** was founded in 1993 as a cooperative alliance of the mayors of 31 cities and towns in the Denver metropolitan region. Its purpose: serving as a voice for collective action on issues that affect the entire region but cannot be addressed effectively by any one jurisdiction acting alone. The caucus is unique among regional organizations because of its commitment to decision-making by consensus, exploring all options, and searching for solutions that reflect the needs and values of each member. This approach has enabled the caucus to develop positions and implement initiatives on growth management, multi-modal transportation, affordable housing, regional response to emergencies, and intergovernmental cooperation. The success of the Metro Mayors Caucus in Denver has led to its duplication in Oklahoma City, Chicago, Albuquerque, and Boston.

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**The Regional Jobs Initiative** was started in 2003 by the towns of Fresno and Clovis, CA, and now includes hundreds of private and civic organizations. All are dedicated

to the ultimate objective of generating long-term, sustainable economic development in the Fresno Region by diversifying the industrial and economic base to combat chronic, double-digit unemployment.

The Jobs Initiative is based on the idea that regional economies are composed of related industries, or clusters, that benefit one another. Task forces identify existing and emerging industry clusters where the region has a competitive advantage, and then devise strategies that improve the region's climate in each cluster for innovation, business creation, expansion, and retention. A five-year strategic plan is guided by 10 community values known as the Guiding Principles of the Fresno Region, developed collaboratively by business, education, civic, and grassroots leaders. The Regional Jobs Initiative's goal is to create 25,000 to 30,000 net new jobs by 2008, at an average salary of \$29,500.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Informal Cooperation**

#### Advantages

- Pragmatic solution to specific needs; often accomplishes a local jurisdiction's goals without complex fiscal and jurisdictional components.
- The most widely practiced approach to collaborative public service delivery, according to anecdotal evidence.

#### Challenges

- Hard to sustain over time, given the lack of formal structures.
- Very susceptible to shifts and changes in politics, personnel, and resources.

## **2. Interlocal Service Contracts**

Interlocal service contracts are another voluntary collaboration option. In contrast to informal approaches, they involve a more formal agreement between two or more local jurisdictions. Interlocal service contracts are widely used to handle servicing responsibilities, particularly between and among metropolitan communities, and they often can include nonprofit and civic organizations. The agreements may take a variety of forms:

- (1) A contract for services between two jurisdictions under which one jurisdiction agrees to provide a service to another for an agreed price. This is the most common form of interlocal service contract and can cover such

services as law enforcement, fire protection, corrections, courts, emergency dispatch, building inspections, and code enforcement.

- (2) Joint service agreements where two or more local jurisdictions join forces to plan, finance, and deliver a service within the boundaries of all participating jurisdictions.<sup>10</sup>
- (3) Mutual aid agreements for emergency service, which detail how local jurisdictions will provide services across jurisdictional boundaries in the event of an emergency, often without payment.

### **Examples**

**The Tri-County Fire Working Group in Montana** was formed in 1984 to educate the public about wildfire prevention and to train emergency response personnel in wildfire mitigation. The group includes representatives from: disaster and emergency services for Broadwater, Lewis and Clark, and Jefferson Counties; Helena City Fire Department; Lewis and Clark County Rural Fire Council; Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's Department; Montana Department of Natural Resources; Helena National Forest; Butte Field Office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; and private residents and contractors.

One of the organizers, Sonny Stiger of Wolf Creek, MT, said that before the working group was formed, "a lot of folks were working hard to improve the public's understanding of problems created by the build-up of forest fuels, but weren't making much progress. By working together, we were able to speak with one voice and people started to listen."<sup>11</sup>

The working group has brought a number of benefits to the tri-county area, exceeding its initial goals. For example, the group has helped develop interagency fire protection plans and provided support for acquiring state and federal grants that help private landowners reduce fuels on their properties. Participants say the close working relationships that have developed among working group members are an important outcome in and of themselves, contributing to better wildfire prevention and mitigation throughout the area.

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**The Triangle Region Household Hazardous Waste Collection Program** was created in 1995 to coordinate and improve regional and local approaches to the disposal of household hazardous wastes in the Triangle Region of North Carolina. The coalition sets goals and priorities and oversees program activities. It includes: Chatham, Durham, Orange and Wake Counties; the City of Durham; and the

Towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro. Operations management comes from the Triangle J Council of Governments.

A major objective is to reduce household hazardous wastes in the region's landfills and the environment. Initiatives include:

- A comprehensive education program to inform the public about reducing, reusing, recycling, and properly disposing of wastes.
- Outreach programs, public service announcements, media displays, and promotional materials as education vehicles.
- Collection points throughout the region that can be used by residents of any jurisdiction.
- A public information campaign with a 24-hour information line.
- A joint contract with a waste disposal company that provides a 10-percent discount to the coalition.

Among the major benefits for local governments participating in the program are cost savings and greater efficiency — for example, through cooperative purchasing of equipment and joint development of specifications for collection facilities.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Interlocal Service Contracts**

#### Advantages

- Provides a formal agreement between and among local governments to cooperatively carry out public functions within existing government structures.
- Can provide cost-effective solutions to shared problems.

#### Challenges

- Distributing costs and services equitably among participating agencies can be a challenge.
- Agreements that lack specificity regarding expected services and responsibilities can cause friction.
- Each party to the contract must perceive a benefit from the agreement for the negotiation to be successful; it cannot be assumed that a jurisdiction will enter into a contract solely for the good of the region as a whole. For example, the Triangle Region program didn't choose to promote one regional waste disposal facility, but opted instead to coordinate multiple waste collection sites.
- Sunset provisions often used in interlocal service contracts tend to make them issue-oriented rather than comprehensive. In other words, they disappear when the issue or problem goes away.

### 3. Joint Powers Agreements

Joint powers agreements between two or more local governments provide shared planning, financing, and service delivery to residents of all involved jurisdictions, with all jurisdictions in the agreement receiving the same services from the same provider. Other civic and private organizations also may join. Joint powers agreements are used for a wide variety of services, including fire protection, job training and placement, and flood control.

#### Examples

**The Central Arkansas Transit Authority** was created as a public corporation in 1986. The authority is governed by a 13-member board appointed by local elected officials. It serves the jurisdictions of Little Rock, North Little Rock, Cammack Village, Maumelle, Sherwood, and portions of Pulaski County.

In 1995, voters approved a tax to build an 18,000-seat arena in North Little Rock and to double the size of the convention center in Little Rock — but with only 300 new parking spaces. The transit authority led the way in creating a downtown streetcar line linking the sites and supporting a revival of the neighboring cities' downtown areas. Since its opening in 2004, the River Rail streetcar line has met its ridership goals and generated new residential and commercial development, along with the renovation of existing buildings.<sup>12</sup>

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A welfare-to-work agreement in 1997 between the City of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, MN, established the **Minneapolis Employment and Training Program**. The program enables the city and county to cooperatively develop and implement employment and training services under welfare reform. The city and county pooled their resources and empowered a five-member City-County Partnership Committee to make all funding recommendations.

The committee includes staff from both the city and the county. County members are the Assistant County Administrator for Community Services, the Director of Economic Assistance, and the Director of Training and Employment Assistance. City members are the Director of Neighborhood Services and the Director of the Employment and Training Program.

The committee administers a total of \$23 million from multiple local, state, and federal funding sources. Without the program, the funds would have been

administered by the city and county using separate processes and with little or no consultation.<sup>13</sup>

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Joint Powers Agreements**

#### Advantages

- Can provide cost-effective solutions to shared problems through a formal agreement among local governments to cooperatively carry out public functions.
- Can provide greater regional synergies with greater than anticipated returns on investment.

#### Challenges

- As with interlocal service contracts, each party must perceive a benefit from the agreement for the negotiation to be successful. It cannot be assumed that a jurisdiction will enter into a joint powers agreement solely for the good of the region as a whole.

## **4. Extraterritorial Powers**

This approach allows cities to exercise their regulatory authority in surrounding unincorporated areas. Originally used for public health and safety purposes, it is now used primarily for planning and zoning. The implementation of extraterritorial powers requires state authorization, which 35 states currently provide.

### **Example**

**Extraterritorial planning jurisdiction** is exercised by a majority of municipalities in North Carolina, according to a 2006 study by the University of North Carolina. Of 315 municipalities responding, 62 percent use extraterritorial powers for land development regulations, including: zoning, signage, location of adult entertainment and telecommunication towers, watershed protection, sediment and erosion control, and historic districts. The study's author, David W. Owens of the School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, concluded that urban growth pressures mean the key question surrounding extraterritorial unincorporated land is not whether it will be regulated, but by which jurisdictions.<sup>14</sup>

## **Advantages and Challenges — Extraterritorial Powers**

### Advantages

- Allows municipalities to deal with issues that affect them but are located beyond their borders without formally annexing the adjacent areas.
- Gives cities added flexibility to influence land-use decisions that affect them.

### Challenges

- The exercise of extraterritorial powers can harm the interests of individual residents in adjacent unincorporated land. Although property owners have constitutional protection against taking without compensation, many voice concerns about having the use of their property overseen by a city where they don't reside.

