

# Intergovernmental Collaboration: Successes, Failures, and Lessons Learned

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There has been a great deal of robust dialogue recently about intergovernmental collaboration and consolidation of services. However, intergovernmental cooperation, collaboration, consolidation, and consolidation—along with interlocal agreements—are by no means new concepts. Significant discussion has been taking place for many years, but these discussions have become more earnest as local governments have experienced the financial stresses of the last decade.

Kent County, Michigan, where I am the County Administrator/Controller, has been involved in collaborative partnerships with local units of government and other organizations since 2002. Yet the more than 100 partnerships that exist—both formal and informal—represent the tip of the iceberg. (The list is available at [http://www.accesskent.com/News/Publications/2012/Intergov\\_Coop\\_Update\\_2012.pdf](http://www.accesskent.com/News/Publications/2012/Intergov_Coop_Update_2012.pdf).) These collaborative partnerships, along with similar efforts in the six core cities of Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood, Walker, Grandville, and East Grand Rapids, Michigan, were used as the basis of a report titled "Streamlining Functions and Services of Kent County and Metropolitan Grand Rapids Cities," issued in 2009 by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan (<http://www.crc-mich.org/PUBLICAT/2000s/2009/rpt357.pdf>).

What is the rationale for this increased and more profound dialogue about cooperation and collaboration? It's not simply about reducing costs. Michigan Governor

Rick Snyder has required local units of government to document, on an annual basis, their collaborative efforts in order to receive a portion of state revenue-sharing. In addition, the state provides discretionary, competitive funding for collaborative efforts. Rather, the dialogue has increased because local units of government have realized they must become more efficient and effective in delivering services to their citizens.

What makes these issues so interesting is the significant number of local governments in Michigan and how the state's strong history, culture, and statutory authority of home rule have affected the thought process and philosophy of collaboration and, especially, consolidation. Michigan has 83 counties, more than 530 cities and villages, more than 1,200 townships, and more than 350 special districts. And although there are regions for metropolitan planning organizations, workforce development programs, planning and economic development organizations, agricultural cooperative extension districts, emergency preparedness regions, and so on, the boundaries are inconsistent. Even the three associations representing local governments (the Michigan Townships Association, the Michigan Municipal League, and the Michigan Association of Counties) have differing regions. The state is governed by the Friday Night Lights syndrome: you can mess with everything else, but don't mess with my football team (or my township, my city, my school district).

In essence, in Michigan there is no model for the regional delivery of services for transportation, public safety, arts and culture, health and human services, community and economic development, and the like. There are 80 different regions for regional services provided through the state (Michigan Department of Technology, Management, and Budget, March 13, 2013). This “tapestry” of regions cannot be mapped in any coherent fashion, the best being the map (figure 1) that identifies 40 of these regions. The State of Michigan recognizes these inconsistencies; Governor Rick Snyder has proposed a Regional Prosperity Initiative that provides for a new

definition and realignment of regions throughout the state to encourage local private, public, and nonprofit organizations to partner and achieve more regional communication, cooperation, and collaboration (see figure 2).

