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# Facilitating Interlocal Collaboration: Community and the Soft Skills of Public Management

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# **Facilitating Interlocal Collaboration: Community and the Soft Skills of Public Management**

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the issue of interlocal collaboration in non-metro areas and argues that the concept of community and related “soft skills” that go along with it, are critical to understanding how increased collaboration can be encouraged. An action research process piloted in two Iowa counties provides the basis for this study and offers rich qualitative insight into some of the factors that influence non-metro interlocal collaboration.

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## **Introduction**

Public management is in a process of transformation. A decade ago the “big questions” of public management focused on intraorganizational issues such as motivating employees and measuring performance (Behn 1995). Today it still matters how organizations are run internally, but the bigger questions seem to be about how “public managers operate in a complex intergovernmental and interorganizational environment” (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). In other words, public management is transitioning from a focus on bureaucratic or hierarchical management toward the management of collaboration and networks; what Agranoff and McGuire appropriately label “collaborative public management” (2003).

This paper examines collaborative public management in the specific context of nonmetro local governments. Nonmetro and particularly rural, nonmetro local governments may in fact stand to benefit the most from collaboration; yet they may likewise face the most significant obstacles to taking advantage of opportunities for collaboration. Most research on interlocal collaboration focuses on metro areas and because many key metro-based assumptions do not apply in nonmetro contexts, the need is great for more specific studies of nonmetro collaboration.

This paper differs from most other studies on interlocal collaboration that are descriptive in nature. Rather than trying to understand factors that influence current levels of collaboration, the research discussed here seeks to develop practical approaches to facilitating or stimulating increased collaboration. Rather than looking at local governments from the outside and retrospectively, the research discussed here was/is a process of engaging communities in a process of mutual learning with the intent of

producing real outcomes as well as usable knowledge for the broader question of how to encourage or facilitate interlocal collaboration. The primary findings suggest that there are numerous opportunities for nonmetro local governments to engage in interlocal collaboration and that the strategies needed to identify and take advantage of those opportunities emphasize what might be called the “soft skills” of public management. Understanding community identity, stakeholder involvement, and collaborative leadership are essential for public leaders seeking to exploit the collaborative advantage.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a case is made for the need to study nonmetro interlocal collaboration. Next, the collaborative management literature generally and the nonmetro/rural administration collaboration literature specifically is briefly reviewed. Fundamental factors influencing interlocal collaboration are identified. The case is then made for action research as a logical approach to addressing these key factors in efforts to facilitate or encourage increased collaboration in nonmetro areas. The methodology of a pilot process based on these principles is next discussed, along with a description of the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of lessons learned from this effort, specifically the strategies and skills that appeared most salient in this case.

### **Studying Interlocal Collaboration in Nonmetro Areas**

The discussion of field research that follows is of a pilot project in two nonmetro counties in Iowa. Why study nonmetro local governments when an overwhelming majority of the U.S. population resides in metropolitan counties? There are several ways to answer this question. The first response is that even though a large majority of Americans do in fact live in metro areas, there are still about 50 million that do not.

Hence, just as we would not exclude California from studies of state government, we should not exclude nonmetro areas from our studies of interlocal collaboration. Another response looks to the number of governments involved. Table 1 breaks down the number of counties in the U.S. by metro/nonmetro designation. Nonmetro counties outnumber metro counties nearly two to one. The average number of local governments in a county area in the U.S. is about twenty-eight.<sup>1</sup> Certainly metro counties have more local governments, but even a conservative estimate of ten local governments per nonmetro county would mean that studying nonmetro local governments covers over 20,000 units of government.

	<u>Metro</u>	<u>Nonmetro</u>
Number of counties	1,089	2,052
Population	232,263,225	49,158,673
Percent of total population	82.5%	17.5%
Source: Economic Research Service, USDA (2003)		

**Table 1 - Metro - Nonmetro distinction**

Another way to think about the great number of governments one is dealing with when looking at nonmetro areas is to consider the population distribution. Of the 3,034 counties reported in the 2002 Census of Governments, 2,178 have a population of less than 50,000 and 1,540 (more than half) have a population of less than 25,000 people. Of the 35,933 subcounty, general purpose governments (municipalities, towns, and townships), 32,070 (89 percent) have a population less than 10,000 people. Half of all subcounty, general purpose governments have populations less than one thousand. The same trend is apparent with school districts. Of the 15,014 school districts in the U.S., almost half (7,201) have less than 1,000 total students.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the figures in this section regarding numbers of local governments are drawn from the 2002 Census of Governments available at [www.census.gov/govs/www/cog2002.html](http://www.census.gov/govs/www/cog2002.html).

The sheer number of nonmetro local governments points to the importance of their study to public administration. Limiting our understanding of interlocal collaboration to that of what occurs in a metropolitan context is very limiting; as demonstrated above, it excludes tens of thousands of governmental units. Interest in rural governance<sup>2</sup> seemed to peak in the early to mid-nineties (Korsching et al, 1992; Radin et al, 1996) but has since waned, at least in the public management literature. Rural governance now seems to be mostly part of discussions of “rural development” (Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2003).