## **5. Councils of Governments**

Councils of governments (COGs) are organizations formed by counties and cities to serve local governments and residents in a region through government cooperation. COGs provide coordination of service delivery, planning, advocacy, technical assistance, and project development. They usually are voluntary and involve no transfer of authority.

COGs became popular in the late 1960s and 1970s due to requirements for federal aid. In the 1980s, COGs adapted to the Reagan Administration's new federalism by becoming regional service agencies for local constituent members. They provide clearinghouse functions and assume some specialized regional planning roles as well. A few also act as metropolitan planning organizations — mandated regional agencies that disburse federal funding for transportation projects. Rural COGs often play a more direct service provision role, while urban COGs often develop and propel regional dialogues and initiatives.

Most COGs belong to the National Association of Regional Councils, a national advocacy and support organization governed by policy and elected officials representing 15 regions covering all 50 states. The association is a good source for material on the role that COGs are playing in promoting and implementing regional cooperation. [www.narc.org](http://www.narc.org).

### **Examples**

**The Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)** serves as the association of city and county governments and the metropolitan planning organization for the bi-state Kansas City region. MARC is governed by a board of directors of 30 elected officials representing the eight counties and 116 cities in the Kansas City region. MARC's goal is to promote better understanding and cooperation on issues that extend beyond the jurisdiction of a single city, county, or state.

The MARC portfolio of issues includes transportation, child care, aging services, emergency services, environmental issues, and many others. The council also

responds to specialized regional needs. For example, a MARC committee oversees efforts to address terrorist threats to the Kansas City metropolitan area. The committee brings local, state, and federal partners together to assess needs, develop regional action plans and protocols, and determine the best use of federal funds.

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**The San Diego Association of Governments** serves as the forum for regional decision-making for 19 city and county governments in the San Diego region of California. The association deals with issues such as growth management, habitat conservation planning, traffic management, and criminal justice research. It provides regional planning leadership in the areas of transportation, housing, open space, recycling, and hazardous waste management; and it distributes information on a broad range of topics pertinent to the region's quality of life.

The association's board of directors includes mayors, council members, and a county supervisor from each of the region's local governments. In addition to these voting members, there are advisory representatives from Imperial County, the U.S. Department of Defense, Caltrans, the San Diego Unified Port District, the Metropolitan Transit System, the North County Transit District, the San Diego County Water Authority, and the country of Mexico. The board is assisted by a professional staff of planners, engineers, and research specialists. Given the wide range of cross-jurisdictional issues facing the region, the association permits a more streamlined, comprehensive, and coordinated approach to planning without the need to create costly new government entities.

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## **Advantages and Challenges — Councils of Governments**

### Advantages

- Provides a valuable forum for local governments within a region to work through conflicts and reach consensus on broad issues that affect them, such as transportation and environmental quality.



- Can respond to new and emerging regional issues, as in the case of the anti-terrorism planning committee in the Kansas City region.
- Can be the first step toward encouraging regional cooperation in a metropolitan area.

#### Challenges

- COGs have little implementation authority — what gets done is solely dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of each member municipality. As a result, it is very difficult to effect change on issues involving serious disagreement.
- Even for issues where there is consensus, there are no guarantees that every member municipality will effectively implement an agreed-on policy.
- As a rule, COGs tend to focus on local governments as their constituents, rather than the residents of the region. This can discourage resident participation.

## **6. Federally Encouraged Single-Purpose Regional Bodies**

Single-purpose regional bodies originally were created to administer some federal-aid programs around poverty, aging, health systems planning, and criminal justice planning. Their numbers dropped in the mid-1980s due to budget and program cuts and other factors (including the incorporation of services into councils of governments). New single-purpose regional bodies are primarily formed for transportation planning and funding. In these instances, the body will serve as the federally designated metropolitan planning organization that prioritizes projects and disburses funding within a region. Single-purpose regional bodies also can be vehicles for job training and economic development programs.

#### **Examples**

**The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission** is the metropolitan planning organization for the Philadelphia metropolitan region. City, county, and state representatives work together to foster regional cooperation in a nine-county, two-state area around key issues including transportation, land use, environmental protection, and economic development. The commission provides a range of services to member governments and others, including planning, analysis, data collection, and mapping. Aerial photographs, maps, and a variety of publications are available from the commission for use by the public and private sectors.

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**The California Air Resources Board** is part of the California Environmental Protection Agency, an organization reporting directly to the Governor's office. The board's mission is to reduce air pollution while considering the effects on the state's economy. Thirty-six regional air pollution control districts throughout California work with the board and local metropolitan planning organizations to enforce regional and state clean air regulations. The board, for example, has proposed a significant increase in the use of alternative fuels for automobiles in California by 2010.<sup>15</sup>

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Single-Purpose Regional Bodies**

#### Advantages

- They are relatively easy to establish.
- They can play a helpful and non-threatening planning role for the region.
- They are supported by federal funding, which provides a carrot for participation.

#### Challenges

- They usually are organized around a single issue, so they may lack a comprehensive approach to thinking about regional concerns. They also may be structured in ways that exclude parts of a region.
- While single-purpose regional bodies offer the carrot of federal funding as an incentive to participate, they lack a stick for enforcing their vision (other than withholding funds).

## **7. State Planning and Development Districts**

State planning and development districts were established during the late 1960s and 1970s as a way to bring order to the numerous federal regional programs. Initially seen as a mechanism to corral the burgeoning number of single-purpose regional bodies, most state planning and development districts are similar to councils of governments; in fact, many COGs that operate within a single state have become state-designated districts. State planning and development districts can offer an array of technical assistance and management services related to community and economic development, solid waste management, census information and population data, 911 mapping and addressing, geographic information systems, workforce development, and transportation planning.

## **Examples**

**North Delta Planning and Development District** serves Coahoma, DeSoto, Panola, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Tate, and Tunica Counties in Northwest Mississippi. The district provides a variety of services, including regional planning, local technical assistance and coordination, and review of applications for federally sponsored programs for the region. The primary purpose of the district is to promote overall economic and community development, and foster responsible community planning.

The district serves as the area's agency on aging and as lead agency for the federally designated Enterprise Community, which includes portions of three counties. The Enterprise Community designation will bring an investment of almost \$3 million in federal funds and local match funds for economic development and social services in the area over 10 years. The district also administers Medicaid waiver and long-term care alternatives, community development block grants, geographic information systems, and a revolving loan fund program that covers federal and state business-related funding aid.

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**The Coordinating and Development Corporation** serves portions of Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. Originally chartered in 1954, the corporation is a private, nonprofit, membership-supported organization. It serves the economic, community, and business development needs of 10 parishes in northwest Louisiana, eight counties in northeast Texas, and four counties in southwest Arkansas. In addition, the State of Louisiana recognizes the corporation as one of the state's eight regional planning and development districts. In this capacity, the corporation works with government agencies, businesses, civic groups, and residents to develop programs and services for economic and community development in Northwest Louisiana.

Services of the corporation's 10 divisions and seven affiliates span economic development, culture, recreation and tourism, natural resources, workforce development, international trade, and transportation. Clients include parishes/counties, municipalities, industrial/economic development groups, businesses and industries, special-purpose governmental bodies, port authorities, and the region's higher education institutions.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — State Planning and Development Districts**

#### Advantages

- They provide a regional basis for planning and programming activities of state government.
- They also can encourage regional coordination of planning and programming undertaken by local governments.

#### Challenges

- They can be difficult to implement because special authorizing legislation is required at the state level, and the process of creating a system of statewide districts can appear threatening to local governments.

## **8. Contracting**

Local governments struggling to provide services with less revenue increasingly are turning to contracting with other governments and/or with the private and nonprofit sectors. Suburban governments may contract with larger municipalities in their regions for supplemental services in expense-heavy areas such as police and fire — providing a level of coverage beyond that of a county government. Local governments also have a long history of contracting for water, electricity, gas, and sewer services with both publicly and privately owned entities.

### **Examples**

“**Contract City**” is an apt description of Camarillo, CA, because the city purchases major public services through contracts with other agencies and private companies. Camarillo contracts with the Ventura County Sheriff’s Department to provide its 46-member police force. Camarillo’s police station houses an additional 22 sheriff’s personnel who serve other parts of the county. Building and safety services are provided by a private contractor, whose five employees work at Camarillo City Hall handling inspection services for the city and checking building plans.

Other regularly contracted services in Camarillo include refuse collection and recycling, street sweeping, landscaping, and transportation-related services such as public transit, traffic signal maintenance, assistance with asphalt paving, and installation of handicap ramps. All contracted services are reviewed annually and renewed on a performance/cost basis.

Other services in Camarillo are provided by special districts funded through tax assessments on property owners tailored to the services received. Fire protection, for example, comes from the Ventura County Fire Protection District; community parks are managed by the Pleasant Valley Recreation and Park District; and library services are provided by the Ventura County Library District.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Contracting**

#### Advantages

- Contracting can provide efficiencies by enlisting professional specialists to perform services rather than government employees.

#### Challenges

- Contracting for certain public services can raise issues concerning the confidentiality of information, as well as government's obligation to serve its residents.
- Contracting without a transparent bidding process and strong conflict-of-interest rules can lead to favoritism.
- For these reasons, joint powers agreements and interlocal service contracts are good alternatives to private contracting.