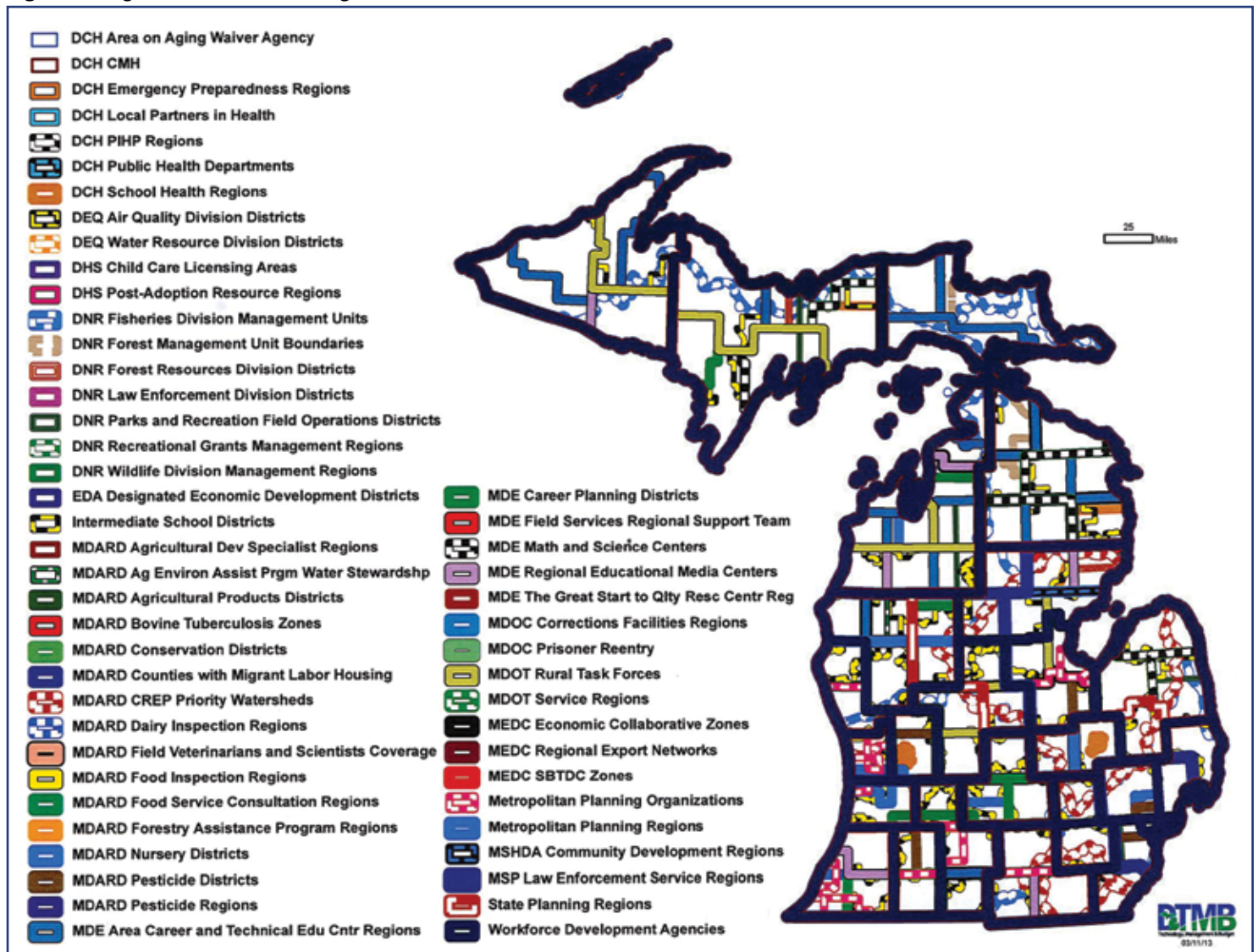
## The Hierarchy

About four years ago I developed a graphic (figure 3) about the issues affecting the ability of local units of government and other organizations to work together in a more collaborative manner. (Note that this hierarchy of issues is Michigan-specific.)

While *technology* may not be an absolute requirement for collaboration, it should be seriously considered as

a foundational element. The more closely hardware platforms (Avaya, Cisco, Intel processors), server platforms (Microsoft, Novell, Linux), and applications (PeopleSoft, New World, BS&A) are aligned, the easier it is to address the second layer: operational issues. When the various technology platforms are not well-aligned among the potential partners, it may preclude achieving some collaboration objectives or make resolving operational issues more complex. Alternatively, technology alignment itself may be a collaboration objective, either by moving to publicly available cloud-based offerings or by creating a private cloud to offer services to collaboration partners.