The governance of nonmetro and/or rural communities should become more of a concern of public management not only because of the sheer numbers of governments in question, but also because these smaller communities face significant problems and would benefit greatly from increased collaboration with other organizations, particularly other local governments (Radin et al 1996). There is substantial evidence that collaborative management at all levels of government can yield great benefits in a variety of ways (Mandell, 2001). Additionally, there is specific evidence to suggest that rural communities can especially benefit from horizontal collaboration with other communities (Korsching et al, 1992; Radin et al, 1996). Yet rural communities lack the administrative capacity assumed by the very notion of “collaborative management” (Seroka, 1991).

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<sup>2</sup> Here I don't mean to confuse the terms “nonmetro” and “rural.” In many cases nonmetro and rural are used synonymously, however some cities may be rural but are included in a metro county while there are urban clusters within nonmetro counties. This paper makes the case for the importance of studying the nonmetro context generally, and the circumstance of rural, nonmetro communities particularly. There are two primary elements to consider. The nonmetro context is one where there is no urban center, though there may be urbanized areas. A small community with 2,500 people or more and 1,000 per square mile qualifies as an urban cluster, but is still nonmetro when not connected to an urbanized area of 50,000 or more. The rural community has less than 2,500 and is thus characterized by both small population and geographic isolation (see <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/>). Throughout the paper I will reference both nonmetro and rural communities with the understanding that most nonmetro local governments are also rural or at least face similar issues as rural communities in that they are not part of a metropolitan region.

Thus it is critical to find effective ways to build capacity and encourage collaboration so that nonmetro communities may better take advantage of collaborative opportunities.

### **Principles of Collaborative Public Management**

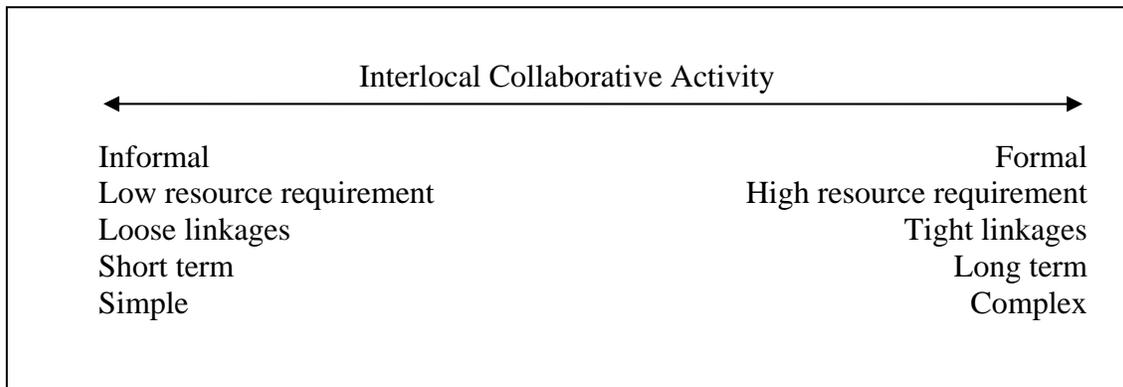
Studies of collaborative public management have identified a wide range of collaborative activity. Interlocal collaboration is multi-level (in terms of levels of government) and multi-sectoral. Looking at local government in particular, Agranoff and McGuire distinguish between “vertical” collaboration with state and federal agencies and “horizontal” collaboration with other local governments, nonprofit agencies, or other local organizations (2003, 68). Interlocal collaboration is thus “horizontal” and can take many forms. Agranoff and McGuire group horizontal collaboration into categories of policymaking and strategy-making, resource exchange, and project-based work (2003, 71). These various forms of collaboration may be formal or informal, ranging from sharing information to formal interlocal service agreements to the creation of organizations that institutionalize collaborative decision making and planning.

### **The Range of Interlocal Collaborative Activity**

In discussing the range of collaborative activity among small towns and rural areas, Beverly Cigler identifies a “continuum of partnerships” (1999). At one end of the continuum are “networking” partnerships loosely organized primarily for information exchange. “Cooperative” partnerships involve simple, low-cost agreements and linkages that range from informal to somewhat formal. “Coordinating” partnerships require more commitment, tighter linkages, and more formality. Finally, “collaborative” partnerships are the strongest form. Collaborative efforts, according to Cigler, involve strong, often long-term and formal linkages and a significant commitment of resources.

Mandell (2002) also distinguishes different types of collaborations. She too argues that collaborative activity is best understood as a “continuum from partnerships that are formed loosely with a narrow focus and great independence to more structured and interdependent collaborations that encompass broad systems change to accomplish a common policy goal” (2002, 36). Mandell’s continuum of “pure forms or theoretical archetypes” progresses from intermittent coordination to temporary task force to permanent and/or regular coordinations to coalition to network structure (2002, 36-37).

Although the terminology certainly differs across different treatments of collaboration, the important point to understand here is that collaborative activity varies in many ways. Even when the focus is narrow—in this case on horizontal collaboration across nonmetro local governments—there is still a wide range of collaborative possibilities. The variation can be thought of as falling along a continuum based on the intensity of relationships and formalness of the collaboration Figure 1 presents a simplified summary of this continuum.