## **9. Regional Purchasing Agreements**

Regional purchasing agreements are an approach that helps local governments achieve cost savings while fostering more cross-jurisdiction collaboration. These agreements can be straightforward bulk purchasing groups, or they can take on more complex challenges such as coordinating bidding and contracting for their members.

### **Examples**

The **Strategic Alliance for Volume Expenditures (SAVE)** was formed by 22 local jurisdictions in the Mesa, AZ, area — including cities and school districts — to coordinate their purchasing and contracting. Based on a state cooperative purchasing program, SAVE coordinates bidding and contracting for commonly used items such as water treatment chemicals, recycling containers, buses, bus shelters, and traffic signal equipment.

One SAVE member agency serves as the lead to develop specifications, solicit bids, and evaluate potential vendors. Then, other members help select the vendor, and the

lead agency awards the contract through its governmental approval process. Any SAVE member can purchase from the chosen vendor, according to the SAVE bylaws and intergovernmental agreement. The group has a Web site to identify contracts and facilitate the process.

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**The Miami Valley Fire/EMS Alliance** is a cooperative of 26 fire and EMS agencies in the Dayton, OH, region formed in 1991. The agencies are a diverse group of full-paid, part-time, and all-volunteer departments serving 800,000 residents. Each member has annual dues of \$0.24 per resident served. The Alliance helps its members enhance their public safety services by promoting best practices in resource use, operating efficiencies, information-sharing, and regional cooperation. It has a wide-ranging joint purchasing program that has included fire trucks, ambulances, cardiovascular monitors, ladder testing, and EMS supplies. In 2004, the State of Ohio created a bid process that has decreased the number of items the Alliance handles; however, the cooperative continues to find goods and services that can reduce members' costs. Alliance programs help local communities prepare for emergencies. The cooperative also provides advice on homeland security issues and long-range planning.

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**Northeast Ohio Sourcing Office (NEOSO)** is a new cooperative purchasing and services program started with grants from several foundations in Northeast Ohio and targeted at helping 21 municipalities. It now is open to any unit of local government, including municipalities, counties, special districts, school systems, and publicly funded higher education institutions. The area served encompasses Cuyahoga, Ashtabula, Columbiana, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull, and Wayne counties.

Launched in October 2005, NEOSO offers pooled purchasing and shared back-office services to government members seeking to save taxpayer dollars and generate

operating efficiencies. NEOSO's most popular offering to date is auto parts and services, with members saving an average of 20 percent on discounted parts. Participants in the auto parts program also receive individual and group rebates as spending crosses certain thresholds. They also have access to inventory optimization, daily delivery, unused inventory buyback, and warranty and return services.

Other NEOSO offerings include: computer maintenance, contract administration, information technology training, network expense management, and shared chief information officers. Services under development include pooled purchasing and services covering tires, vehicle maintenance, and fuel for vehicles.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Regional Purchasing Agreements**

#### Advantages

- Collaborative buying groups can achieve volume discounts with their collective buying power, and can realize savings from shared consulting or outsourcing services.
- This kind of cooperation avoids the need to draw new boundaries.
- Success at regional purchasing can lead to collaboration on more challenging governance issues.

#### Challenges

- There are many regional purchasing programs in operation around the country. However, many pick off a few “low-hanging fruits” by focusing only on cost savings at the local level. They can miss the opportunity of bringing leaders together to address regional issues in a more comprehensive and cooperative way.

## HARDER OPTIONS

The next eight options on the continuum of local government cooperation are more difficult to implement than the first nine. However, they can provide more enduring systems for facilitating collaboration among governments on important regional issues.

### 10. Local Special Districts

Local special districts are a popular option for providing single services or multiple related services to a number of jurisdictions. Special districts often remove from local government the policy control, technical specialization, and fiscal responsibility for providing services. These powers are vested instead in a board (either elected or appointed) of representatives from the member governments. Enabling legislation is needed at the state level to create a local special district, which can be funded through special assessments of property owners. Most states require that a majority or greater of those affected have to vote in favor of creating a special district before it is enacted.

#### Examples

The **Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago** was formed in 1889 to keep sewage from polluting Lake Michigan and the Chicago, Des Plaines, Calumet, and Illinois rivers. The district exercises no direct control over wastewater collection and transmission facilities maintained by cities, towns, and villages in the region. Instead, it provides the main sewer lines for collection of wastewater from local sewer systems, and treats and disposes of the sewage. The district owns and operates seven water reclamation plants (one being the largest in the world) and 23 pumping stations. It is governed by a nine-member Board of Commissioners that is directly elected. The district's taxing authority overlaps that of numerous general-purpose governments, school districts, and other governmental entities.

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The **South Suburban Parks and Recreation** is a quasi-municipal corporation and a political subdivision of the State of Colorado, formed in 1959 pursuant to state law, for the purpose of providing recreational facilities and services for residents of the southern suburbs of metropolitan Denver. In 1959, approximately 45,000 people lived in the district served by the agency; in 2005, the population totaled nearly 140,000 residents. The 57-square-mile district includes six municipalities, and parts



of three counties. The district's facilities range from BMX tracks and child care to golf courses, recreation centers, swimming pools, and restaurants. District residents elect a five-member policy-making Board to at-large positions for four-year terms, on a non-partisan basis. In 1979 a foundation was created to support the district and further the quality of life of the region.

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**The North Coast County Water District** was created in 1944 when residents of Pacifica, CA, wanted to supplement their water sources. The district operates as an agency of the state, formed to provide local service in accordance with the California State Water Code. It is responsible directly to customers of the district and is not an arm of local, state, or federal government. Over the years, voters in Pacifica have rejected a suggestion by their mayor to merge the water district with the city, which shares the same boundaries and service population.

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## **Advantages and Challenges — Local Special Districts**

### Advantages

- Local special districts offer a very effective solution when unique services are needed in certain parts of a region. For example, downtown leaders in both large and small cities have embraced business improvement districts to help them compete against the centrally managed environments of suburban shopping centers.
- Local special districts generally serve to complement, rather than replace, local government services. Their boundaries usually can be drawn to encompass an area where a different level of service is needed or desired.

### Challenges

- Although local special districts can provide local governments with a way out of providing services that they historically would have provided, the price can be a sacrifice of some of the accountability that comes with services provided by local governments.

- Local special districts may provide services to residents of multiple jurisdictions, but their governance structures generally do not promote regional collaboration.

## 11. Transfer of Functions

Transfer of functions is a method used to permanently change who provides specific services, with local governments releasing authority to other jurisdictions. For example, cities may shift services first to counties, then to a council of governments, and then to special districts. Transferring government functions in this way increased in popularity in the 1970s and 1980s.

Transfers typically are enabled by state statutes and created through intergovernmental negotiation. For instance, New York state law permits transfers only between governments that are independently empowered to provide the function, a provision that thwarts transfer of certain redevelopment functions because counties lack such authority. The impetus for transfers is typically fiscal, although federal or state mandates, changes in settlement patterns, or political expediency also may be motivating factors.

### Example

**Erie County, NY**, has increased its service provision through transfer of functions since the 1930s. In an ongoing process of regionalization, services transferred from municipal to county governments have included social welfare, centralized police functions, cultural facilities funding, parks, the Buffalo airport, and libraries. The motivations for the transfers have included fiscal stress, the need to provide higher-quality services, and a desire for more regional cooperation.

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### Advantages and Challenges — Transfer of Functions

#### Advantage

- Transferring functions allows local governments to shift services that they cannot provide efficiently or well.

#### Challenge

- Politically, transfer of functions can be a difficult approach to implement because not many states authorize such shifts, and in many cases voter approval is required.

## 12. Annexation

Annexation has long been used to expand jurisdictions and service boundaries in the United States. In the nineteenth century, large-scale annexations were common in the large industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. In recent years, large-scale annexations have mostly taken place in the West and Southwest, primarily because of the large amounts of unincorporated land on the periphery of cities in those regions. The incorporation of suburban municipalities in the East has made annexation virtually irrelevant there today.

In writing about annexation, David Rusk, a former mayor of Albuquerque, coined a theory of “elastic cities” to refer to cities that keep expanding their boundaries via annexation to encompass virtually the entire built environment within their metropolitan regions. Rusk says annexation can enable the central city to prevent the loss of tax base that has occurred with middle-class flight from older central cities, especially in the Northeast. As those residents fled to the suburbs, central cities were left with more low-income residents needing more services even as they had less capacity to provide them.<sup>16</sup>

### Examples

The **Berryville Area Plan** is the result of a cooperative effort between the Town of Berryville and surrounding Clarke County in Virginia. To ensure sound land use planning beyond the town’s corporate limits and reduce the amount of sprawl, the Berryville Area Plan Committee was formed in 1987, with representatives from the town and the county. The committee started with consensus-building to decide on the zoning of county land abutting the town. Committee members researched and analyzed the area’s physical, demographic, and historic qualities, then examined these characteristics in light of the community’s values. The committee projected future service and infrastructure needs, and finally recommended land use and zoning designations that enabled Berryville to gradually annex county land parcels. The Berryville Area Development Authority, another regional body, administers the plan and reviews all land development requests for areas under the plan.