**Figure 1.** Regional services in Michigan



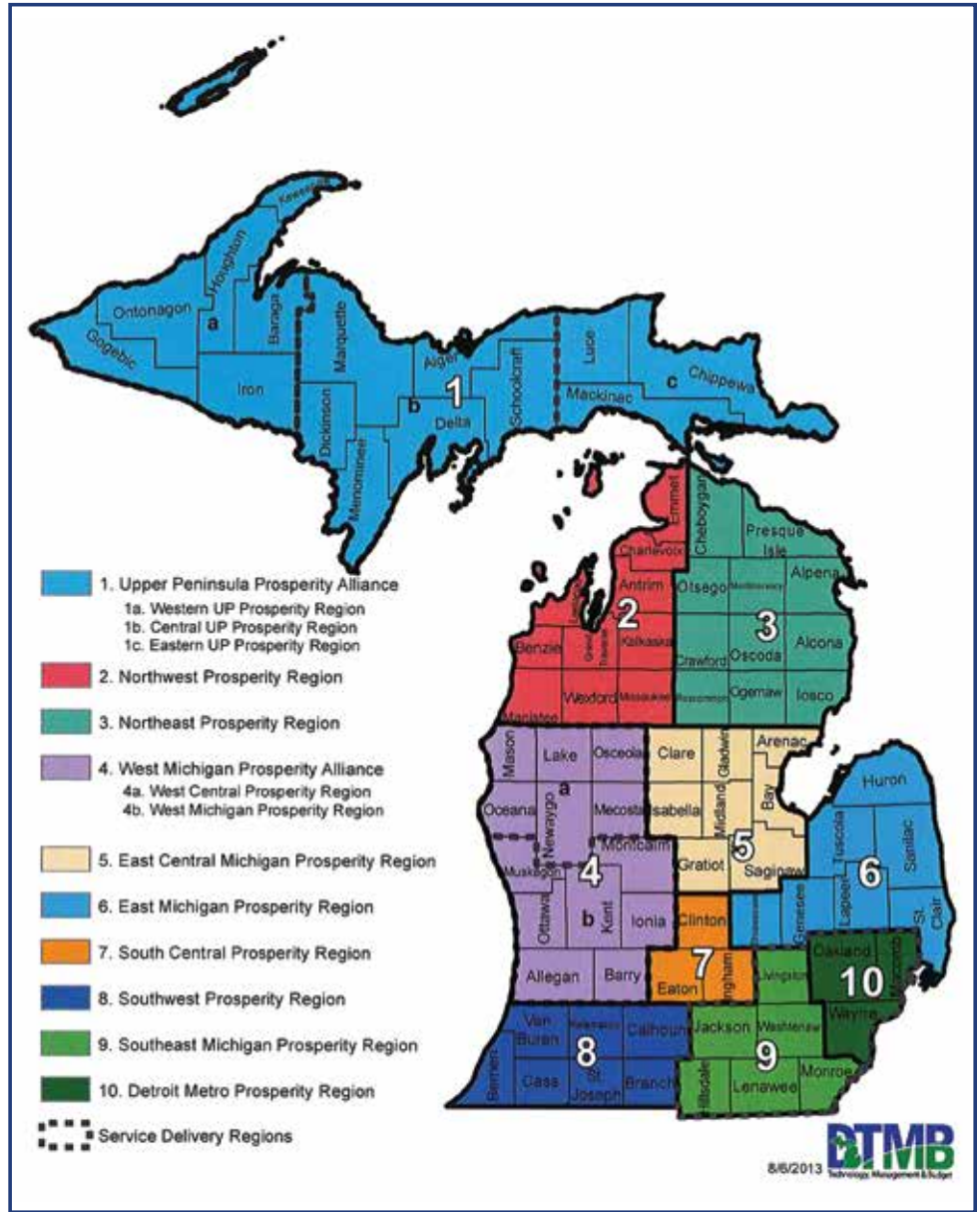


Each organization has its own *operational* identity, as reflected in the form of missions and functions, policies and procedures, collective bargaining agreements, and historical practices. Counties are not big cities. While cities for the most part focus on physical infrastructure and public safety (police and fire services), counties must deal with the additional elements of justice, corrections, and human services. Discretionary functions that exist in counties may also be different. Operational issues between organizations, even in collaborative or cooperative endeavors (versus true consolidation), have to be acknowledged, understood, and addressed.