**Figure 1 – Continuum of interlocal collaborative activity**

**Factors Influencing Interlocal Collaborative Activity**

In developing an approach to encouraging increased or improved interlocal collaboration, it is first important to understand what factors might be important in

explaining variations in collaboration. If some of those factors can be influenced through intervention, then it seems reasonable to focus in on those factors in particular. Cigler's research on intergovernmental partnerships uncovered a set of "pre-conditions" for "multicommunity collaborative organizations" (1992; 1999). The nine preconditions identified by Cigler are:

1. A "disaster occurrence," similar to Kingdon's notion of a "focusing event" stimulating the opening of a "policy window" (2002).
2. Perceived or actual "fiscal stress."
3. A "political constituency for cooperation." Cigler's case studies revealed that "local governments were not the initiators of the partnership organizations" due to "lack of a natural supportive political constituency" for promoting collaborative action (1999, 93).
4. "Supportive capacity building," or in other words, "incentives such as technical or financial assistance." Cigler found that "outside" support of local collaboration efforts was very important to the emergent organizations she studied.
5. "Early and continued support by elected local officials."
6. "Visible advantages of cooperation for participating governments."
7. "Existence of a policy entrepreneur" or "sparkplug" who provides "energy and commitment to organizational emergence and development."
8. "Early focus on visible, effective strategies" suggests that early successes stimulate interest and build collaborative "constituencies."

9. “Emphasis on collaborative skills-building” usually developed by “external capacity building organizations.”

Cigler’s study of pre-conditions for collaborative organizations highlights the “key roles played by external change agents” and thus points directly to the focus of this paper (1999, 99). Building public support, identifying and developing leaders, and nurturing the support of elected officials are all factors that can potentially be influenced through intervention measures.

Agranoff and McGuire’s study of interlocal collaboration on economic development identifies several variables influencing the variation in collaborative activity across cities. Though their study is from a managerial point of view, the factors they identify are more or less consistent with Cigler’s pre-conditions. The factors identified by Agranoff and McGuire include perceived internal and external barriers, local economic conditions, variations in cities’ policy approaches (in this case, to economic development), changes in policy and institutional context, administrative arrangements, and the presence of strategic planning (2003, 29-33). Shared learning and the presence of social capital are also evident in successful interlocal collaborations (2003, 179-181).

Myrna Mandell’s research on collaboration and networks also identifies factors “which affect relationships in collaborations” (2002, 37). Her work identifies commitment of members, perceptions and values of members, imposition of rules and regulations, relative power of members, and impact of political/cultural context as key factors affecting collaborative relationships (2002). A more recent study by Mandell and her colleagues (Keast et al, 2004) identifies common mission, interdependence of members, and unique structural arrangements as the three primary characteristics of

networks structures. These characteristics require a range of new behaviors or attitudes that correspond in interesting ways to Cigler's preconditions (1999) and the factors identified by Agranoff and McGuire (2003). Common mission requires "seeing the whole picture; new values—around the issue, not the service; and new attitudes."

Interdependence requires changing perceptions and "stepping into others' shoes." Unique structural arrangements require "actively doing something; systems change; members [representing] their own organization and the network structure; and new ways of thinking" (Keast et al 2004, 368).

An earlier study by Janet Weiss also provides an integrated model of interagency cooperation that shows "how the context of multiple constraints shapes the behavior of public agencies" (1987, 109). Specifically, Weiss specifies "three conditions that must be met" and "an external directional force that propels the agency from one condition to the next" (1987, 109). The external direction force can come in a variety ways but it is essentially new demands on agency performance. This external pressure can help move the agency along the three conditions that lead to cooperation. The first condition is a perceived problem shared across agencies. The second condition is the "availability of resources to address problems through cooperation." The third condition is "institutional capacity to mount cooperation" (1987, 111). Interagency cooperation occurs as partner agencies move from condition to condition, toward cooperation, by the external forces placed on their agencies.

Another interesting treatment of interagency collaboration is Eugene Bardach's "craftsmanship theory" (1998). Like Agranoff and McGuire's research on collaborative management in local government, Bardach approaches the subject from a managerial

perspective. He argues that public managers must develop new, post-bureaucratic ways of thinking. He also argues that resources are needed, both in terms of human resources and flexible funding. Facilitative, or collaborative, leadership, along with relationship (trust) building are also fundamental elements of success. The focus of craftsmanship theory, therefore, is building collaborative capacity across organizations. The approach is prescriptive and outlines what factors need to be developed in order to realize the potential of interagency collaboration.

Another prescriptive model comes from Russ Linden's book *Working Across Boundaries* (2002). Linden's framework for collaboration consists of

- "The basics," meaning that the right people are involved, the process is legitimate, there is a shared goal uniting the parties, and there is a champion who helps make the potential collaboration a priority.
- "Forming open, trusting relationships among the principles."
- "Developing high stakes," or in other words, the issue is pressing enough to motivate the principles to action.
- "Creating a constituency for collaboration."
- "Building collaborative leadership."

Linden argues that leadership "makes a huge difference" in the success or failure of potential collaborations (2002, 146). Collaborative leaders are builders and maintainers of networks; they lead from the middle as opposed from the top and facilitate the connections so critical to collaboration (Chrislip and Larson 1994).

A strong common thread among these various treatments of collaboration is the importance of political and organizational culture. This observation corresponds with

Visser's call to look to political and organizational culture and its impact on administrative behavior as "driving explanatory factors" of interlocal relations in urban regions (2002). The same observation would seem to be true, perhaps even more so, in nonmetro areas where government is more intimate and connected to the community, or stated differently, "more personal and less bureaucratic" (Seroka 1990, 140).