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**Sugar Land, TX**, has grown rapidly through a series of annexations over the last 15 years, increasing its population by more than 150 percent. As part of an area labeled the fastest-growing city in Texas (the Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown metropolitan area), Sugar Land has added a number of master-planned communities to its

boundaries and has plans for more annexations. It is the largest city in Ft. Bend County, with a 2005 population of almost 79,000. Sugar Land officials credit their expansion successes to an extensive process of community input, good planning, and the immediate provision of full city services into annexed areas.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Annexation**

#### Advantages

- When annexation allows a central city to have authority over most of its geographic area, the city can act as a regional governance institution with the benefits that centralized administration and planning provide.
- Annexation allows for the orderly growth and development of formerly unincorporated areas.

#### Challenges

- The nature of each state's authorizing laws limits the use of annexation, and there also is a reluctance to use the process as a long-range solution rather than an incremental one.
- In addition, many municipalities will choose to annex selectively, resulting in the "hole in the doughnut" problem of poorer communities becoming isolated due to annexation around them.

## **13. Special Districts and Authorities**

Special districts and authorities are designed to address single issues such as mass transit, pollution control, hospitals, airports, or water supply on an area-wide basis, typically with a major urban area involved. They are the most popular form of regional government in metropolitan areas.

Districts' service areas can range from a single city block to vast areas that cross city and county lines. For example, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California serves 17 million people in a six-county area of 5,200 square miles, while County Service Area #2 in Los Angeles County serves only 25 acres.

Special districts enjoy many of the same governing powers as cities and counties. They can enter into contracts, employ workers, and acquire real property through purchase or eminent domain. They also can issue debt, impose taxes, levy

assessments, and charge fees for their services. Special districts, like other governments, can sue and be sued.

### **Example**

The **Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority** in New York City is one of the first and most famous public authorities ever created. The brainchild of Robert Moses, Triborough built most of New York City's modern infrastructure, including numerous bridges and tunnels connecting Manhattan to the city's outer boroughs. Its revenue stream of toll collections allowed Triborough to plan more and more ambitious projects, even as the city and state faced budget shortfalls that precluded government funding.

But the Triborough example also offers a cautionary tale about what happens when regional authorities are allowed to exercise their power unchecked, and become more accountable to bondholders than residents. Public opinion became irrelevant in Triborough's plans, which ultimately led to Moses' political downfall and the reforming of the authority by the State of New York. In 1968, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority was made part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority of New York City.

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## **Advantages and Challenges — Special Districts and Authorities**

### Advantages

- When they have the standing to issue bonds, special districts and authorities can become very powerful and effective regional institutions because they can raise capital to finance projects and improvements.
- They also can generate their own revenue streams by fees for services they provide.

### Challenges

- Because of the political challenges of their creation, special districts usually cover smaller areas rather than large sub-state regional areas.
- Special districts and authorities can face conflicts between their need to be accountable to their bond purchasers as well as to the residents and local governments they serve.

## **14. Metro Multipurpose Districts**

These districts differ from regional special districts and authorities because they involve establishing a regional authority to perform many diverse functions, as

opposed to one set of related ones. Under a multipurpose district, an elected (direct or indirect) regional agency provides or coordinates regional service delivery, while local governments and often metropolitan single-purpose districts continue to perform their assigned functions.

“One attraction of the multipurpose district model,” says a 1996 study by the State University of New York, “is that as residents become more comfortable with regional governance, new functions can be added to the menu of district services. In the meantime, local governments — including area-wide special districts — retain their autonomy, which has political benefits at the time of formation of a multipurpose district.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Examples**

**The Portland, OR, Metropolitan Service District (Metro)** was formed by the state legislature in 1979 and covers three counties, 24 municipalities, and several special-purpose agencies. Portland’s Metro came together initially to provide regional coordination of land-use planning. In the ensuing 25 years, its portfolio has expanded to include operation of the regional zoo and convention center, open space and parks, economic development, solid waste, housing, transportation, recycling, and other environmental services. Metro has 1,900 employees and an annual budget of more than \$200 million, with governance by a president (elected region-wide) and seven councilors (elected by district).

Before 1992, Metro’s structure and responsibilities were set by the Oregon legislature. In 1992, the area electorate gave Metro a vote of confidence when it approved a home rule charter for the district. The charter directs Metro to prepare a 50-year mission and vision plan for the region’s land use, transportation, natural resources, and water management. Additionally, the charter recognizes that regional government and regional issues will change and evolve over time. To this end, the charter allows Metro to work with local jurisdictions as needed to develop solutions to regional problems.

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From 1958 until 1993, the **Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle (Metro)** was an example of a metro multipurpose district. Seattle’s Metro originally was created to establish a regional water quality system. Voters broadened its mission to include a regional bus system in 1972, which expanded Metro’s service area to include all of King County.

However, a resident's lawsuit led to a 1990 federal court ruling that Metro's governing council failed to meet the constitutional standard of "one person, one vote." (Under the agency's federated structure, some Metro Council members effectively represented many more people than others.) This triggered a long and fractious round of negotiations among Seattle, the suburbs, and county officials. In 1992, voters in Seattle and King County approved the county taking over the services provided by Metro.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Metro Multipurpose Districts**

#### Advantage

- Metro multipurpose districts can offer a level of service planning and coordination not possible with single-purpose districts. For instance, Portland's Metropolitan Service District coordinates land-use planning *and* transportation. Clearly, there are advantages to a coordinated regional approach to these two functions.

#### Challenge

- Political and statutory challenges make this a very difficult form of regional governance and service to implement.

## **15. Reformed Urban County**

County governments have been changing over the last two decades, increasingly providing more services and addressing "urban" issues as metropolitan areas have expanded. Yet the governing structure in many counties dates back a century or more to when a commission or committee form of administration was sufficient to deal with sparsely populated rural areas. Counties seeking stronger executive leadership and broader representation in their legislative bodies have sometimes opted for the reformed urban county approach. Under this approach, the county government is restructured with an executive and legislative branch, but municipalities and other local governments within the county are not changed.

### **Examples**

**Summit County, OH**, voters in 1979 adopted a new urban county charter, allowed by the Ohio Revised Code. It replaced the county's three-member commission, which had executive and legislative functions, with an elected county executive and an 11-member county council. More than 30 local governments within the county

were not affected. Summit County is the only one of 88 counties in Ohio that has adopted this change. In 1991, county voters went further and agreed to eliminate the office of elected County Recorder. Summit County's current population is about 547,000 people, in a northeast Ohio area including Akron that covers 420 square miles.

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**Allegheny County, PA**, developed its urban county home rule charter through special state legislation in 1997. The county sought and was granted a waiver to the 1972 home rule charter statute, to shorten the time-consuming process for restructuring county government required by the law. Before the change, three county commissioners in Allegheny County handled everything from elections and prisons to airports and city planning, acting in both executive and legislative capacities.

The new charter was approved by voters in 1998, providing for a Chief Executive Officer, 15-member council, and appointed county manager. The new Allegheny County officials were sworn into office in January 2000. They preside over a county of 745 square miles, including the City of Pittsburgh and 129 other municipalities with a total population of more than 1.2 million.

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## **Advantages and Challenges — Reformed Urban County**

### Advantage

- Many states have enacted permissive home rule statutes making it theoretically possible to create new urban counties.

### Challenge

- The reformed urban county approach can be difficult to implement because elected officials often are reluctant to allow their positions to be abolished through such changes. It also offers only a partial solution to many service delivery issues that cross broader territory.



## 16. Regional Asset Districts

Regional asset districts are special tax districts used to fund regional resources, such as arts and cultural institutions, entertainment venues like sports stadiums, and even parks and libraries. Assets in a particular local jurisdiction often draw visitors from across (and in many cases beyond) the region. These assets often serve economic development goals while contributing to the region's sense of identity.

Two primary factors have driven the development of existing regional asset districts:

- (1) *The desire to use a region rather than a single community as a more equitable basis for imposing a culture tax.* A driving force behind the creation of the Metropolitan Zoological Park and Museum District in St. Louis, MO, was the realization that many of the cultural institutions' audiences and members lived in the counties surrounding St. Louis, although the attractions themselves were located in the city.
- (2) *Drastic federal reductions in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts that began in the mid-1990s and caused reductions in state funding for the arts.* Regional asset districts arose as an alternative funding mechanism, such as in Salt Lake County, UT, where a coalition of state and regional arts and civic leaders supported such a district.

Only a handful of regional asset districts have been created to date. They include: Allegheny Regional Asset District, Allegheny County, PA; Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, metropolitan Denver, CO; The Zoo, Arts and Park Program, Salt Lake County, UT; Bi-State Cultural District, Kansas City, MO; and the Metropolitan Zoological Park and Museum District, St. Louis, MO.

### Examples

**The Allegheny Regional Asset District** in Pennsylvania distributes sales tax revenue from Allegheny County (which includes Pittsburgh) to fund parks, libraries, sports and civic venues, and cultural arts groups throughout the region. Created by the Allegheny County Commissioners in 1994, under authorizing legislation passed by the State of Pennsylvania the year before, the district is a special-purpose, area-wide unit of local government. Unlike other local governments, the district has no taxing powers. The county is authorized by state legislation to levy a 1-percent sales tax identical to the state sales tax to fund the district's activities.