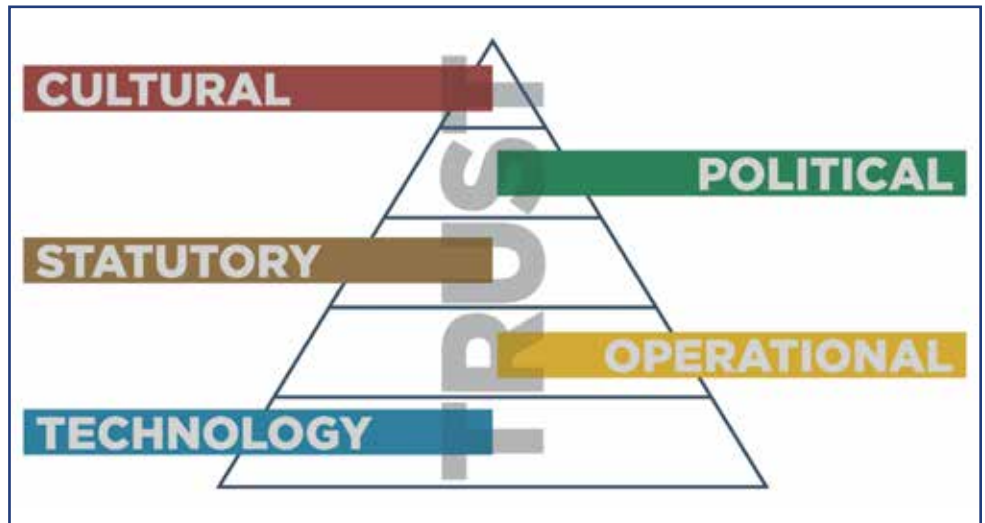
The next significant layer is the *statutory* restrictions on local units of government. Public Acts 7 (Urban Cooperation Act) and 8 (Intergovernmental Transfers of Functions and Responsibilities Act) of 1967, as well as the Metropolitan Councils Act (PA 292 of 1989), have certain requirements that restrict or constrain the ability of local units of government to consolidate and collaborate. The Municipal Partnership Act (PA 258, PA of 2011) has addressed some of these mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is important that the State of Michigan continue to provide enabling legislation to remove barriers to or restrictions on collaborative efforts.

The next level of the pyramid is the *political* considerations of dealing with change, collaboration, or consolidation of services. These considerations are very real and tangible. Former U.S. Speaker of the House Thomas Phillip (Tip) O’Neill, Jr., coined the phrase, “All politics is local.” The politics of dealing with change, collaboration, and consolidation are complicated and emotional—and local. Citizens of counties, cities, villages, and townships appreciate knowing that their elected officials are friends and neighbors. For example, in my case, my state

**Figure 2.** State of Michigan prosperity regions



**Figure 3.** Hierarchy of issues related to collaboration



representative lives in my neighborhood. There is a certain value to that. (An interesting and insightful read on the country's founding and how local politics was instrumental in the revolution is *The American Revolution: A History* [Wood 2003]. This short tome helped me better understand that "all politics is local," that local units of government are essential to democratic governance, and that they are part of our nation's history.)

At the top of the pyramid, and one of the biggest issues to overcome, is *culture*. As mentioned previously, Michigan is a very strong home rule state. That is, Michigan's constitution, statutes, and history reflect a culture of strong local governance. Each local unit of government has its own culture, and chances are that its culture differs—at least to some extent—with that of a neighboring jurisdiction. Even further, there may be many cultures *within* an organization. Kent County has 28 departments, and there are probably 28 different cultures there, along with several subcultures.

Since I developed this graphic in January 2010, one other overarching consideration has been added to the mix. In 2012, representatives of cities, townships, the business and economic development community, and nonprofit organizations met in Kent County to discuss ways for local units of government to collaborate more closely and to potentially consolidate some services. The word *trust* was mentioned on numerous occasions in numerous ways, and its importance can be neither minimized nor over-emphasized. According to *The Power of 2* (Wagner and Muller 2009), partners need to depend on each other. "Without trust," the authors write, "it's better to work alone." And trust comes from building relationships.