A very important conceptual treatment of interlocal collaboration is Frederickson's theory of administrative conjunction (1999). Frederickson finds the high levels of interjurisdictional cooperation in the metropolis to be a function of interdependence. Most of this interdependence is administrative, not political. While politics is mostly still jurisdiction-based in the metropolis, administration is more functionally-based. Administrative professionals operate in transjurisdictional "epistemic communities" that facilitate administrative conjunction. Administrative conjunction describes the "systematic patterns of cooperation and coordinating among and between administrative operations."

The key point here is that formal and informal agreements between jurisdictions are "organized, maintained, and operated voluntarily by public service professionals" (Frederickson and Smith 2003, 223). Interlocal collaboration and networks evolve primarily out of informal professional networks. Thus Frederickson concludes that "insofar as there is a regional polity, then, it is an administrative polity" (1999, 710). For the purposes of the discussion here, the primary factor we must consider from the theory of administrative conjunction is the presence or extent of administrative conjunction in a given area. More professional networking across jurisdictions leads to more collaboration.

The preceding review highlights many factors identified as important contributors to explaining interlocal collaboration. There are many overlapping and crosscutting ideas. In considering the main themes of this review we find several important factors that influence collaborative activity (listed in no particular order):

- The existence of a pressing, shared issue, including fiscal stress
- Public support for collaboration
- External capacity building
- Collaborative leadership
- Trust and positive relationships between potential partners
- Administrative capacity
- Positive experience (small gains to build on)
- Support of elected officials
- Social capital and joint learning processes

Cigler's pre-conditions, as discussed above, capture to a large extent the other observations in the literature. The one key missing variable stems from administrative conjunction theory, which Frederickson admits is mostly limited to urban areas (Frederickson and Smith 2003, 225).

### **Rural / Nonmetro Capacity Issues**

The summary above of factors influencing interlocal collaboration highlights where rural and nonmetro communities have a marked disadvantage; they often lack administrative capacity. Rural communities are small and dispersed and even nonmetro urban communities are, by definition, comparatively smaller than their metropolitan counterparts. Smaller communities have smaller governments. In many cases there is no

professional administration to speak of. In others, the administrator wears many different hats and lacks the specialization to be part of an “epistemic community.” Jim Seroka argues that the best alternative for addressing rural administrative capacity issues “is the expansion of local intergovernmental cooperation” (1988). Thus intergovernmental cooperation helps overcome lack of administrative capacity, yet administrative capacity is one of the primary factors that enables such cooperation.

The geographic dispersion of rural and nonmetro areas also influences capacity for collaboration. Frederickson explains that collaboration is a function of interdependence, yet the apparent isolation of nonmetro communities renders them more independent. While jurisdictional lines are becoming less and less meaningful in metro areas, they still seem to mean a lot in smaller nonmetro communities. Seroka notes that there are additional institutional impediments as well such as restrictive state laws, tax codes that foster competition, and the lack of regional planning that results in “mutually antagonistic zoning, and contradictory development plans” (1988, 45).

Seroka notes that in rural settings “cooperation among service providers” is more desirable than outright service consolidation. Rural communities tend to feel threatened by the idea of regional service provision (not to mention the idea of consolidation). The most well-meaning of intergovernmental collaborations could, according to Seroka, “destroy the basis for a strong rural community” (1990, 143-144). Community identity is very local in nonmetro America and thus the school, the fire station, or the community library are more than just service centers; they are part of residents’ sense of community. It is arguably easier to collaborate across jurisdictions in the metropolitan setting because this community dynamic is less salient. Metro-area residents will likely have more of a

regional identity and thus not feel as threatened by interlocal service sharing arrangements and other forms of collaboration.

These contextual factors must be considered when considering approaches to encouraging increased interlocal collaboration in nonmetro areas. In Iowa, the tendency of state-level officials is to want to force consolidation, or at least collaboration, on communities that are seen as “inefficient.” These top-down approaches ignore the important differences between metro and nonmetro, not to mention the factors involved in successful collaboration (like trust and political support). Approaches to interlocal collaboration should focus on performance rather than efficiency and be sensitive to local political culture.

### **Facilitating Interlocal Collaboration**

In taking up the question of how to encourage or stimulate interlocal collaboration it is encouraging to note that most of the factors discussed in the section above can be influenced. In other words, there is hope that policy interventions can be successful in expanding “local intergovernmental cooperation, so that small rural governments join together to increase their administrative capacity to deliver services and achieve economies of scale” (Radin et al 1996, 72). Beryl Radin and her colleagues in *New Governance for Rural America* argue that reforming state tax codes and promoting regional and state-wide land-use planning are two “state actions” that can “facilitate such cooperation” (1996, 72). However, these actions do not speak to the multiple factors identified above. Such state action would certainly be useful and address some of the specific structural constraints on collaboration that rural areas face, but it would not

address the internal factors such as political support, trust, recognition of opportunities, and so forth.

### **The Action Research Approach**

Several of the studies reviewed above at least imply the value, even necessity in some cases, for external facilitation and support of emergent collaborative activity. For example, Cigler found that for the organizations she studied, “outside capacity building (by state government, foundations, professional associations) was necessary for strengthening and broadening leadership” (1999, 94). The question then is what kind of intervention is most useful. The variables that need to be influenced seem to center on community and organizational culture (Visser 2002). In public administration, organizational development (OD) has become a widely recognized approach to initiating “change in organizational cultures.” OD approaches are also used to facilitate community-wide change and development. The primary OD technology or process used to stimulate change is action research (Carenevale 2003). Action research methods provide an excellent framework for organizing and implementing an intervention aimed at stimulating interlocal collaboration.

