

Municipal Service Sharing

By Thomas C. Reynolds, Manager, Research & Information Management

These are trying economic times for municipal governments. Whether it's the municipal share of income tax and highway user revenues or property tax assessments, all indicators are pointing toward an increasingly downward trend. At the same time, the cost of providing services – be it materials and supplies or health care and other personnel benefits – continue to rise. The question for local government becomes, “how do we meet the growing demand to do more with less?”

For several cities and towns the answer lies in a collaborative approach to service provision. We've all encountered situations where providing a particular service seems desirable but the cost of actually doing so is prohibitive. By partnering with other municipalities with shared interests, a growing number of cities and towns are finding it possible to provide services they could only dream of on their own. Groups of municipalities in Garrett and northern Prince George's Counties provide us with two useful, but varied, examples of how municipalities are working collaboratively to solve their shared community challenges.

There are eight municipalities in Garrett County, ranging in size from the Town of Kitzmiller with a population of 302 to the Town of Mountain Lake Park with 2,248 residents. The total population for all eight towns is less than 7,500. Given their relatively small size, it would be difficult for any one of them to justify the paying for any number of services that many other local governments take for granted.

In light of this challenge, the mayors of these towns began meeting regularly as part of the Municipal Assistance Program (MAP), where they discuss issues of common interest to Garrett County's municipalities. Once these towns came to realize just how much those interests overlapped, they sought out and received a Community Legacy grant to fund a combined strategic revitalization plan. The resulting revitalization plan revealed a variety of weaknesses and threats related to poorly maintained properties, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient zoning controls. In order to effectively deal with these challenges, the eight municipalities jointly hired a shared code enforcement officer with the help of CEZOA (the Maryland Code Enforcement and Zoning Officials Association). After operating informally for about two years the towns, recognizing the value of working collaboratively, decided to incorporate in the form of a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the idea that this new status would maximize their access to a variety of grant monies.

Garrett County Municipalities, Inc. (GCM) now supports not just shared administrative and code enforcement functions, but the shared purchase and use of public works equipment as well. Among the recently purchased items were a

15" towable wood chipper and a road paving/patching machine. The decision to purchase these particular items was based on an equipment needs survey solicited from each town's public works department. GCM is currently looking into the possibility of entering a joint refuse collection contract. "The main rationale for GCM is the provision of quality services to our communities and cost savings for our towns and their residents," according to Mayor Martin, "but frankly, for me, one of the most gratifying rewards has been the extraordinarily high levels of cooperation between the towns."

The cooperative efforts initiated by the City of Mount Rainier and some of its neighboring municipalities offer a considerably different set of service sharing experiences that may help other cities and towns make the most of limited resources. Mount Rainier's public safety example actually consists of two programs. One creates an agreement with a smaller neighboring town without a standing public safety function; and the other constitutes a more dynamic partnering arrangement with five other municipalities to provide additional staffing for public safety initiatives and special events as well as police officer back up.

The agreement to provide police service to the Town of Brentwood (population 3,000) was initiated in 2006 and has since been renewed. Under the agreement the City of Mount Rainier provides one full time officer who patrols the Town of Brentwood for a total of 40 hours per week. This officer continues to report to Mount Rainier's police chief, who in turn meets regularly with Brentwood's town administrator to discuss matters of procedure and operational policy. Under their written agreement, the Mount Rainier Police Department provides all necessary supplies and police equipment with the exception of a police vehicle, which Brentwood leases for the exclusive use of the Mount Rainier officer who provides police services to the town. The Town of Brentwood also supplies the assigned officer with office space and administrative support. The two jurisdictions agree on a budget each year designating the amount of funds that Brentwood will pay to Mount Rainier for providing police services.

The City of Mount Rainier has entered into a separate mutual aid agreement with the municipalities of Bladensburg, Greenbelt, Hyattsville, and Riverdale Park that greatly expands any one jurisdiction's ability to provide services to its citizens and community. This agreement allows for daily back-up support when it comes to traffic stops and calls for service, additional staffing for large public events, investigative task forces, and the ability to pursue an all-hazards approach when dealing with large-scale accidents, natural and manmade disasters, and terrorist attacks. The existence of a mutual aid agreement has also been instrumental in helping these jurisdictions obtain grant funding for various equipment and programs including a multijurisdictional DUI initiative to combat drunk driving in the Route 1 corridor.

If your municipality has a successful service sharing program you would like to share with your fellow municipal officials, or if you would like information on other partnering initiatives around the state, contact MML Research Manager Tom Reynolds at 800/492-7121 or via e-mail at TomR@mdmunicipal.org.

Photo Captions:

(dilapidated structure) Garrett County's eight municipalities share a code enforcement officer who cites owners of poorly maintained properties.

(police car) – Mount Rainier provides police service to nearby Brentwood, using a police vehicle leased by Brentwood for the exclusive use of the Mount Rainier officer who provides police services to Brentwood.