

10-31-2005

Elements of Successful Interlocal Agreements: An Iowa Case Study

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Recommended Citation

Thurmaier, Kurt, "Elements of Successful Interlocal Agreements: An Iowa Case Study" (2005). *Working Group on Interlocal Services Cooperation*. Paper 2.
http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/interlocal_coop/2

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A Statewide Survey of Interlocal Agreements*

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Creating Collaborative Communities Conference

October 31, 2005
Wayne State University

Abstract

Interlocal agreements have long been a useful tool for municipal and county governments to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of local government services. Yet while they have a long history in practice, there is little empirical study of the nature and characteristics of ILAs, especially on a statewide basis. This paper presents results from a statewide survey of interlocal agreements in Iowa created in the period, 1993-2003. Results suggest that governments believe that their ILAs increase the effectiveness and efficiency of local services.

*The authors wish to thank Sarah Schillerstrom for her helpful assistance. This research was made possible with an award from the IowAccess Advisory Board, Iowa Department of Administrative Services, Dr. Kurt Thurmaier and Dr. Yu-Che Chen, Principal Investigators. The information in this report does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Department of Administrative Services or the IowAccess Advisory Board.

Introduction

American local governments have been collaborating for a long time, at the least, several decades. One of the oldest collaborative instruments is the interlocal agreement (ILA). An ILA can take many forms, ranging from an informal “handshake” agreement to elaborate contracts structured according to statutory requirements and filed with a state agency and local county or city recorder. ILAs exist between cities, counties, a city and a county, between cities and school districts, between school districts, and in many other combinations. Although we do not have good systematic data on the scope and breadth of ILAs, it is certain that they exist in myriad forms across the states, and they have for many years.

Despite their long history and prevalence in local governance, the academic community has been lax in studying interlocal agreements and so we know little about them as a management tool for creating collaborative communities. This paper reports initial findings from a statewide study of ILAs in Iowa. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic study of interlocal agreements to this extent and depth. This initial review is largely descriptive, outlining the major research questions, the process to study agreements in Iowa, and some initial results. The goal is to stimulate discussion at the conference about the challenges scholars face as we attempt to understand the role of these instruments in creating collaborative communities.

Intergovernmental Relations, Networks, and Interlocal Agreements.

The intergovernmental relations literature is dominated by studies of federal-state relations (federalism). More recently, there have been increased studies of state-local relations.

Overall, there are very few studies of interlocal relations framed with an intergovernmental

context. There are studies of metropolitan governance in both the economics and political science/public administration literature; much of this surrounds the longstanding debate over local government consolidation versus the economic efficiency of fragmented local governments in metropolitan areas (Marando 1968, Savitch and Vogel 1996, Stephens and Wikstrom 2000). Hence, we have numerous studies based on Tiebout's hypothesis of tax and service competition among local governments, and studies about the virtues and vices of city-county consolidations (Leland and Thurmaier 2004, Carr and Feiock 2004), but little research focused on how local governments actually collaborate with each other to provide citizens with public services that may cross jurisdictional boundaries.

Some of the more recent literature emerging in the public management networks studies emphasizes more how local governments collaborate with private and nonprofit actors and less about how they collaborate with others (e.g., Agranoff and McGuire 2003, McGuire 2002, O'Toole 1997, Provan and Milward 2001). Public management network research is increasingly harkening back to the vast literature in sociology regarding social networks (e.g., Berry et al 2004, Thurmaier and Wood 2002). The sociology literature emphasizes network structures, roles, and power relationships; there is very little, if any, discussion of managing a network or managing a public service in a network setting. Hence, public management scholars are defining the specific questions that surround the problem of managing in networks and the more uncertain role of managing a network.

Many studies have demonstrated that cities frequently participate in intergovernmental service delivery arrangements (Studenski, 1930; Jones, 1942; Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren, 1961; Deutsch, 1964; Zimmerman, 1974a, 1974b, 1976; Friesema, 1971; Henderson, 1984; U.S. ACIR, 1985; Agranoff and Pattakos, 1985; Shanahan, 1991; Morgan and Hirlinger, 1991; Coalition to Improve Management in State and Local

Government, 1992; NLC, 1995; Thompson, 1997; Bartle and Swayze, 1997; Pagano, 1999; Meek, Schildt, and Witt, 2002; Thurmaier and Wood, 2002; Wikstrom, 2002; Agranoff and McGuire, 2003).