Twenty-five per cent of the district tax goes directly to the county government and 25 percent goes to local governments based on a formula in the authorizing legislation. These governments can use the funds for governmental purposes provided the municipalities share 25 percent of any increase in revenue with area councils of governments or other regional programs.

The other 50 percent of the tax goes to the district and is distributed to civic, cultural, and recreational entities; libraries; parks; and sports facilities. The distribution is made by a seven-member board of directors appointed by the County Chief

Executive, Mayor of Pittsburgh, and one person elected by the six appointees. The board also appoints a 27-member advisory board to provide public input and comment on policies and procedures.

In the last decade, Pittsburgh's regional attractions — from sports arenas to the all-volunteer Edgewood Symphony Orchestra — have received \$670 million in operating and capital grants from the regional asset district.

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Denver's **Scientific and Cultural Facilities District**, covering seven counties in the metropolitan area, was created by voters in 1988 to provide a consistent source of unrestricted funding to scientific and cultural organizations. The voters' approval ratified legislation passed by the Colorado State Legislature in 1987 that outlined eligibility definitions and the district funding formula. Since then, the district has provided more than \$480 million to more than 300 organizations in the arts and natural and cultural history via a 0.1-percent retail sales and use tax (one penny on every \$10). Distributions are made by a 10-member board appointed by city and county elected officials and the Colorado Governor, following guidelines in the authorizing legislation. Denver-area voters renewed approval of the district tax in 1994 and again in 2004.

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## **Advantages and Challenges — Regional Asset Districts**

### Advantages

- Regional asset districts help spread the costs beyond the municipality or private entity operating a place-based asset that benefits the entire region.
- There is increasing research showing that regions that fund arts and culture may have a competitive advantage in business attraction, retention, and workforce education.

## Challenge

- Regional asset districts can face opposition based on a number of factors, including:
  - The ingrained habit of “free-riding” as communities become accustomed to using resources in one part of their region without having to support them;
  - The belief that funding culture is not a valid government function; and
  - Resistance to the use of a regressive tax such as a sales tax (a frequent form of regional asset district taxation) to fund arts and culture.

## **17. Merger/Consolidation**

This option involves a variety of approaches that result in the creation of a new region-wide government, reallocation of government powers and functions, and changes in the political and institutional *status quo*. These approaches are variations of the “structural regionalism” described by David Y. Miller in his 2002 book, “The Regional Governing of Metropolitan America.”<sup>18</sup> Miller, in addressing the organization and governance of U.S. metropolitan areas, concludes that more centralized government systems are better than decentralized ones in dealing with regional governance issues such as fiscal disparities between communities, social equity, and economic development.

Merger/consolidation can happen in a number of ways, as described below.

### **Incremental approach focused on service delivery**

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC, experience has been described as “functional consolidation” of city-county services, as contrasted with “political” consolidation. In essence, for the past 60 years, increasing amounts of the major services of the city and county have been provided across the county either by Charlotte or by Mecklenburg County.

In an incremental process, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has instituted a set of interlocal service agreements in service areas that span parks and recreation to public transit. In all, more than 20 major public services have been consolidated.

This incremental process of service consolidation followed several failed attempts at political consolidation, most notably in 1971, 1990, and 1995. According to an article by Timothy Mead in *State and Local Government Review*, these “failures” may have stemmed from the very success of the functional consolidation that had evolved over time. “Charlotte was not in crisis, which would serve as a catalyst for consolidation...Efficiency measures had been made possible by annexations and functional consolidations.”<sup>19</sup> Mead concludes, however, that as regional pressures

become more intense in relation to transportation, the environment, and population growth, the need for more regional institutions of some sort will increase.

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### **One-tier consolidation**

This approach to merger/consolidation results in a single new government responsible for all service delivery in the area. It has been used in the United States since 1984, but is extremely rare. Of the 33 city-county government consolidations recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau, most have been partial, leaving out small suburban municipalities, school districts, and special districts.

Well-known consolidations in larger metropolitan areas occurred between 1960 and 1970 in **Nashville-Davidson County, TN; Jacksonville-Duval County, FL; and Indianapolis-Marion County, IN**. There were two smaller city-county consolidations in the 1990s in **Athens-Clarke County, GA; and Kansas City-Wyandotte County, KS**.

- Voters in Athens and Clarke County approved a unified government in 1990 after three failed referenda. The new government provides services to more than 100,000 people over 125 square miles, with a directly elected mayor and 10 elected commissioners.
- The unified government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City covers an area of 156 square miles with almost 160,000 people. It was created by popular vote in 1997, consolidating Kansas City and the county, but leaving some cities and towns as separate jurisdictions. The mayor/CEO presides over and serves as a member of a 10-member elected commission.

The vote in 2000 for city-county merger in **Louisville-Jefferson County, KY**, is the first larger metropolitan consolidation in three decades, and it has kindled a great deal of interest in how local government cooperation, including consolidation, can help communities with challenges they face today. Louisville and Jefferson County went to voters four times over four decades trying to get approval of a merger of city and county governments. They finally succeeded in 2000, and the new Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government was launched in January 2003.

The merger brought together the executive and legislative branches of Jefferson County and its largest city- Louisville, covering a jurisdiction of 386 square miles. Incorporated suburban cities in the county stayed intact with their pre-merger boundaries, services, and elected officials. There were 94 suburban cities at the time of merger, home to one-third of the county population.

All residents of the new Louisville Metro, almost 700,000, vote for a single mayor. A 26-member Metro Council is elected by districts, which include residents of the former City of Louisville (now an “urban services district”), the incorporated suburban cities, and previously unincor-

## City-County Consolidations in U.S. History

Based on the classifications by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 33 cities that also function as county governments, in three different forms:

### Areas with governments legally designated as city-counties and operating primarily as cities

#### Alaska

City and Borough of Anchorage  
 City and Borough of Juneau  
 City and Borough of Sitka  
 City and Borough of Yakutat

#### California

City and County of San Francisco

#### Colorado

City and County of Broomfield  
 City and County of Denver

#### Hawaii

City and County of Honolulu

#### Kansas

Unified Government of Wyandotte County and City of Kansas City

#### Montana

Anaconda-Deer Lodge County  
 Butte-Silver Bow County

### Areas designated as metropolitan governments and operating primarily as cities

#### Tennessee

Hartsville and Trousdale County  
 Lynchburg and Moore County  
 Nashville and Davidson County

### Areas having certain types of county offices, but as part of another government (city, township, special district, state)

#### Florida

County of Duval (City of Jacksonville)

#### Georgia

County of Clarke (City of Athens)  
 County of Muscogee (City of Columbus)  
 County of Richmond (City of Augusta)

#### Hawaii

County of Kalawao (State of Hawaii)

#### Indiana

County of Marion (City of Indianapolis)

#### Kentucky

Lexington-Fayette Urban County  
 Louisville-Jefferson County

#### Louisiana

Parish of East Baton Rouge (City of Baton Rouge)  
 Parish of Lafayette (City of Lafayette)  
 Parish of Orleans (City of New Orleans)  
 Terrebonne Parish Consolidated Government

#### Massachusetts

County of Nantucket (Town of Nantucket)  
 County of Suffolk (City of Boston)

#### New York

Countries of Bronx, Kings, New York, Queens, and Richmond (part of City of NY)

#### Pennsylvania

County of Philadelphia (City of Philadelphia)

porated areas of the county. The new Metro government is classified as a city and a county under the unique state statute that was created for the new entity.

Left unchanged were a three-tier level of property taxes that varies according to the level of services received in the urban services district, suburban cities, and unincorporated areas.

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### **Two-tier consolidation**

This option results in regions with two levels of government, one to provide services at the local level and another to address regional issues. Local governments retain their autonomy and identity, and the regional tier provides regional functions.

**Miami-Dade County** was formed when Florida voters approved an amendment to the state constitution in 1956, allowing for a home rule charter, and voters in Miami-Dade County adopted a charter in 1957. Miami-Dade is comprised of a large unincorporated area and 30 incorporated areas or municipalities. Each municipality has its own government and provides such city-type services as police and zoning protection. Miami-Dade County is governed by a mayor who is elected countywide and a board of commissioners elected from 13 districts. The mayor appoints a county manager, subject to approval of the commissioners. Additionally, there are mayors elected individually in Miami and the other 34 municipalities.

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### **Three-tier consolidation**

This approach has been used only twice in the United States, and includes multiple counties. Its rarity is due in part to the fact that it is hard to enact, requiring state legislation and often a constitutional amendment.

One region that has adopted a three-tier consolidation approach is **Portland, OR**, with its Metropolitan Service District (Metro) system (see page 30). The other is the Twin Cities area in Minnesota. **The Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities** was established in 1967 by the state legislature. It is governed by a 17-member board of metropolitan-area residents appointed by the governor, who also appoints the chair. The Metropolitan Council has taxing and policy-making authority over certain area-wide special districts and local planning processes.