Action research refers to a “family of research methodologies which aim to pursue action and research outcomes at the same time” (Allen 2001, 12). The variety of approaches that fall under the label of “action research” share a commitment to analytical rigor that is reflective or interpretive, a collaborative relationship with people who are traditionally thought of as the “subjects” of research, and an emphasis on practical outcomes relevant to the lives of the participants (Stringer 1999, xviii). Ernest Stringer argues that community-based action research adds to these commitments a fourth goal of

building community itself. That is, community-based action research seeks “practical and theoretical outcomes but that does so in ways that provide conditions for continuing action – the formation of a sense of community” (Stringer 1999, xviii).

Community-based action research (hereafter shortened as action research) contains elements of field research in its traditional sense, where rich, micro-level data helps illuminate broader theoretical questions. At the same time, this research approach contains elements of intervention for social change, using the process and the knowledge produced in that process to improve the community in which it is being applied. Action research is “democratic, empowering, and humanizing” and thus offers an approach to research and organizational development consistent with democratic values (Stringer 1999, 9).

Action research begins with the assumption that the stakeholders of any community-based project “should be engaged in the processes of investigation.” The researcher in this case takes on more of a facilitative role, working with stakeholders in a process of collecting and analyzing data, theorizing, developing plans for action, and evaluation (Stringer 1999, 10-11). The acquisition and production of knowledge “proceeds as a collective process” where “stakeholders build a consensual vision of their life-world” (1999, 11). This approach focuses on “methods and techniques of inquiry that take into account people’s history, culture, interactional practices, and emotional lives” (1999, 17).

### **The “Olive Tree Project”**

Action research was a natural starting point in developing a process for facilitating interlocal collaboration to pilot in Iowa. Given the pre-conditions and key-

factors identified in the literature, it was clear that a bottom-up, participatory process was important. Interlocal collaboration cannot be separated from citizens' sense of community and clearly needs political support to be effective. Further, the issue is not just about getting agencies to act; the process must begin before that. Decision makers and their constituencies must first be aware of opportunities for collaboration (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000, 214-217). Then the concern shifts to whether the opportunities are politically and otherwise viable.

The context of the Olive Tree Project begins with the issue of interlocal collaboration being high on the issue agenda of state government. Local governments continue to face declining resources while the demand for public services grows. State legislators frequently hear from constituents about high property taxes. There is a recognition that communities across Iowa simply cannot afford to "go it alone" anymore. The Governor's Strategic Planning Council recognized this reality in the "Iowa 2010" final report which includes the goal that by the year 2010 "state and local governments in Iowa have achieved national recognition for effectiveness and efficiency through voluntary regional realignment, streamlining, reallocating resources and making services available when and where citizens demand them."

This call for "smart government" emphasizes utilizing public resources more effectively through collaborative provision of public services, through "28E" agreements (formal interlocal agreements), or other resource sharing arrangements. However, there is also some recognition that communities may be reluctant to fully explore opportunities for collaboration due to a fear of losing community identity. Thus it is crucial to find ways to help communities identify core services, institutions, and values that are essential

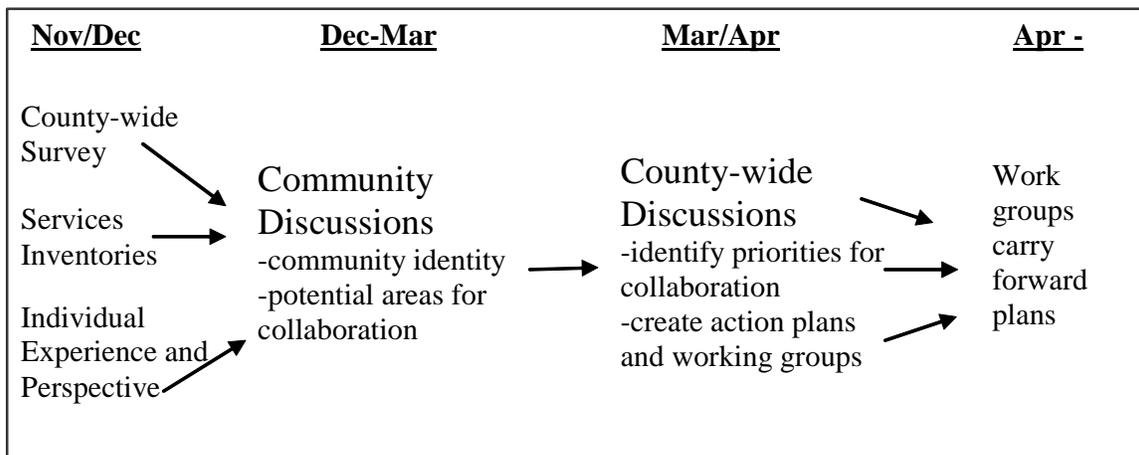
to preserving community identity. The project's title is derived from *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's bestselling book on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999). The olive tree is a symbol of roots, sense of place, of "belonging to a family, a community, a tribe, a nation, a religion or, most of all, a place called home." Friedman argues that in today's era of globalization, communities must keep pace with modernizing forces or be "left behind." However, this progress must not come at the expense of community identity. Ways must be found to move forward by building upon, not uprooting, those "olive trees" that give meaning and a sense of connectedness to peoples' lives.