Interlocal agreements range from simple dyadic relationships to complex networks of multiple local governments with private and nonprofit actors. In the dyadic case, for example, two cities may agree to share snow-plowing duties along a street that straddles their mutual border. The more complex network example might be an economic development agreement that involves multiple cities, their county, and the nonprofit chamber of commerce or similar group. The simple dyadic case involves management of a contractual relationship (formal or informal) while the latter requires city and county officials to manage their respective economic development duties in a network situation and requires the director of the economic development commission to manage the network. Such range in the scope and depth of interlocal agreements poses interesting and challenging questions for scholars who want to understand how they work and to offer advice to public managers who might want to use them.

Thurmaier and Wood (2002) analyzed interlocal agreements in the Kansas City metropolitan area to ascertain the impetus for agreements and the horizontal and vertical dimensions of agreements. They frame cooperative relationships between local units of government in terms of four levels of interlocal agreement (communication, coordination, cooperation and consolidation) and the type of substantive policy or service area. They found a strong link between the creation of interlocal agreements and underlying social networks among administrators. The administrators were more focused on improving service effectiveness than governmental efficiency, regularly proposing new collaborative arrangements to their respective elected officials. The social networks among administrators

were found to be much stronger than the social networks among elected officials, supporting Frederickson's administrative conjunction theory (1999) that posits that intergovernmental partnerships and social networks are driven primarily by professional staff who are more inclined to think and act regionally and to build "epistemic communities" (707) than elected officials who are more focused on electoral matters that are jurisdictional and local in nature and scope. Thurmaier and Wood found that the bountiful ILAs in the Kansas City metropolitan area thrived in a political and administrative culture that emphasized a "norm of reciprocity" among the more than 100 local government units in the metropolitan area.

Pagano (1999) and Wood (2004) found that intergovernmental partnerships have become the structure of choice for many jurisdictions in the delivery of urban services. Wood (2004) uses a typology of service delivery arrangements that include joint initiatives, contracts, transfer of services (functional consolidation), city-county consolidation, and partnerships with regional institutions such as a council of government. According to Wood, intergovernmental arrangements may be preferable to public-private partnerships in that governments share common goals and values which results in more trust, fewer agency problems, and lower transaction costs. Collectively, the nascent body of research on ILAs raises interesting questions regarding their utility in creating and maintaining collaborative communities.

Research Questions

We can think of at least three sets of research questions related to interlocal agreements.

- What is the scope of interlocal agreements? More specifically:
 - Are they used more for one type of public service than another?
 - What are the long and short term trends in use of ILAs?

- Are they used more by one type of local government than another (e.g., more commonly by counties than cities)?
- What considerations prompt the creation of management agreements? More specifically:
 - Do underlying social networks improve the likelihood that ILAs will be created?
 - Are economic and fiscal factors more important than management factors as the impetus for creating agreements?
- What are the management tools for creating and maintaining successful interlocal agreements? More specifically:
 - do underlying social networks improve the likelihood that ILAs will be maintained successfully?
 - What role does information technology play in the management of agreements?

In the remainder of this paper, we will discuss a project in Iowa that begins to answer some of these questions in a systematic statewide study of interlocal agreements.

Methodology

Interlocal agreements in Iowa range from the informal dyadic relationships to complex formal agreements crafted within the authority of chapter 28E of the Iowa code (Iowa Code 2003). Hence, interlocal agreements in Iowa are often referred to as 28E agreements. Under chapter 28E, interlocal agreements must be filed with the Office of the Secretary of State (OSS) and a local recorder. The OSS staff registers the agreements with a barcode and then

archives the papers in a box; when enough boxes are collected in the office, the stack is sent to the state archives.

The Public Policy & Administration Program at Iowa State University received funding from the Iowa Access Advisory Board (Department of Administrative Services) to develop a project to transform static archives of interlocal agreements in Iowa into a dynamic database accessible on the internet. The study has three main components:

- To create a web-accessible 28E information system
- To survey all local government units (LGUs) with 28E agreements to determine the scope and breadth of agreements in Iowa, and
- To conduct in-depth field interviews for a sample of selected 28E agreements to identify why and how an agreement is effective (or ineffective).

The analysis of survey and field study data will also be web-accessible. Together, the information system will allow citizens, local elected officials and local public managers to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of government services to citizens by learning about effective interlocal (28E) agreements used in Iowa's communities.

The Public Policy & Administration Program worked in cooperation with the Office of the Secretary of State, the Iowa League of Cities, the Iowa State Association of Counties, the Iowa City/County Managers Association, and the School Administrators of Iowa to survey all local government units in Iowa regarding their use and satisfaction with 28E agreements. The survey package was sent to the central contact point for each type of local government, either the county auditor, the city manager/city clerk, the school superintendent, or the fire chief. The survey package included a CD with two types of files. First, there were multiple TIF files (e.g. L006615.tif) that were scanned copies of each of the 28E agreements for the LGU. There was also a single PDF file on the CD that contained individual surveys corresponding to

each of the 28E agreements (i.e., the TIF files). The LGU contact was ask to “distribute each survey and its corresponding 28E copy to the person who is responsible for managing the 28E program or project, if you are not that person.”