As mentioned earlier, Kent County is involved in quite a few collaborations and partnerships. A couple of

successes are highlighted in the following paragraphs. And, in the spirit of full disclosure, I also highlight some efforts that were not successful and how those failures were reversed. I conclude by discussing lessons learned.

## **The Successes** **DeVos Place Convention Center**

In September the City of Grand Rapids and Kent County were privileged to host the IAAO 79th Annual Conference at the DeVos Place Convention Center. Had it not been for a strong private-public partnership, along with vision and courage, those who attended the conference may not have had the opportunity to do so.

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With the addition of the 12,000-seat Van Andel Arena in 1996, downtown Grand Rapids was beginning to reach its full potential as an active, robust urban core. New businesses were popping up around the arena. To continue the renaissance that Grand Rapids and Kent County were experiencing, the area would need a new convention center. The existing convention center was antiquated and in need of massive restoration or a complete rebuilding. The problem was two-fold: land and money.

The Van Andel Arena was the product of collaboration among Grand Action (a private-sector, entrepreneurial and philanthropic group of businesspersons), the City of Grand Rapids, the State of Michigan, and the Grand Rapids Downtown Development Authority.

Grand Action spearheaded a study to look at what a new convention center could do for the city and the region. Grand Action's deliberative, thoughtful approach resulted in another public-private collaboration. The City of Grand Rapids and Kent County owned property north of the existing convention center, and that property housed the city police department, the city district court, and the county circuit court. Those facilities were also in need of replacement, so the planets were aligned for several new facilities.


Through several years of dialogue, planning, financial analyses, and collaboration, the City of Grand Rapids and Kent County moved their facilities to two different locations in the downtown area (the city leased a new facility for its police station, and the county constructed a new courthouse for the city district court and the county circuit court). The State of Michigan passed enabling legislation to create a Grand Rapids/Kent County Convention & Arena Authority (CAA). The city and county donated the land that previously housed the police department and courts to the CAA. The \$214-million project was funded through a combination of Kent County, City of Grand Rapids Downtown Development Authority, state, private-sector, and federal dollars. In February 2005, the DeVos Place Convention Center was officially dedicated, enhancing the region's many attractions.

## **Cooley Law School Public Sector Law Clinic**

Trust is integral to the process of collaboration, and trust comes from building relationships. The Cooley Law School Public Sector Clinic in Kent County is the result of a professional relationship.

The size of Kent County (615,000 people; 1,725 employees) justifies an in-house legal staff. In 2008, the





county entered into a partnership with Cooley Law School, which is headquartered in Lansing but has a number of campuses throughout the state, including one in Grand Rapids. The Law School had created a public-sector law clinic to provide opportunities for law students to “get their feet wet” by working on projects under the auspices of the clinic director and a supervising licensed attorney. Since the clinic director was a former corporate counsel for the county, she approached me about a possible partnership, thinking she had a perfect laboratory in Kent County. She knew the county because she had spent more than 10 years of her professional life here. I was receptive because I could get *free labor!* It was a win-win for both the Cooley Law School and Kent County.

The Law School provides five to six students to Kent County each term to work on any number of legal issues, ranging from Freedom of Information Act requests, to gun board proceedings, to special projects requiring various levels of legal research. In turn, several county staff members speak at the Law School’s classes each term. It is worth the county’s investment of three Saturday afternoons (about six to eight hours) per year to collaborate with the clinic. While not on the scale of a convention center, this valuable partnership works well for both the Law School and Kent County and demonstrates how solid relationships can result in positive outcomes. Had the clinic director not been familiar with the county, this partnership might not have existed. And because of the popularity of the program, students have worked in other local governments in addition to Kent County.

#### **Kent-Montcalm Equalization County Partnership**

In 2011 I was approached by the County Administrator in Montcalm

County, which borders the northern edge of Kent County, to determine whether Kent County might be interested in contracting with Montcalm County to provide for a shared Equalization Director. The retirement of the Montcalm County Equalization Director was the initial impetus for the dialogue, but there were also financial considerations—Michigan was still experiencing significant economic hardships that had started in the early 2000s and were exacerbated by the subprime mortgage crisis of the late 2000s. At the same time, there were increased pressures being placed on local governments by Governor Snyder and the Michigan Legislature to find ways to collaborate and consolidate services in Michigan.