The Metropolitan Council provides a wide range of services to the region, including:

- Operating the region's largest bus system;
- Collecting and treating wastewater;
- Maintaining an urban service area to guide orderly regional growth;
- Providing affordable housing;
- Planning, acquiring, and funding a regional system of parks and trails; and
- Providing a framework for decision-making and provision of regional services, including aviation, transportation, parks and open space, water quality, and water management.

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### **Advantages and Challenges — Merger/Consolidation**

#### **Advantages**

- Clearly, there is potential for great efficiency and effectiveness in having fewer governments (or just one) delivering and accountable for services. Consolidated governments cite an array of benefits stemming from unified leadership and a more focused community agenda. These benefits include

improved success in economic development and increased collaboration and partnerships throughout the region.

- Two-tier consolidation is attractive because it keeps some services localized, as needed, and provides regional service delivery for services that affect the entire region.
- It is difficult to calculate actual savings and improvements in services under consolidations because there are so many variables. However, independent analysis of both Louisville-Jefferson County, KY, and Athens-Clarke County, GA, document savings and improvements. Both communities have increased their credit ratings after consolidation. Louisville decreased its government workforce by 10 percent overall, and Athens saw its general government expenditures decline by 10 percent in the five years after merger. Louisville also touts a savings in executive branch salaries and from efficiencies such as consolidating banking services, and has extended countywide several new services previously offered only in the City of Louisville, without tax increases.

### Challenges

- The challenges of merger/consolidation are primarily political. Getting the necessary authorization from the state, overcoming resistance from local elected officials and addressing concerns about equal representation in the new government all can pose problems. In Indianapolis and Louisville, for example, African-American leaders felt that merger would dilute the political and economic interests of minority residents.
- As a result of these difficulties, many merger referenda have failed at the polls — including in communities that eventually approved consolidation — and many more initiatives have never even made it to the ballot.
- Some communities have concluded that the time and energy spent dealing with the political challenges of merger/consolidation could better be used implementing less intensive and more easily achievable forms of local government cooperation and collaboration.



# A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Before undertaking a regional collaboration approach, some local officials may ask themselves, “How do I begin a dialogue about regional cooperation with my neighboring jurisdictions, citizens, and others?” This is precisely the right question because regional strategies require stakeholder engagement and support. This section of the guide offers local elected leaders a brief, step-by-step approach showing how to involve all stakeholders, from citizens to business partners to religious leaders, to help make regional collaborations more successful and sustainable.

## Step 1 — Beginning the Discussion: Stakeholder Groups

The basic premise behind public engagement and collaboration is this: If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the community.

Increasingly, leaders from business, government, nonprofit organizations, and foundations are working collaboratively on challenges facing metropolitan and rural regions across the nation. But this cannot just be the work of community “elites.” Diverse stakeholders need to be involved at key points in the process. In fact, many attempts at new approaches to service delivery have failed largely because they did not include enough stakeholder involvement in the process, particularly during early discussions.

Representatives of key stakeholder groups that can be consulted include:

- Business
- Government
- Nonprofit/civic groups
- Neighborhood leaders
- Educators
- Religious Leaders
- Media

One method to help determine what groups are stakeholders is to assess if a group has any one of the following: legal standing, political clout, power to prevent implementation, or moral claims.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes, groups may not recognize that they

**The National League of Cities’ *Strengthening Democratic Local Governance* initiative seeks to facilitate leadership by local elected officials on issues of democratic governance and civic engagement. For additional information on how to mobilize citizens, overcome conflicts, and solve critical public problems, look for the most recent report of the initiative, *Building Democratic Governance: Tools and Structures for Engaging Citizens*, on NLC’s Web site at [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).**

have a stake in the issues at hand. Others may need organizational support to ensure that they can play an active part in the discussion.

Once identified, stakeholder groups should be represented in the discussion by people of their own choosing, people whom they trust. Their task is to speak *with* their constituents, not *for* them. Also, it is usually necessary to engage a neutral facilitator to keep the process moving smoothly and to ensure that all participants are playing a productive and valued role.

## **Step 2 — Defining the Problem/Identifying Assets**

Consensus on how to deal with a problem is something that has to be built phase by phase. If you can't agree on the problem, you won't agree on the solution.<sup>21</sup> The following questions are intended to help reach consensus on what problem(s) the community is facing, whether there truly is a problem, and what assets in the community can serve as the building blocks for future success.

1. What is the problem, really?
  - Problems that have been identified by communities often include:
    - Population growth/population shift/population decline
    - Power/authority struggle (within local government)
    - Taxes (typically taxes perceived as unfair among different communities)
    - Inefficient provision of services
    - Fiscal inequities/fiscal inefficiency in local government
    - Environmental issues
    - Flight of tax base to suburban/exurban areas
    - Racial tension/mistrust
    - Corruption in local government
    - Economic decline/need to stimulate job growth
  - Who has identified it as a problem? Is the problem a perception of civic leaders only, or is it pervasive throughout the community? (Often, problems of this magnitude initially are recognized only by business or civic leaders.)
  - Is there consensus among stakeholders that this is a problem? Is there consensus on the scope of the problem? Has it reached crisis level?
  - What do the stakeholders believe are the existing roles/responsibilities of local government and other community groups in addressing the problem?
  - What actions to address the problem have already been tried? What were the outcomes in the view of the stakeholders?
  - How does the perceived problem relate to other issues in the region?
2. How does the problem affect the community's or the region's goals and objectives?

- Is there consensus among stakeholders about the region’s goals, objectives, and vision? If not, developing a consensus set of goals and objectives is a necessary step.
  - Does the problem prohibit the community or region from realizing its goals and objectives? How?
  - Are current collaborative/cooperative agreements and regional governance structures within the region unable to address this problem? If not, why?
3. What are the assets and the successes that will help the community solve the problem?
- What is going *right* in the community and/or region, and how can its successes and assets become the basis for solutions?
  - What qualities do the community and region have that make people choose to stay there or move there from other places? What do people like about living there?
  - What companies have grown and thrived in the region? Why have they succeeded?
  - What institutions have contributed to the region’s quality of life and character? How have they sustained success over time?
  - What assets are endowed by the region’s natural environment? How has the region sought to preserve these?
  - What provides the region with a distinct sense of identity and place?
  - How do visitors view the region? Are there attributes they like that the region should do more to promote?

**“Seek agreement on a problem that requires cooperative solutions, work up options that can be talked about as win-win propositions, and then implement solutions using language that is as neutral as possible.”**

A note about language: Every community has terms that are flashpoints among key stakeholders in any discussion of local government change.

“Revenue-sharing,” for example, can be seen by suburban communities as a code for raising their taxes to support the inner city. In Louisville, merger opponents in 1982 and 1983 successfully urged voters to “Vote No on Metro,” playing on people’s concerns about metropolitan government. Ultimately, the winning merger campaign was titled the “Unity” campaign, not the “Metro Government” campaign.

The point is, don’t lead with language and ideas that polarize people up front. Instead, seek agreement on a problem that requires cooperative solutions, work up options that can be talked about as win-win propositions, and then implement solutions using language that is as neutral as possible. Many of the changes may actually result in sharing revenue, or moving toward “metro” government, but the real focus should be on identifying and agreeing on the big challenges facing the community/region, and whether changes in the way local governments operate can have a positive effect.

### **Step 3 — Continuing the Discussion: Surveying the Public**

In addition to asking questions about the problems facing local communities and the region, as well as the assets they bring to shaping solutions, it is important to survey the public in order to gauge their reactions to various efforts to change local government relationships. This means asking open-ended questions such as:

- Do residents think the community is a good place to live?
- What are their top concerns?
- How do residents rate various public services?
- How much do residents trust their local elected officials?

Town hall meetings, newspaper inserts, door-to-door surveys, and/or Web sites are good ways to gather feedback from residents. These can also serve as an opportunity to inform and educate residents about the problems identified by the groups listed in Step 1.

The survey should be performed by or for stakeholder representatives and used to test their assumptions about their constituencies' points of view, as well as to gauge differing opinions within the community.

### **Step 4 — Finding the Right Solution**

Once a problem (or set of problems) is identified, the next step is to determine the most appropriate solution. Answers to the following questions can provide a framework for this analysis:

- What are the various options for addressing the problem?
- What are the costs and benefits of each option?
- Who will perceive they will “lose” if a particular option is implemented? How can these concerns be addressed?
- What is the optimal solution for a particular situation?

If inefficient/ineffective public services are identified as a problem, it is important to determine which specific services need improving. Different solutions may apply depending on the service in question. Examples of public services that may need improvement include:

- Streets and roads
- Public safety and police
- Parks and recreation
- Fire protection
- Emergency medical
- Garbage collection/recycling
- Building codes
- Property and building assessments

The next task is exploring various service delivery options available to resolve the problems/challenges. Use the options listed in this guide as a way to survey the various approaches used by other communities.

## Step 5 — Winning the “Campaign”

Efforts to make changes in service delivery systems or structural changes to government need to be thought of as civic campaigns. It is easy to become focused on the details of making the change and to forget to help the public understand the importance of the proposed change to the long-term quality of life in the community

**“It is easy to become focused on the details of making the change and to forget to help the public understand the importance of the proposed change to the long-term quality of life in the community and the region.”**

and the region. This is particularly true if a public vote is needed to authorize the changes. However, even if the vote is just among local and/or state elected officials, it is critical to have public support for the change.