We mailed or delivered 4949 surveys to 98 counties, accounting for about 3485 of the 28E agreements. We personally delivered another 425 surveys to the Polk County Auditor's office, the largest single source of 28E agreements in the state. We mailed surveys to 643 cities in Iowa, accounting for about 5796 of the 28E agreements, and personally delivered more surveys to the city of Des Moines (single largest source of city agreements) accounting for 252 agreements.

Table 1. Sample & Response of Surveys and 28E Agreements.

Local Government	Number with at least one 28E	Number of 28E Agreements
Counties	99	3934
Cities	644	6048
School Districts	226	719
Fire Districts	135	135
<i>Total Distributed</i>		10,836
<i>Total Returns</i>		1,290 (12%)

Approximately 1290 surveys were returned from about 10,800 that were sent to all four types of LGUs in table 1. Surveys were only sent to an LGU that had at least one agreement filed with OSS between 1993 and May 2004. The response rate as of October 2005 is about 12 percent.

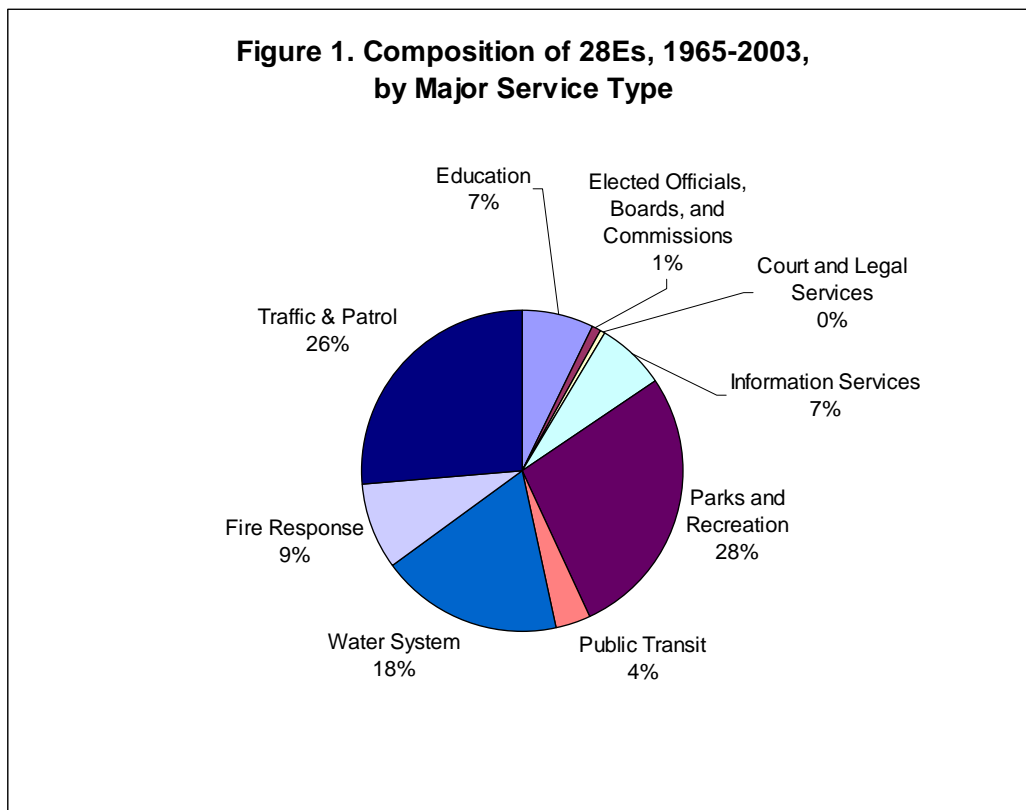
An index of service codes was created to categorize agreements by the type of public service (Appendix A). Codes were creating by amalgamating services provided by a “full-service” city of 50,000 population and a GFOA award winning budget (Ames, IA) and services provided by a professionally managed county government with a GFOA award winning budget (Scott County, IA). Each of the 11,797 agreements filed between 1965 and July 2004

were coded as providing a single type of service. In some cases, agreements included multiple services (e.g., mutual aid response for fire and ambulance) and these were coded for the first service mentioned in the title.