Again, demonstrating the importance of establishing and building relationships, in January 2012 Montcalm County started contracting with Kent County for the management of its Bureau of Equalization. The Kent County director and deputy director spend 16 hours per week managing Montcalm County’s equalization process. The benefits include the ability for Kent County to retain some of its equalization staff (who might have been laid off due to reductions in funding), a different level of expertise (a new set of eyes can bring a different perspective to an established way of doing things and this goes both ways), and a reduction in costs to Montcalm County. In addition, Kent County’s Equalization Director has been able to use Montcalm County, which is significantly smaller than Kent County, as a pilot test for some projects that ultimately may be expanded to Kent County.

In time, there will be a capacity issue and the partnership may have to be reduced and/or set aside, but it is a prime example of collaborative relationships between counties.

## **The Failures**

### **Property Tax Administration System**

In 1996, Kent County had an antiquated, mainframe-based property tax administration system. The county and its 35 local units of government determined that a modern, centralized property assessment and tax collection system was needed and toiled for a number of years to develop one. The process was about as collaborative as it could have been. Every local unit of government in the county was invited to focus group meetings and participated in the development of requests for proposals, and a local government assessor and treasurer were paid by the county to negotiate through the complexities of developing and implementing this system. No agreements were signed; only verbal commitments were made. The county was expected to front the costs and ended up, through hand-shake agreements, paying for half of the cost, with the local units of government sharing the other half based upon a formula that took into account population and number of parcels. Regular meetings were held. All participants were fully engaged in the process. Money was being spent.

Then it became apparent to all parties that, because there were so many moving parts and complexities, coupled with an out-of-state vendor, little problems were becoming big problems. Several local governments were vocal about moving to a different system. I met with the local assessor and treasurer who were being retained by the county to discuss next steps. They remained optimistic; we persevered. But after several years of effort, expenditures totaling \$5.5 million, and a lawsuit filed by the vendor with a negative result for the county, the efforts were abandoned.

### **Jail per Diem**

One responsibility of the county sheriff in Michigan is to provide correctional (jail) facilities. Kent County

charges a per-diem rate for inmates to five cities that have their own district courts and deliver individuals to the correctional facility who are charged with violating the respective city's ordinances. The per-diem fee has long been contentious and the subject of court cases (not very collaborative). There was agreement about methodology, but what continued to be problematic was that units of government under the county's district court (all 21 townships, 5 villages, and 4 of the 9 cities) were not charged a per-diem rate.

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***Collectively, the participants learned and were reminded that shared technology project solutions are not easy or straightforward. It takes trust and solid calibrating of mutual interests in order to accomplish the goal of a shared objective. The lessons learned from the property tax administration system initiative will be a benefit to future collaborations.***

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In 2007–2008, a confluence of needs emerged. The millage was set to expire in 2010. Two older portions of the jail, which housed roughly half of the jail beds, needed replacement. Another millage was necessary, not only to fund the costs associated with bed replacement but also to continue to pay for half the cost of operations. In 2007, the county established a committee comprising the sheriff, some commissioners, and some local unit representatives to examine the millage question. Local units saw an opportunity to revive the per-diem issue.

The committee met on numerous occasions, but it became clear that

the per-diem issue would monopolize conversations. As a result, the committee ended its deliberations, and the county decided it would place a millage renewal question on the ballot in 2008 (to take effect in 2011) to address the facility and operational needs. Still concerned about the per-diem issue, the mayors of the five cities held a news conference on the plaza of the City-County Building Complex opposing the millage renewal and urging their citizens to do the same. The resolve of the Chair of the County Board of Commissioners to renew the millage increased, as did that of the Board of Commissioners. Again, long-standing relationships and trust were tested.