An analogy can be made then between the forces of global competition Friedman speaks of and the forces that make interlocal collaboration more and more of a necessity for local governments. The olive trees still count though, and thus discussions of interlocal collaboration must take into account the community factors. This is consistent with the research cited above that notes the importance of a political constituency backing up efforts to collaborate.

Action research is an ideal approach to this dilemma. The approach is to involve communities in an effort to identify opportunities for collaboration—opportunities that are consistent with community values and needs—and then move forward with those opportunities with the political support developed through the process. Citizens and public officials work together in the action research process facilitated by (in this case) the research team lead by the author.

The development of the pilot project itself was a collaborative effort of the university research team, local extension offices, participating local governments, the

Iowa League of Municipalities, the Iowa State Association of Counties, and the Iowa Department of Management which funded the effort. The focus of the pilot effort from the beginning was to stimulate intercommunity collaboration through a process of citizens defining and, to some extent, redefining their communities. Defining in the sense or articulating publicly what constitutes community identity; redefining in the sense of learning to think regionally at the same time. The research team and citizens and public officials from Boone and Poweshiek would engage in a process of identifying opportunities for collaboration that preserve, and even builds upon, the different communities' identities and visions for their future.



**Figure 2: Process Map for the Olive Tree Project**

The outcomes sought were two-fold. The first aim was to identify opportunities for collaboration (or improved collaboration) in the two counties through a bottom-up process of community dialogue. The second aim was to learn from the process itself and work toward a model for other counties across Iowa. Figure 2 represents the process as it was implemented. In the Fall of 2004, county-wide stakeholder committees were formed and met in each county to kick-off the project. Participants gave input on the design of te

survey and overall design of the project. The stakeholder committees consisted of leaders from all sectors of the community (government, business, schools, civic, etc.).

In November, 2004, the survey was finalized and distributed through local newspapers and, in Poweshiek County, the schools. The newspapers featured articles on the project and encouraged readers to fill out and return the survey. The response to the survey was not as great as anticipated. Boone County ended up with approximately 340 respondents and Poweshiek County, nearly 650 (including 175 high school students). The survey data nevertheless provided important background information regarding citizen attitudes toward public services, local government, and community participation.

Community forums were held from December 2004 to March 2005 in the following communities: (Boone County) Boone, Boxholm, Luther, Madrid, and Ogden; (Poweshiek County) Brooklyn, Grinnell, Malcolm, Montezuma, and Searsboro. In many cases there were multiple meetings in a given community. The project team worked with local civic groups to organize meetings and often were able to do the “program” as part of a regular meeting of a local group.

Hundreds of citizens and community leaders participated in the two counties. The local media was helpful in covering the meetings and topics discussed. In Boone County, the chair of the board of supervisors made it a point to attend every meeting and listen to what was being discussed. The community forums stimulated discussions around two principle questions. First, “what are the critical sources of your community’s identity?” The discussion of community identity then became the backdrop of group work designed to identify potential areas for intercommunity collaboration. Participants had as background information a summary of results from the community survey and an

inventory of local services and how they are provided. The primary question was: “what opportunities are there for collaboration with other cities or county-wide?” In other words, citizens were able to brainstorm opportunities for collaboration in the context of what is important to their community. Detailed notes were kept from each meeting.

The community discussions represented the second phase of the action research process; the first phase being the initial reconnaissance, organizing of county-wide committees, and the county-wide surveys. The community discussions widened participation and began the process of knowledge creation through dialogue. These discussions produced a wealth of ideas that participants said they would be willing to explore. In March and April, 2005, the stakeholder groups for the two counties (about 20 people each) were reconvened and met two times each to 1) review the findings from the survey and community forums, 2) identify the best opportunities for collaboration that came from these discussions, 3) prioritize the opportunities for collaboration (i.e., identify which ones are most important and actionable at the present time), and 4) develop initial working groups around the top opportunities and identify next steps. By the end of the second meeting (in both counties), three working groups had done some initial action planning and identified what they needed to do next. In both counties, these county-wide stakeholder meetings included prominent community leaders, including board of supervisor members, mayors, and so forth. In Boone County, three state representatives also participated.

### **Results from the Pilot Project**

At present we find that some of the working groups have moved forward with ideas and plans and others have stalled. Perhaps the most exciting development is

continued discussions in Boone County around the issue of county-wide planning.

Though there are still many details to be worked out and issues to be resolved, there is significant interest across the county in this opportunity that was identified in several community meetings and selected as a priority area in the county-wide stakeholder meetings.

While it is premature to report on full “results” from the pilot project, a brief description of initial findings follows. First, some of the interesting findings from the survey include

- Over 70% of respondents reported being “somewhat” or “very” informed when it comes to local government.
- About half of the respondents reporting trusting local government to do the right thing “most of the time” or “almost always”.
- 69% of Poweshiek County respondents and 77% of Boone County respondents rated overall public services as “good” and “very good.”
- Fire protection, libraries, and schools were among the highest rated public services whereas economic development and roads were among the lowest rated services.

These data were one of several sources of background information for the community discussions. Additionally, participants learned about how public services are provided in their community and shared insights with each other on what key elements make up their community identity. Several strong, common themes emerged from the community forums. Among the strong themes for community identity were schools, churches, quality of life, and volunteerism. In terms of opportunities for new or improved collaboration,

planning and zoning, economic development, recreation facilities, and services for youth were dominant themes in community discussions. Nearly every community meeting identified these areas as fruitful for interlocal collaboration.