Results

Database Analysis

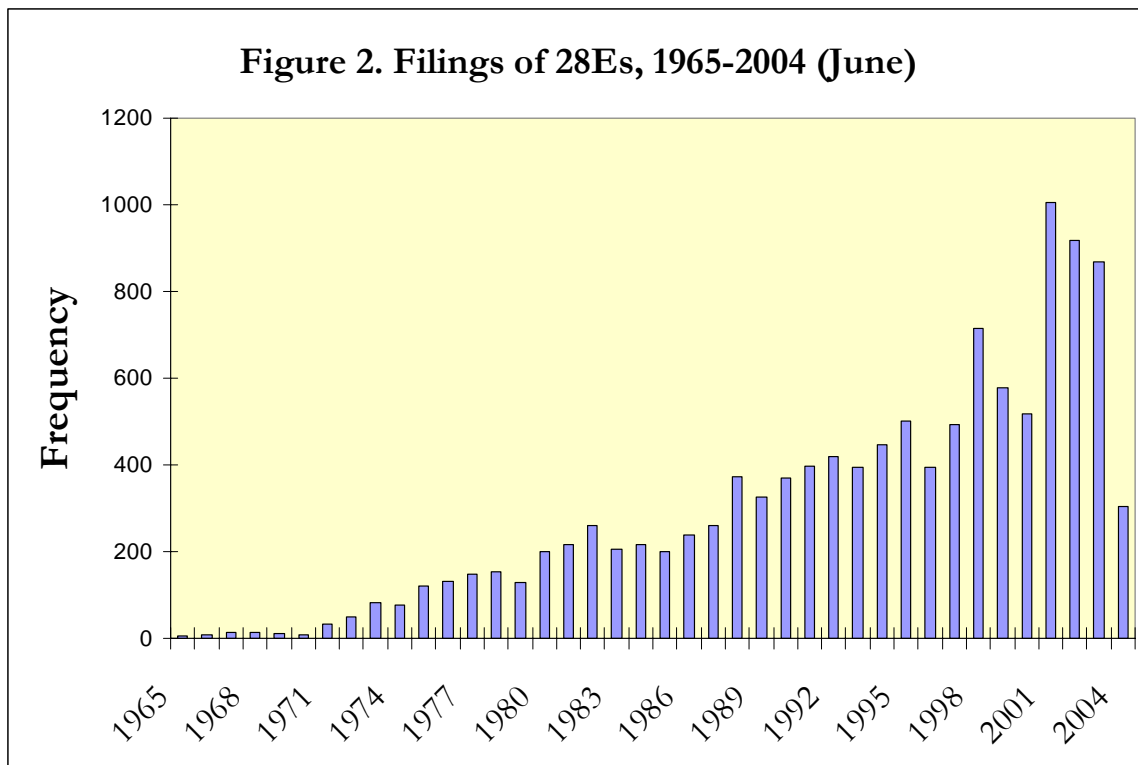
As seen in figure 1, community and neighborhood services and law enforcement account for the two largest types of 28E agreements filed with OSS between 1965 and 2003. The Community and Neighborhood Services group includes housing, health, library, planning,



elder services, and economic development agreements. The Law Enforcement group includes traffic & patrol, jail, emergency management, and criminal investigations

agreements. The third largest group of agreements falls in the Highways and Public Works area, including water systems, electric utility system, engineering, streets, sanitation, and other facilities. Together, these three groups account for nearly three quarters (72 percent) of the 11,797 agreements on file.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of 28E agreements over time, 1965-2004. The number of filings includes annual renewals of 28E agreements, for example in traffic and patrol between sheriffs and small towns. Hence the numbers overstate the actual number of relationships between units of local governments. For example, if a small town establishes a 28E agreement with a county sheriff's office to patrol the town for a year for a fixed price, that is considered a single agreement. If the agreement is renewed for another year, it is considered a brand new agreement by OSS and receives a new ID number. Consequently, there is some built-in acceleration of agreements over time; some sheriff-town agreements are over 10 years old, renewed annually.