The history of community efforts to change service delivery and structure shows that success is more likely when the proposed changes are related to improving economic development and quality of life. Making efficiency or equity arguments on behalf of campaigns for change — especially structure change — is not necessarily a winning strategy, largely because it is difficult to “prove” that the changes will directly lead to cost savings, greater efficiency, or more equity.

The first four steps described above set the stage for success. Residents must be convinced:

- That there is a problem;
- That the proposed solution will address the problem; and
- That the solution will not cost more than the current state of affairs — or if there is a cost, it will be offset by the improvements communities will see.

The “Unity” campaign launched by civic and government leaders in Louisville and Jefferson County in 2000 to secure voter approval of city-county consolidation is a model that has attracted interest from dozens of other communities considering structural change. The campaign relied on these key elements for success:

- A simple, easily understood consolidation proposal;
- Focused research to identify likely supporters and opponents;
- Arguments for approving the change that resonated with voter concerns;
- Trusted spokespeople to deliver the campaign message; and
- Sophisticated techniques to communicate the message, including direct mail, phone banks, and regular polling.

## **Step 6 — Implementation**

Once the change has been successfully adopted, it is extremely important to pay attention to the transition period, because going from the “old way” to the “new way” often takes longer than expected and can be a very complicated process.

During the transition period, agreements must be in place with all of the municipalities and local governments affected by the change. Communication with the public during the transition is critical; local leaders need to provide regular information about the changes that are occurring, the timeline, and how changes will affect residents’ daily lives.

Once the change has been implemented, it’s important over the longer term to thoroughly document and communicate the results, including cost savings, improved services, and new opportunities, to demonstrate to the public the ongoing value of the changes. This also helps set the stage for more far-reaching changes that may be sought in the future.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Several resources offer useful information about lessons learned from communities that have attempted various forms of local government collaboration.

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*From “A Brief Primer on Regional Collaboration,” developed in 2005 by the State of Michigan’s Centers for Regional Excellence. Findings are based on the experience of local governments in the state.<sup>22</sup>*

### **Build on existing relationships.**

While there was often a crisis or incident of some sort that may have initiated the conversations, many regional contacts became more formal after years of informal discussions about regional issues and shared problems. Remember, you only need two communities to get started. You can always build from there.

### **Start small.**

After putting a number of potential collaborative projects on the table, narrow them down to the most immediately achievable. It is wise to start with the idea of sharing services rather than immediately with consolidation, and to start by sharing services that will readily accomplish cost-saving benefits. Collaboration around building/improving infrastructure is likely to show greater financial benefits in the short term than cooperation in human services delivery, for example — though both areas may need improvement. Most communities said it took them between nine months and two years to form a collaborative group that productively addressed regional issues.

### **Be as inclusive as possible.**

Most Michigan communities that explored local government collaboration have used a broad coalition, including but not limited to area chambers of commerce, large employers, local media, nonprofits, the foundation community, public safety representatives, the faith community, local schools and colleges, representatives of ethnic groups, and community and constituency groups.

Coalition members can provide instant validation for your efforts. In many areas, the business community has been the driving force. Businesses are regional no matter where their physical location, so their interests are directly served by collaborative efforts. In a number of areas, nonpolitical entities have taken the first step.

Leadership reflecting business, civic groups, and government is best. Work to keep everything nonpartisan. If race is an issue in your area, confront it immediately and head-on. If your initial organizing group is truly broad enough, your minority communities will be represented.

**Formalize relationships.**

A legal entity may not be necessary for initial explorations, but almost all of the Michigan communities formed some kind of inter-local contract. Formalizing agreements can help provide validity. A legal entity or inter-local contract also has the benefit of removing daily politics from the program, not threatening individual turf, and preventing ad hoc collaboratives from forming. Remember that you have to cede power to get power. Many local governments want to be assured at the very beginning that annexation, dissolution, or any other kind of land or tax grab is off the table. Having third-party facilitators might be very helpful, especially in the beginning.

**Keep reaching out to the public.**

Hold special public meetings, invite people to attend visioning sessions, use community email lists and newsletters, and design a good evaluation process to gauge residents' participation. Develop a good relationship with the media from the start and enlist them as partners in the process.

**Look for funding sources.**

Foundation dollars may be available to help the effort get started. This is especially true if you have generated your own start-up funds first. Create strong financial data to indicate potential financial payoffs. Determine who or what the fiduciary agent is for your collaborative.

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*From the "Intergovernmental Cooperation Handbook," updated in early 2006 by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. The book gives general insights as well as advice based on Pennsylvania statutes.<sup>23</sup>*

**Start off on the Right Foot.**

- Be inclusive. Invariably, these efforts start with a small group, but try to move as quickly as possible to share the *concept* with others, not just the finished plan.
- Involve elected officials. Many times the idea for an intergovernmental cooperation initiative does not come from an elected official, but make sure they are pulled in as early as possible to get their insights on both the benefits and potential political challenges.
- Involve municipal staff. These efforts immediately can be perceived as "getting rid of jobs." Engaging municipal staff who may be affected early gives them the opportunity to help shape the effort and reduces the chances of false perceptions.



- Start with an easy project. Don't choose the project with the potential for the greatest impact; look for the project that appears most doable. After achieving success and building new working relationships, you can tackle the more far-reaching issues.
- Communicate effectively. There are multiple audiences affected by intergovernmental cooperation efforts: local elected officials, local government employees, residents, and business and civic leaders. Success will depend on support from all of them. Communication with these groups must move beyond memos and internal reports to personal contact, Web sites, traditional media, speakers' bureaus, and other more public formats.

### **Maintain a Cooperative Spirit.**

- Be proactive. Cooperation doesn't come to communities that do nothing. When potential intergovernmental cooperation projects are identified, aggressively pursue opportunities and work actively to develop a successful effort.
- Be flexible. There are many different ways to organize intergovernmental cooperation programs.
- Be patient. These programs will not have dramatic, immediate results. Develop realistic expectations and ongoing ways to communicate them.
- Think regionally. When new or expanded services are needed, don't immediately look to staff changes or contracts with private-sector providers as the solution. Think about how the challenge could be dealt with if you worked with other jurisdictions that are likely facing the same issue.
- Brief newly elected officials. Political campaigns generally do not involve issues of regional cooperation. Therefore, it is critical to help newly elected officials understand why these approaches are being used. In particular, show them how intergovernmental cooperation can help them achieve their goals.

### **Proceed With Care.**

- Study options thoroughly. Intergovernmental approaches are complicated and often require different types of analysis to properly evaluate the options.
- Select realistic programs. Do not rely on theoretical analysis. Run simulations of how the proposed program would work, including variables and potential pitfalls.
- Pay attention to the little things. Nowhere is the old adage that "the devil is in the details" as true as in intergovernmental cooperation. Particularly when

looking at pitfalls, determine where misunderstandings could occur and work through them.

- Watch out for the “ease of informality.” If you have created a spirit of cooperation, do not fall into the trap of moving forward without agreements clearly written down and having the agreement of all parties.

### **Allocate Costs Fairly.**

- Cooperation is free. Running programs is not. Focus on cost savings and service improvements. Make sure the program is a win-win for all participants. Some participants may achieve greater cost savings, others may get better services. It is critical that all can point to the positives.
- Share total costs. Don’t fall into the trap of charging only marginal costs to get a program started. Make sure from the beginning that all participants understand and agree to cover the total costs of the initiative or program.
- Establish a positive cash flow. Make sure all partners know the total costs and that there is a revenue stream to cover them. Most intergovernmental programs are fragile at the beginning; having to borrow money to make them work can destroy them.
- Avoid overdependence on grants. There is increasing interest in intergovernmental cooperation and its perceived benefits by foundations, state governments, and the federal government. Grants can provide useful seed money. But don’t start a program just because you can get a grant, without doing the analysis that shows the program can be self-sufficient.

### **Deal Directly with Problems.**

- Learn from failures. Intergovernmental cooperation is not a guaranteed success. If an attempt fails, avoid finger-pointing and instead thoroughly analyze what didn’t work.
- Address turf issues. Intergovernmental cooperation by its very nature involves people having to give up and/or share control and responsibility. Address these issues up front and clearly so they do not undermine the program as it is implemented.
- Recognize historical animosities. Neighboring jurisdictions invariably have had disagreements over the years. Acknowledge these and see if there are ways to resolve past problems. If not, focus on finding a way to work around the problems rather than trying to avoid them.

