



Natural resources rarely recognize municipal boundaries

Are you ready to be the champion of natural resources within your community? *If so, be prepared!*

To begin with, the days of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 70 percent-plus grant funding for infrastructure projects are gone. This now burdens those benefitting from public works improvements to fund the entire project, a commonly unpopular proposition. To add insult to injury, natural resources rarely recognize political boundaries. Lakes, streams and wetlands span multiple townships, villages and even counties. The result: Multiple communities must collaborate on potentially controversial projects to comprehensively protect their natural resources and to minimize costs.

Without intergovernmental cooperation, piecemeal solutions result, costs are duplicated, and resources are not fully protected. And if you have asked around, intergovernmental cooperation is not something that comes easy. In the words of John Egelhaaf, executive director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, "The process [of intergovernmental cooperation] can be thankless, and the players not frequently recognized." Proceeding without the proper tools can increase the likelihood of failure and controversy on these often uphill battles.

In a historical context, inter-municipal utility service agreements between townships, cities and villages have existed for years and require a working knowledge of the issues and benefits associated with these types of arrangements. However, when rural natural resources are involved, they demand an additional level of expertise in intergovernmental cooperation.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

To successfully approach and complete a project involving natural resources with intergovernmental strategies, there are

a number of issues to consider, beyond "Why would anyone be crazy enough to even try this in the first place?"

Educational outreach and educational outreach—No, we aren't being redundant. As with any facet of a project where the need to communicate is paramount, the time and resources allocated to carry out an effective outreach program directly affect the amount of input, understanding and buy-in received from the public and public officials alike.

Outreach and communication are the most significant factors in keeping a project moving in the right direction throughout its duration. When dealing with different municipalities and constituents, each with their own unique perspectives and goals, it is imperative to clearly establish the need for a project, convey the project process, and identify the metrics used in measuring the success of a project. Third-party educational documents, public informational meetings, and Internet and social networking site postings of information are all useful media in executing a program.

Dedicated, consistent and committed leadership—The time to take a project from inception to completion can vary widely, lasting upwards of years for the more complex situations. Leadership is very important to keep the "train" from veering off-track. The time and meetings involved can seem endless and require significant commitment of the entire project team.

When asked about the importance of leadership in their recent project, Lakes Area Sewer Authority Chairman Gerald Melko added: "Our project involved two counties, three townships, one village, four lakes, four lake associations, a newly created sewer authority and treatment plant, and a federal funding agency. Not working together was *not* an option. Fortunately, the respective leaders set aside politics and made decisions based on what was best for all the constituents." Collaborative leadership was a key contributing factor for the project receiving the 2011 Graham Woodhouse Intergovernmental Effort Award from the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Consistent, reliable and accurate data—Human nature makes us all cling to any piece of information that is relevant to us. The project team needs to keep this in mind before disseminating information. Developing trust is critical and mandates that information is accurate, truthful, reliable, consistent, objective and free of political bias. Identifying key milestones for published information, such as cost and rate analyses, is also important and should not be done in a cavalier manner.

Special assessments—Typically necessary to fund improvements and often unpopular, the special assessment legal process must be understood. Furthermore, preliminary estimates used to establish probable assessment figures during the project approval process need to be accurate and easy to understand. People always remember the first cost they hear, so analyses must be prepared as realistically as possible. This will make a remarkable difference in the public perception and trust associated with the improvements.

Governing body—When spanning across several communities, consideration should be given to establishing a legally recognized municipal body/utility authority that has the right to own/operate/manage constructed improvements. This creates a mechanism for representation from involved entities while delegating the finer details and responsibilities of the specialized infrastructure to a single board of decision-makers.

Special engineering considerations—Natural resource areas possess many characteristics that require attention in both the design and construction engineering phases of a project. Poor soils, high water tables and site access issues are only a few of the commonly encountered difficulties. Overlooking even one critical element can lead to serious problems during construction and increase project cost—both of which increase cost to the end user.

Experienced service providers—The use of professional service providers with relevant experience implementing your type of project, from beginning to end, is highly recommended and a critical factor in completing a successful project.

HARD WORK YIELDS MAJOR BENEFITS

After the long hours, hard work—and even sometimes some grief—your community will get major short- and long-term benefits.

Protection of natural resources and improved water quality—Eliminating the contribution of pollutants (on-site wastewater, undesired runoff) is one of the foremost reasons to proceed with a project. Surface waters and wetland areas are significant resources and protecting them for future generations is nothing new, yet still highly important.

Comprehensive solutions—Municipal boundaries often lead to partial fixes. By erasing municipal boundaries and working collaboratively, improvements can be developed on a holistic approach.

Collective bargaining—If the need arises to negotiate and obtain utility services from one or more neighboring communities, a previous good relationship can benefit all “project” municipalities and even offset bad experiences. There is also strength in numbers at the negotiation table.

Cost reductions—Working together almost always lowers the upfront capital investment to construct a project and the long-term operation and maintenance costs. This is because cost factors are usually marginal for each participant added to a project. In an era where doing more with less is becoming essential, combined efforts to save the end-user money falls in line with this objective.

Indirect economic benefits—Instead of taking our word for it, the indirect benefits are best exemplified through a case study. Robert Wagel, chair of the Cass County Board of Public Works and a Cass County commissioner, discusses his experiences as follows, “Over the past 25 years of serving on the board, it has been astonishing to see the numerous communities within the county collaborate on numerous infrastructure projects to preserve natural resources. Indirectly, these projects also served as economic engines. With portions of the manufacturing and agricultural industries struggling, the tourism and increased property values brought about by protected resources is really making a difference in keeping the area economically vibrant and improving the quality of place.”

Creates a spirit of cooperation within the community—The difference between communities collaborating and putting up walls can often be linked to a single project that acts as a springboard for subsequent endeavors. Successful intergovernmental projects facilitate better relationships between communities and can act as that springboard.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF YOUR NATURAL RESOURCES

It’s obvious why these projects just don’t happen every day. Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy. However, if you can remove the political boundaries that surround you—and see a need and potential for a project to address the needs of your natural resources—it may be worthwhile to take the next step. With collaborative leadership and the right plan, your dream will become a reality. ■

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