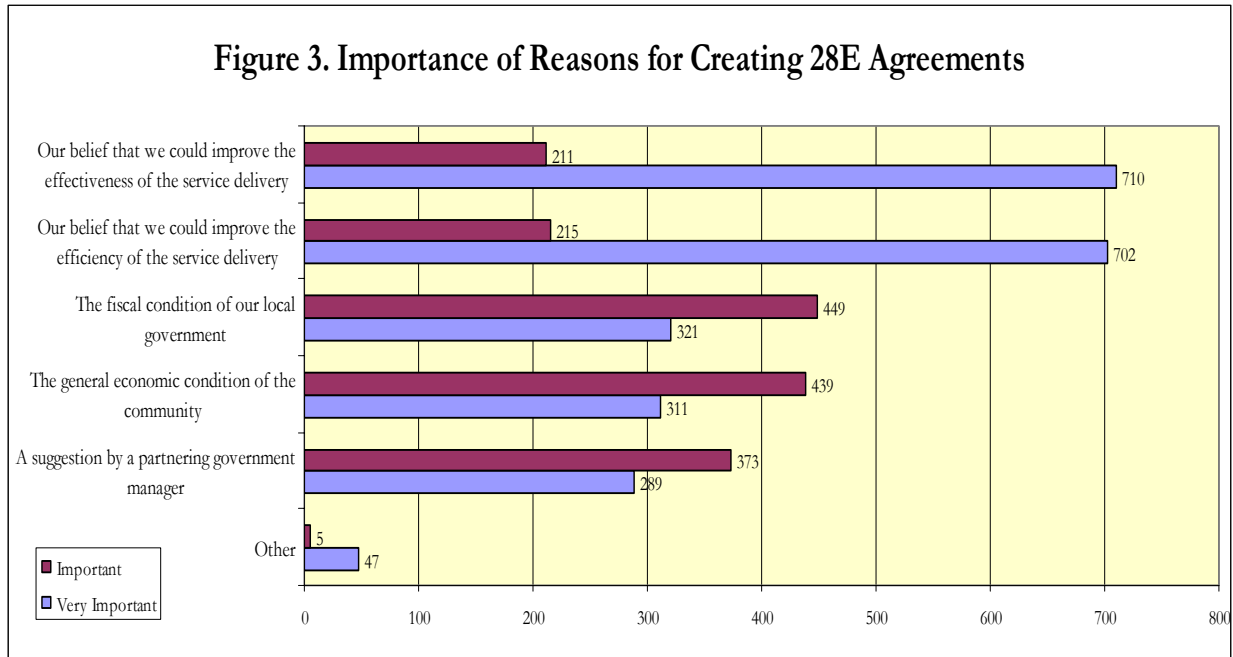
We are still analyzing this phenomenon by service type, so we have yet to estimate the acceleration factor embedded in the longterm trend. One notes a steady increase in 28E filings until 2002, when there is precipitous drop. (We only have 50% of the 2004 agreements in our database for analysis, so one can disregard the 2004 entry.) We are exploring reasons for the marked decline in 28E agreements, but have yet to settle on a reasonable explanation.

Survey Analysis

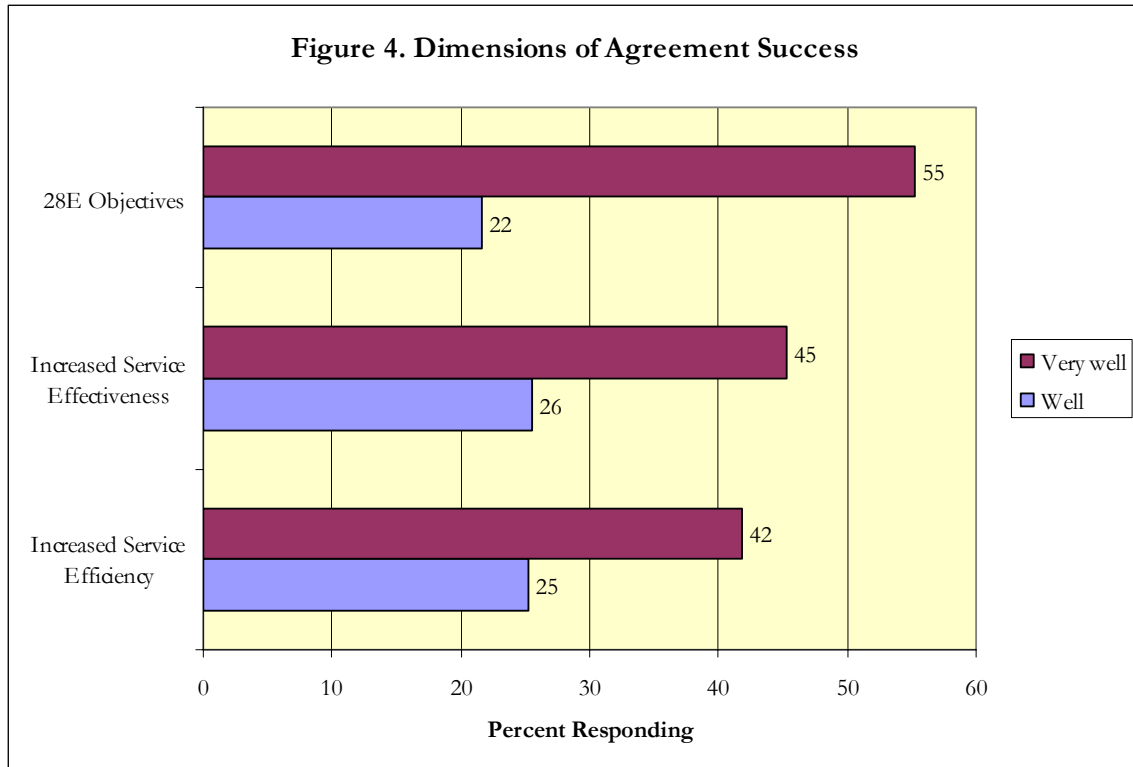
In addition to analysis of the complete set of 28Es filed with OSS, a second component of our analysis involves the survey data. Based on survey data, we expect that about 75 percent of the 28E agreements filed with OSS are ongoing relationships (compared with about 25 percent that are short term project agreements).