The county-wide stakeholder meetings highlighted many innovative ideas for county-wide collaboration that citizen participants were supportive of pursuing. After discussions about how to prioritize them, the top three ideas were selected and initial working groups formed to plan out how to realize the opportunities. In Poweshiek County the three areas for collaboration were a county-wide animal shelter, economic development, and programs for youth. In Boone County groups formed around developing a river trail connecting recreational assets throughout the county, looking into regional economic development, and working toward county-wide planning and zoning.

While (at present) no changes have been made in terms of formal intercommunity collaboration in these two counties, there is evidence that at least some of the ideas will be realized in the near future. In Boone County in particular, the planning and zoning idea and river trail project are actively being pursued and key stakeholders are involved in the process. However there are other outcomes that seem highly relevant in the long run that deserve mention. First, in both counties the importance of collaborating across communities has been discussed not just by policy makers but by regular citizens. To some extent the process itself constituted informal collaboration among communities in terms of information sharing and informal strategy-making. Awareness has been raised and ground has been cultivated for more public conversations about sharing services or otherwise collaborating. Second, public officials in both counties now have a rather long list of opportunities for collaboration that is citizen-based. We found a lot of

collaboration already occurring in Boone County, for example, yet the process still identified many other unrealized opportunities.

### **Lessons Learned from the Pilot Project**

Beyond the specific “findings” of the action research—the opportunities identified and prioritized in the process—there are broader research findings culled from the in-the-field observations of the author. Several important themes emerged regarding keys to success in identifying and taking advantage of opportunities for interlocal collaboration. While the observations are based only upon the pilot effort in two counties, they nevertheless seem to underscore certain aspects identified elsewhere in the literature. Further, they point to areas that need additional empirical research and testing.

### **Involving Citizens in Process of Identifying and Prioritizing Opportunities**

Wondolleck and Yaffee’s study of collaborative environmental management notes the importance of “imagining collaborative opportunities” (2000, 214). Yet their focus is on how to spark this imagination within agencies. In the pilot project, the spark came from citizens and public officials together, in an unofficial, non-threatening environment. In considering the factors of interlocal collaborative activity, it appears that citizens have an important role to play. Political culture shapes, or at least greatly influences, the actions of local governments (Visser 2002). Political support is commonly cited as a key pre-condition for collaborative success (Cigler 1999; Linden 2002). Involvement in identifying and selecting opportunity breeds commitment when it comes time to actually move forward with an opportunity.

An earlier experience from Poweshiek County is instructive. As part of a state effort to “reinvent” government, the State of Iowa contracted with a private consulting

group to develop innovative approaches to government across the state. At one point the consultants worked with Poweshiek County and determined that consolidating 911 dispatch services county-wide would be much more efficient (and presumably effective). When this plan was brought before the public for comment it was met with serious acrimony. Citizens, particularly those outside the population center where the consolidated dispatch center would presumably go, were outraged. The plan did not move forward but the bitterness remained through the next election when the failed plan resurfaced as a campaign issue. About a year later the topic of consolidating dispatch services emerged again, this time during the Olive Tree discussions. However, given the setting, it was never contentious. In fact, most participants supported the idea in principle while recognizing continued concern over some details. While it remains to be seen whether the county consolidates dispatch services, the experience shows that involvement is key to acceptance.

### **The Role of Community Context**

Another important theme that was anticipated and confirmed through the pilot process is the salience of community context. The community forums consistently revealed the expected finding that public institutions such as schools and courthouses are indeed key aspects of community identity. However, this finding does not close off discussions of collaboration. Most participants were open to working together or otherwise sharing resources once the threat of consolidation was off the table. This consistent finding demonstrates that a bottom-up approach is preferable to top-down approaches that are de facto threatening and tend to encourage a “circle the wagons” mentality. Citizens demonstrated that when engaged about the issue of collaborating with

other communities they are not only very reasonable, they can be the source of many innovative ideas.

The lesson here is that considering community context is more than just understanding community culture and values and acting accordingly. Intervention processes must recognize and validate community culture and use it as a backdrop for discussions of collaboration. Local stakeholders are much more reasonable than they are often given credit for. The process of collectively articulating “what matters most” is a positive, affirming one that does not close off discussion of networking outside of the community; rather, gaining confidence in who you are as a community is enabling or empowering and helps stimulate outward-looking thinking.

### **Efficiency is Not the Primary Value in Question**

The survey demonstrated that, for the most part, citizens are happy with the services they are getting. However, the areas that they are concerned about (economic development, planning, youth and recreation programs) also were ones they felt strongest about being an opportunity for collaboration. In other words, the argument for improving service is a strong one for encouraging collaborative thinking. The argument for efficiency rarely came up.

A lot of the discourse about interlocal collaboration or consolidation at the state level and beyond emphasizes efficiency and economies of scale. Similarly, a lot of the academic literature on the topic approaches the issue from a public choice perspective, as if local governments were rational actors (see LeRoux and Carr 2005; Visser 2002). However, local governments, any more than individuals, are not rational actors in the narrow utilitarian sense. Trust, reputation, interpersonal relationships, and other

normative factors are at least equally important as material interests (Ostrom 1998; see also Etzioni 1988).