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*From “When Efficiency Is Unbelievable: Normative Lessons from 30 Years of City-County Consolidation,” published in 2005 by Suzanne Leland and Kurt Thurmaier. This document, based on new research, gives very useful insights into what arguments have proven successful for promoting intergovernmental cooperation.<sup>24</sup>*

Most communities will not decide to pursue a formal city-county consolidation effort. But recent research looking at successful and unsuccessful efforts provides useful insights for leaders interested in new forms of regional collaboration. Professors Suzanne Leland and Kurt Thurmaier recently took a new look at city-county consolidation efforts in 12 regions over the last three decades. They found that:

- Regional economic development and community revitalization were the strongest arguments in favor of these new approaches.
- Efficiency was not a very effective argument, principally because it is too hard, if not impossible, to prove. It is also a challenge to make the case for efficiency.
- A crisis was not that important for getting support.
- Redistributive or equity arguments are not effective by themselves, but focusing on an improved regional economy and letting local governments focus on their own redevelopment issues has proven effective.
- The civic elites are critical drivers and partners in creating support for new approaches.

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*From the proceedings of the “Lessons from Louisville’s Merger” workshop, sponsored in 2005 by the Alliance for Regional Stewardship and Louisville Metro Government. The workshop focused on the many approaches to local government cooperation that Louisville and Jefferson County implemented before their merger, and lessons they learned.<sup>25</sup>*

The effort to formally consolidate the City of Louisville and Jefferson County, KY, took place after a ballot initiative was passed in 2000, with much of the implementation occurring between the mayoral election of November 2002 and January 2003. However, critical research was conducted after the successful referendum that provided a framework for these changes.

At the “Lessons from Louisville’s Merger” workshop in 2005, a panel of people involved in merger implementation offered these experiences from Louisville’s exercise in “reinventing government.”

- The role of private philanthropies was critical in helping shape the new merged government that began operation in 2003, after the successful vote for city-county merger in 2000. A group of local foundations formed “The Greater Louisville Project” and raised \$1.3 million to pay for consultants to the new government who analyzed existing operations of the former city and county governments, and then recommended ‘best practice’ changes collected from other local governments admired for their effectiveness.
- The merger created an opportunity to take a critical look at local government and to make transformational changes in systems, structure, and operations. In theory, this could have occurred without the merger, but there would have been no impetus for change or for outside financing. Perhaps other governments could make these kinds of changes without the merger as context if they were sufficiently convinced of the need and the public benefits.
- All regions should focus on implementing “best practices” as their new standard for government performance.
- It was critical to create a system for evaluating individual, department, and agency performance. The merger again created the impetus to measure these.
- The merger also created an opportunity to improve relationships with labor unions, banks, and debt-rating agencies. Meeting as a new government entity with these labor unions resulted in more workable contracts with more flexible work rules and more reasonable financial arrangements. Changes in the way Louisville Metro handled its budgeting, finance, and investment operations resulted in cost savings and higher ratings based on the new practices being implemented.
- It takes time to deal with old union contracts that are still in force. In the interim, you may be stuck dealing with the old provisions, but that will change in the future.
- There is a critical need to retrain workers whose skill sets are no longer relevant but can’t be laid off.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This guide has offered many examples of different approaches to intergovernmental cooperation. Some have been around for a long time, such as joint powers agreements and annexation; others are newer, including asset districts. Similarly, some of these approaches will be new to your region and its communities, while others (such as regional purchasing) may already be in use. We hope that the information and examples in this guide will help you expand and strengthen current efforts, while providing a platform for exploring new and different collaborative options.

Our goal for this guide has been to demonstrate that local governments have an array of options for encouraging greater cooperation and collaboration across their regions. It is not an all-or-nothing venture; a community or region can start with small steps and move on from there. Ultimately, it is about making cooperation a norm in your community and region. Working together across jurisdictional lines becomes the expected approach to dealing with complex issues, not just a one-time event. And collaborations are based on an understanding among leaders and residents alike that the challenges facing communities and regions today require a crossing of political, geographic, economic, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

**“Success will depend on building innovative partnerships based on the understanding that the future prosperity of each of our communities is inherently linked.”**

**-Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper,  
2004 State of the City address**

In the Denver, CO, region, widely recognized as a model of regional collaboration, local elected leaders have come together to improve infrastructure, accommodate growth, and achieve other shared objectives. Leading the campaign for intergovernmental cooperation in the region has been Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, whose commitment to regional approaches can serve as a model for local elected leaders everywhere.

In his 2004 State of the City address, Hickenlooper explained the benefits of local government collaboration for all communities in the region. “Success,” he said, “will depend on building innovative partnerships based on the understanding that the future prosperity of each of our communities is inherently linked.”

Mayor Hickenlooper’s statement underscores a vitally important point: local government collaboration cannot and should not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, it is a means to an end. In coming together to explore opportunities for successful collaboration, local leaders should always have the larger goal in mind: building healthy, vibrant communities in economically competitive regions. It is a goal shared by all American communities — and all communities will be more successful to the extent that they share in its achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting of NLC's CityFutures Panel on Community and Regional Development in December 2005. More information about the Community and Regional Development panel can be accessed on the Internet at [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

<sup>2</sup> Chrislip, David D. and Carl E. Larson. 1994. *Collaborative Leadership: How Residents and Civic Leaders Can Make a Difference*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, Kathryn. 2001. *Regionalism on Purpose*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, pp. 24-25.

<sup>4</sup> Downs, Anthony. 1994. *New Vision for Metropolitan America*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution in Swanstrom (1996) "Ideas Matter: Reflection on the New Regionalism." *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, Vol. 2, Issue 2.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, Kathryn. 2001. *Regionalism on Purpose*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Seventeen of these options are identified by University of Connecticut Professor David Walker (1987) in "Snow White and the 17 Dwarfs: From Metro Cooperation to Governance," *National Civic Review*, Vol. 76, Issue 1. The Alliance for Regional Stewardship has developed two additional options.

<sup>8</sup> NLC's City Practices collection can be accessed on the Internet at [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org).

<sup>9</sup> Dodge, William R. 1996. *Regional Excellence*. Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities, pp. 105-106.

<sup>10</sup> 1993. *Municipal Cooperation Guide, What are Intergovernmental Agreements?* MRSC Report No. 27, Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington, accessed on the Internet at [www.mrsc.org/Subjects/Planning/intrgov.aspx](http://www.mrsc.org/Subjects/Planning/intrgov.aspx).

<sup>11</sup> Harp, Duane. 2003. "Tri-County Fire Working Group- Recognition of a Partnership." In *Helena National Forest Update*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> 2005. "For Little Rock, River Rail Streetcar System Is the 'Economic Engine That Could.'" *Passenger Transport*, American Public Transportation Association.

<sup>13</sup> This information is from the United States Conference of Mayors' Best Practices Database and can be accessed on the Internet at [www.usmayors.org/USCM/best\\_practices/search.asp](http://www.usmayors.org/USCM/best_practices/search.asp).

<sup>14</sup> Owens, David. 2006. *The North Carolina Experience with Municipal Extraterritorial Planning Jurisdiction*. Special Series No. 20. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Government. This report can be accessed on the Internet at [www.sog.unc.edu](http://www.sog.unc.edu).

<sup>15</sup> Additional, useful information from local air districts in California are provided on the ARS website at [www.regionalstewardship.org](http://www.regionalstewardship.org).

<sup>16</sup> Rusk, David. 1995. *Cities without Suburbs, 2nd ed.* Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

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<sup>17</sup> 1996. *Governance in Erie County: A Foundation for Understanding and Action*. State University of New York at Buffalo, The Governance Project. This report can be accessed on the Internet at [regional-institute.buffalo.edu/default.html](http://regional-institute.buffalo.edu/default.html).

<sup>18</sup> Miller, David. 2002. *The Regional Governing of Metropolitan America*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 99-124.

<sup>19</sup> Mead, Timothy D. 2000. "Governing Charlotte-Mecklenburg." *State and Local Government Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 192-197

<sup>20</sup> Susskind, Lawrence and Jeffrey Cruikshank. 1987. *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

<sup>21</sup> Straus, David. 2002. *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems and Make Decisions*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

<sup>22</sup> 2005. *A Brief Primer on Regional Collaboration: Collaborating Communities are Competitive Communities*. State of Michigan Centers for Regional Excellence. This report can be accessed on the Internet at [www.michigan.gov/cre](http://www.michigan.gov/cre).

<sup>23</sup> 2002. *Intergovernmental Cooperation Handbook, 5th ed.* Governor's Center for Local Government Services, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Harrisburg.

<sup>24</sup> Leland, Suzanne and Kurt Thurmaier. 2005. "When Efficiency Is Unbelievable: Normative Lessons from 30 Years of City — County Consolidations." *Public Administration Review*, Volume 65, Number 4, pp. 475-489.

<sup>25</sup> Major contributors to the workshop included: Carolyn Gatz, Director, Greater Louisville Project; Larry Hayes, Deputy Mayor, Louisville Metro Government; Jerry Newfarmer, President, Management Partners, Inc.; and Kevin Thompson, Senior Management Consultant, Public Financial Management. For more notes from the "Lessons from Louisville's Merger" Workshop, visit the ARS website [www.regionalstewardship.org](http://www.regionalstewardship.org), click on 'Stewardship Forums', and then on "Louisville."

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Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government, led by Mayor Jerry E. Abramson and a 26-member Metro Council, comprises more than 6,000 employees in 40 departments and agencies. The 2003 merger of Louisville and Jefferson County governments, approved by voters in 2000, is the largest such consolidation in three decades in the United States. [www.louisvilleky.gov](http://www.louisvilleky.gov)



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