The most important reasons for creating 28Es are to improve effectiveness and efficiency of local government services (figure 3); these two reasons each received more than twice as many votes as the fiscal condition of the local government or the general economic conditions of the community. There is a high correlation (0.907) between those who create 28Es for efficiency and those who create them for effectiveness reasons. Similarly, there is a high correlation (0.711) between those who create agreements due to the general economic condition of community or the fiscal strain on the local government.

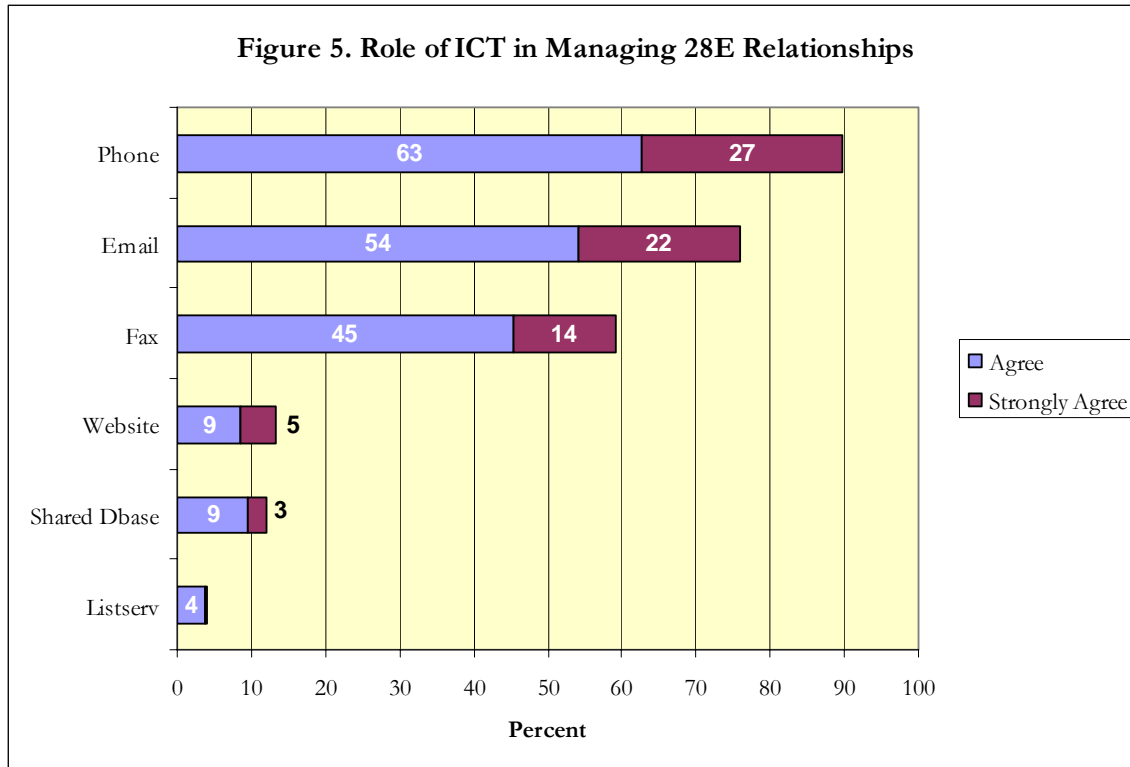
Figure 3. Importance of Reasons for Creating 28E Agreements



Respondents overwhelmingly believe their 28E agreements are successful (figure 4). About 77 percent believe their agreement has achieved its objectives well or very well. Similar proportions believe that their 28E agreement has increased service effectiveness and efficiency (71 percent and 67 percent, respectively) well or very well. The three measures of ILA success are highly correlated; Spearman’s test indicates a very strong correlation between achieving objectives and increasing service effectiveness (0.807) and between achieving objectives and increasing service efficiency (0.764).