### **Relationship Building and Trust are Essential**

Trust is also a key element in cultivating intercommunity service-sharing and collaboration. We found that there is often a lot of “baggage” when it comes to discussing intercommunity relationships. For example, in Poweshiek County it is no secret that citizens in Montezuma feel some ambivalence toward Grinnell, feeling that the dominance of Grinnell as the County’s population and economic center threaten Montezuma’s status as county seat. As discussed, an earlier proposal to consolidate 911 dispatch services in Grinnell was met with serious antipathy by those outside of Grinnell and was ultimately defeated. Olive Tree discussions in Poweshiek County subsequently revisited the 911 consolidation issue and we found that by and large most people were open to the idea (and in fact, a working group is re-exploring this opportunity right now).

The key will be the trust factor; whether or not a proposal can be developed by the interested stakeholders that satisfies the interests involved and is not perceived as a “hostile takeover” by Grinnell. One of the refreshing aspects of the county-wide discussions were realizations by participants that there are a lot more shared interests than some have previously thought.

Trust and relationship building is vital to collaborative success and is not built overnight. Counties and regions should seek ways to open up communication channels and build trust. An excellent example is the Boone League of Municipalities where county, city, and school officials meet for supper together on a quarterly basis. Such activities help build a broader sense of community and go a long way toward developing

the kind of collaborative culture that is essential for successful, innovative local governance in the 21st Century. These small investments are important and ought to be encouraged.

This observation connects with the social capital literature and the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. Rural communities suffer from deficits in social capital, particularly bridging social capital. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, involves networks that are outward looking and cut across diverse groups. Putnam observes that “bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves” (2000, 22-23). Isolated communities can develop networks externally through “weak ties,” those linkages to more “distant acquaintances who move in different circles” (Putnam 2000, 23). The quarterly supper is an example of developing those bridging ties; ties that become a foundation for collaboration.

### **The Role of Leadership**

The role of leadership cannot be overstated. Two kinds of leadership are critical in identifying and realizing opportunities for collaboration at the county or regional level. First, formal leadership is required from elected and appointed officials. Having the chair of the Boone County Board of Supervisors present at nearly every meeting meant a lot substantively and symbolically. Ultimately the decision makers must be supportive and “on-board” in order for these processes to be successful. This support must be for more than just the idea of collaboration; it must equally be for the idea that community stakeholders are important for realizing collaborative opportunities. If the formal leaders can be in the habit of consulting with local groups they can move forward with

“grassroots” ideas and support rather than try to “sell” their ideas after decisions have been made only to face suspicion and apprehension. This kind of leadership from office-holders needs to be collaborative or facilitative (Chrislip 2002; Svara 1994). The old “great man” notion of leadership (“I have the answers”) simply will not work and will not build the trust needed to cultivate collaborative relationships.

The second kind of leadership that counts does not have to come from office-holders; in fact, it may be the case that it cannot come from them. This kind of leadership is catalytic; where trusted, connected people in communities become “champions” of (in this case) the issue of collaboration and then help convene relevant stakeholders around the issue (Luke 1998). The outside facilitation of the ISU team helped pull together conversations, but the long-term sustainability of the process—and ultimately, the realization of outcomes—depends on having community “champions” to help sustain interest and participation, and open, supportive public officials that take part and ultimately help see the ideas to fruition.

External capacity building or policy intervention must include special attention to developing facilitative formal leaders as well as identifying, nurturing, and cultivating the “catalytic leaders” in the community. The leaders are the key to lasting cultural change. They involve stakeholders, build support, develop and maintain ties, and otherwise enable the exploitation of collaborative opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

Although collaborative management, at least in some cases, involves contracts, project management, financial considerations, and other elements that require “hard” management skills, the experience of this effort to stimulate interlocal collaboration

emphasizes that it is the “soft skills” of management that make the most difference as to whether or not opportunities for collaboration are identified and acted upon. These soft skills include involving community stakeholders, building relationships of trust across jurisdictions (bonding social capital), focusing on outcomes, and collaborative leadership.

The action research approach naturally fits the soft skills identified here in that it seeks to stimulate change and development through a participatory, positive process. Small communities need to collaborate in order to survive, and hopefully thrive. More often than not, they need external support and intervention to identify opportunities and then move forward with realizing those opportunities. Change agents seeking to intervene and stimulate culture change and increased collaboration would do well to look to principles of organizational development and particularly the technology of action research. The democratic, collaborative principles of action research are a logical and empowering approach for addressing the need to encourage more and better collaboration among localities in nonmetro areas and beyond.

This paper began by arguing that rural and nonmetro areas in particular lack the high levels of administrative conjunction and otherwise lack capacity to take full advantage of collaborative opportunities. Yet these same rural and nonmetro areas stand to benefit the most from interlocal collaboration (Radin et al 1996). States governments, regional coordinating bodies such as councils of governments, universities, and agencies that have an interest in stimulating interlocal collaboration should focus on the soft skills of management as a starting point. Where administrative conjunction is lacking, how can connections otherwise be made? How can collaborative leadership be developed? How can trust be built across jurisdictions? How can community stakeholders become

involved in identifying collaborative opportunities? These are the starting points for policy discussions of how to enhance interlocal collaboration in rural and nonmetro areas. Discussion of efficiencies, of inducements or punishments, are not going to be nearly as effective because ultimately the choice to collaborate is based on trust, internal and external support, and the mutual realization that collaboration will improve the effectiveness of the public function in question.

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