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Collaborative Governance Council Begins Its Work

By Rebecca Otto, State Auditor

The Collaborative Governance Council held its first meeting in St. Paul on July 20th, and has held three additional meetings since. The Council was created in a bipartisan effort in legislation to bring together key representatives from local governments and other organizations to develop recommendations for increasing government collaboration, cooperation and innovation at all levels.

The Association of Minnesota Counties appointed Commissioner Jack Swanson of Roseau County to serve as one of the Council's nine members. Other members include a representative each for cities, townships, schools, the three major local government employee unions and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. I serve as the chair for the Council, and I am a nonvoting member on the Council.

Identifying and Narrowing Topics for Consideration

At the first meeting, the Council brainstormed about collaborative/cooperative/innovative approaches already happening in government. They then created a list of topics to explore around collaboration, cooperation and innovation in government. Members ranked the topics in order of the priority. At the second meeting, the Council agreed to work on the following list of topics:

- Shared services/shared resources
- Technology
- Cooperative purchasing
- State-wide health insurance for all public employees
- Joint powers – review statutes/real life situations
- Public safety collaboration
- Communication (efficient mail practices, publication requirements)
- Land use matters

The Council discussed a wide range of possibilities for shared services and resources. Seeing that the topic was very broad, they decided to review technology first, as they acknowledged

not having access to up-to-date technology can be an impediment to collaboration, cooperation and innovation. Council members were particularly interested in hearing about broadband technology.

Presentations on Successful Broadband Collaborations

The Council's third meeting featured a number of presentations on successful broadband collaborations and initiatives around the state. Paul Brinkman of the Northeast Service Cooperative's IT Collaborative presented remotely to the Council by teleconference from Mountain Iron. Mr. Brinkman told the Council about their IT Collaborative, which focuses on IT backbone and IT connectivity. The Cooperative links 22 school districts, 16 libraries, 10 higher education sites one state agency and two public/private sites. The Collaborative reduced the members' aggregate costs from over \$2 million in FY01 to \$592,000 in FY10. Their newest initiative is the Northeast Middle Mile Fiber Project. It will lay 915 miles of fiber in the ground, and will serve 8 counties and nearly ¼ of Minnesota's land mass.

Tom Garrison of the City of Eagan followed with a presentation on successful technology partnerships, including public-public and public-private partnerships. One example was the City of Eagan partnering with Thomson Reuters, the city's largest employer. Thomson Reuters houses a public access studio that Eagan's E-TV uses in the morning, and Thomson Reuters uses in the afternoon. The studio is state-of-the-art, and both the City of Eagan and Thomson Reuters gained efficiencies out of the partnership. Thomson Reuters built the spaces, Eagan owns the equipment and provides a negotiated number of hours of internal video support, and Eagan gets to use the facility. The outcome was more than \$100,000 savings per year due to the partnership; Eagan has a new professional studio to use; and the city pays \$0 for rent, garbage removal, maintenance, and local phone lines. Thomson Reuters has a studio with efficient utilization capacity. It was a win-win for all.

Gary Shelton, Scott County Administrator, told the Council about the Scott County Broadband Project, a collaborative effort which built a broadband (fiber backbone) network across Scott County and beyond. The Project was a successful partnership involving the state, four different counties, cities, school districts and the private sector. It was said that the project would not have happened had it not been for the cooperative effort of all involved. There was an immediate return on investment of taxpayer dollars for every partnering government entity. They now spend less and get substantially more.

The Minnesota Cable Communications Association and the Minnesota Telecom Alliance also gave brief presentations on what they do.

A common theme from many of the presenters was that regular communication amongst government entities and the private sector is beneficial. As Tom Garrison said, "The side benefits of just starting the conversation will surprise you." The Council asked the technology/broadband presenters about roadblocks they encountered in completing their projects. One point that was made was that in order for large technology infrastructure projects to happen, collaborative partners are vital – it's difficult for private or public entities to successfully complete these projects alone.

At the third meeting, the Council was lucky enough to have Rick King, global head of technology and operations for Thomson Reuters Legal present. Mr. King was the chair of the Minnesota High-Speed Broadband Task Force that issued an extensive report to the legislature on the state of broadband in Minnesota which included recommendations. He reviewed the work of the Task Force, and also shared lessons learned for future Task Forces that include private sector volunteers who are willing to work on improving government with government partners. There is possible legislation to be pursued that could ease this process.

The Council has begun to review Cooperative Purchasing opportunities for local governments to see if there is a “best” option. Jackie Finger, from the Department of Administration Materials Management Division, was the first presenter on the topic. She covered the State’s Cooperative Purchasing Venture (CPV). There are definite advantages to purchasing from the contract, which can be viewed on the our website under “Collaborative Governance Council.” Other presenters will be invited to present to the Council on cooperative purchasing opportunities.

The Council’s goal is to produce recommendations and or legislative changes that will allow for more collaboration, cooperation, and innovation at all levels of government. The Council's regular meetings are open to the public, and all interested parties are encouraged to attend and participate. Council information, including meeting notices, meeting minutes, PowerPoint presentations that were presented, and other materials are available on the Office of the State Auditor website at:

<http://www.auditor.state.mn.us/default.aspx?page=20100702.000>.