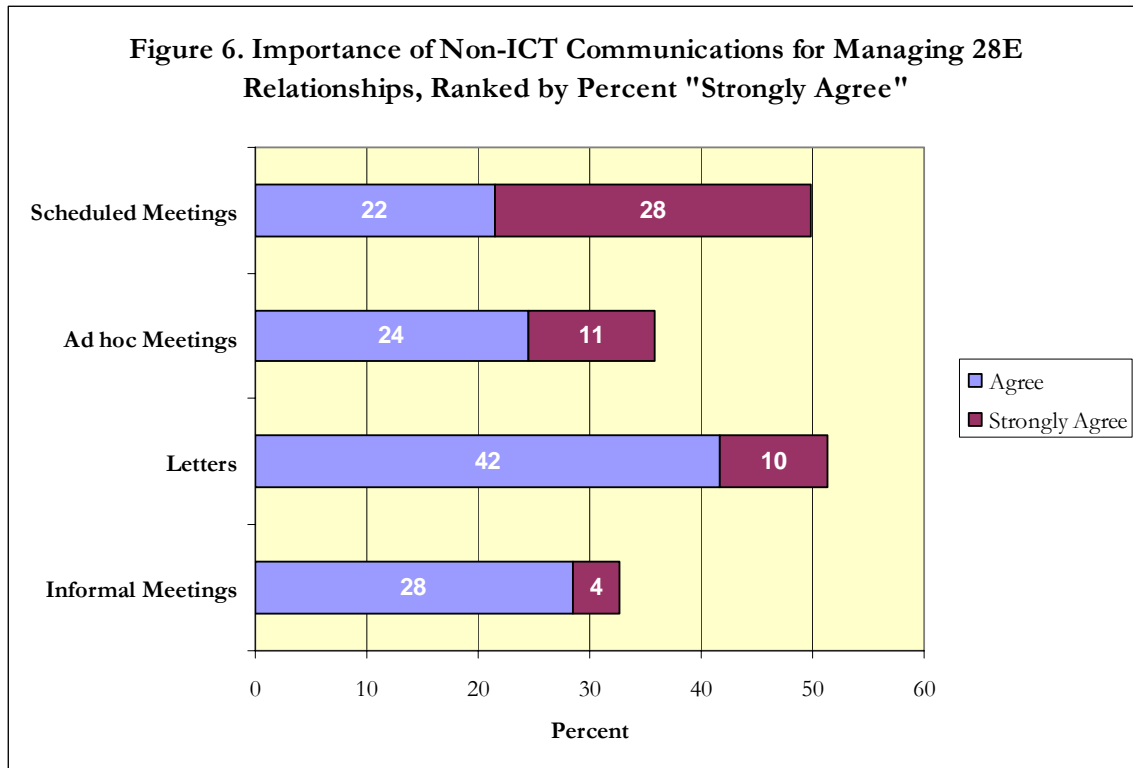


One of our more important questions is what accounts for the success of interlocal agreements. Figure 5 indicates that communication using different information and communication technology (ICT) is an important factor in managing ILA relationships. About 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the phone helped them manage their agreement relationship. Email and fax technologies were also important, with combined scores of 76 and 59 percent, respectively. Figure 5 also indicates a substantial difference in the degree to which these more conventional ICT methods are used compared to a website, listserv or shared database. We are exploring factors that may account for the difference in importance, speculating that the type of service may be a significant factor.



While ICT modes are important, figure 6 indicates that nontechnical communication means are more critical for managing ILA relationships than some ICT, but less important than the phone, email and fax technologies. About half the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that regularly scheduled face to face meetings (50 percent) and correspondence via letters (51 percent) helped them manage their 28E agreements. About a third similarly indicated that ad hoc and informal meetings between parties was helpful in managing their 28E agreements. All four of these communications methods were more important than using a website, shared database or listserv in 28E management (figure 4). We are exploring the data further to determine if the frequency of contact using each communication mode affects the success of an agreement, hypothesizing that more frequent communication by face to face meetings is more important than other methods for longterm agreement relationships. The value of a particular communication method may relate to whether the ILA is for a short term project

or ongoing relationship; we would expect personal (face to face) meetings to be more important for the latter than the former, for example.



Field Interviews

We have some limited data available from field interviews of managers using 28E agreements to provide different types of public services. The analysis supports the proposition that underlying social networks with regular communication foster successful ILAs. One study comparing different types of economic development 28E agreements (Ashbacher 2005) found that counties create structures and make choices that arise from local conditions, following no single formula for creating a countywide economic development network. Ashbacher found that agreement effectiveness is related to wider participation in network decisionmaking. One network was an alliance. The two others had county economic development commissions (EDC); of those two, one EDC had representation from all communities involved and one did not. The network with

widespread participants from all communities was the most effective. “Participant selection, operating structure, decision making, communication, and relationship issues--namely trust, stability, and power--have an impact on interlocal ED network effectiveness at the network and organizational levels” Ashbacher concludes.

Another field study of patrol agreements between county sheriffs and small communities in their counties again found that regular communication between the parties affected the success of the agreement (Scanlan 2005). Sheriffs that used a community policing approach to the 28E agreements were more likely to have regular and more frequent contacts between the sheriff and public officials and citizens in the town for which they had a contract for patrol services. These contacts substantially increased the satisfaction of the town officials with respect to the quality of services received from the sheriff. In effect, the community policing approach depends on an underlying social network of public officials and citizens at the county and town levels to monitor patrol services, identify unmet needs, and evaluate responsiveness of the sheriff's office.

We continue to gather data from field interviews of public managers using 28E agreements for other types of public services, including housing, planning, libraries and emergency management. These studies promise rich qualitative data to supplement the survey data.

Conclusions

This research provides answers to some but not all of the postulated research questions related to interlocal agreements. We find that interlocal agreements are used across a wide range of public services, with neighborhood and community services, and public safety, comprising the largest share of agreements in the last 40 years. The long term trend has been

for a substantial increase in the use of 28E agreements in Iowa, although most recently there was a sharp decline in agreements registered with OSS. The cause for the change in the trend line requires further investigation.

The most common impetus for the creation of management agreements is a belief by public officials that an ILA will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of a public service. These two reasons are much more commonly cited than the fiscal condition of the local government or the economic conditions of the community. This suggests that management considerations are the most important impetus for ILA participation. This has policy consequences for state legislators and governors who may believe that reducing state aid to local governments and increasing fiscal stress on local governments will lead to increased interlocal agreements. These results cast doubt on the efficacy of such strategies.

More work is required to understand the extent to which underlying social networks improve the likelihood that ILAs will be created. Data from the field interviews suggests that healthy underlying social networks, maintained with regular communications, is important in maintaining successful interlocal agreements. The results indicate that both ICT and nontechnical communications methods are important for managing interlocal agreements. The old standbys of the phone and fax machine—and now email, are more helpful than face to face meetings and letters; and sophisticated ICT tools such as shared databases and listservs are likely used in particular situations, which requires further study of the data.

These early results from the study provide a brief description of the breadth and scope of interlocal agreements in a single state. As the first statewide study of interlocal agreements, the study offers a glimpse of the complexity involved in understanding the impetus for agreements and the critical management strategies and tools needed to maintain successful interlocal agreements. We look forward to further explorations of this data.

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Appendix A. Service Codes for Public Services

Service Type	Including:
Law Enforcement	
Police Protection	Patrol, Pursuit, tickets, crowd control, parking
Jail & Corrections	inc prisoner transfer, juveniles, community corrections
Emergency Management	inc 911, ambulance and emergency management
Criminal Investigations	including detectives, crime labs, drug enforcement
Fire Services	
Fire Response	
Hazmat Response	
Highways & Public Works	
Water System	including water, wastewater, storm water systems, utilities, wells
Electric & Energy Systems	including utilities, resale of power, gas utilities
Engineering	
Facilities	
Street & Road Systems	including bridges, streets, signaling, right-of-way, RR crossings
Sanitation	
Other	including golf courses, flood projects
Transportation	
Public Transit	
Airports	
Motor Vehicles	including driver licensing, car registration
Other	including railroads
Community & Neighborhood Services	
Parks and Recreation	including hunting and fishing licenses, conservation programs
Library Services	
Health	including mental health, hospitals, substance abuse, animal control, well regulation
Housing	including public housing, housing assistance, Sect 8
Economic Development	including tourism, business promotion, unemployment/job services
Planning	including building permits, zoning, inspections, other planning
Other	including elderly services, child support collections
General Management	
Information Services	
Purchasing Services	
Risk Management	
Fleet Services	
Finance & Tax Administration	
Court and Legal Services	
Elected Officials, Boards, & Commissions	
Education	including boundaries agreements, changing boundaries, voter registration any education service, inc school resource officers, transportation, but EXCLUDES workforce development/job training (filed under economic development)