### **Interdepartmental Collaboration**

County government in Michigan is often said to be “unique.” There is no one person in charge. Unlike local governments with a strong mayor or a city manager, that is, a known chief executive officer, Michigan counties are organized as a “tapestry of governments.” If someone asks me who is in charge, I reply, “It depends.” In Kent County, five elected department directors and numerous judges report to the people; there are several department directors who report to semi-autonomous boards; and then there is the County Administrator/Controller's sphere of control. Even the governing body's authority is limited to funding the operations of elected officials. The Board of Commissioners cannot direct an elected official or judge on how to operate the department. And even those departments that fall under the purview of the County Administrator/Controller can sometimes be a bit unwieldy. So my skills in facilitation have increased because I can't order the sheriff to do something. I must by necessity try to influence the sheriff to work with me. And here again, history, relationships, and trust come in to play.

So, in my view, the organization of Kent County government is 28 different organizations with at least 28 different cultures (and probably a hundred or more subcultures). Getting departments to communicate with one another, let alone collaborate, can sometimes be difficult; they don't know each other as an organization and so they don't know the different talents and strengths in each department. I made it my mission to improve the level of communication and collaboration among county departments.

### **Failures Reversed (or from Lemons to Lemonade) Property Tax Administration**

There are a couple of things that kept me from being fired when I went to the Board of Commissioners and discussed the property tax administration system failure. First, I was honest with the board. Second, I had a backup plan. While everyone was committed to the idea of a preserving a centralized property tax administration system, the technology at that time simply did not afford the ability to maintain centralization at all costs. The county paid a high price to learn that lesson.

During the course of the property tax administration system project, an alternative based on a decentralized, distributed computer-assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) system was gaining popularity in other municipalities throughout the state, and ultimately proved to be the direction taken by the county. The system is called Equalizer, and it has continued to grow as the leading CAMA system in Michigan over the past decade. The county is now working successfully in its tenth year in this system. The partnerships that were strained during the development process have had time to be rebuilt. This is important because the need to collaborate in the future is

a policy and budget imperative, and the trust that has been renewed will be needed for future collaborations. Collectively, the participants learned and were reminded that shared technology project solutions are not easy or straightforward. It takes trust and solid calibrating of mutual interests in order to accomplish the goal of a shared objective. The lessons learned from the property tax administration system initiative will be a benefit to future collaborations.

### **Jail per Diem**

A convergence of luck, public education, and negotiations resulted in a number of outcomes. First, the voters in the county approved the millage renewal, despite (or perhaps in some cases because of) the mayors' public opposition. The millage renewal passed in all but one community. Part of this was the result of the millage being a renewal, not a new millage or an increase in the millage rates. Second, although Michigan's economy had not been good since 2001, the vote came prior to the significant economic crisis that hit Michigan and the United States as a result of the subprime mortgage debacle. Third, the county was very deliberate about educating the public. By law, no local government in Michigan can use financial resources to advocate for an affirmative vote of the public. But nothing prevents a local government from providing facts and education.

With the approval of the millage, the county did have some leverage with negotiating a jail per-diem rate that no one was happy with but all could live with. Again, relationships, though strained, did help in the process.

### **Interdepartmental Collaboration**

As County Administrator/Controller, my mission to improve collaboration within the diverse and complex organization of Kent County is an ongoing one. I created a high-level (depart-

ment director) Interdepartmental Collaboration Work Group that met quarterly for about 18 months and now meets as needed. There have been a number of successes, including educating each other about what we all do, and a list of interdepartmental collaborations is maintained on an annual basis, similar to the intergovernmental collaboration list.

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***When the county has experienced a natural disaster (which happened in the spring of 2013 when significant flooding occurred), bureau staff worked diligently with the Emergency Management Coordinator to identify the values of the real and personal property that had been damaged. This task was not easy, given the time constraints and requirements of working with the state and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.***

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There are a couple of examples specifically related to how the Bureau of Equalization has integrated its expertise into the organization beyond its traditional functions. First, the bureau plays a significant role in emergency planning, preparedness, and response. When the county experienced a natural disaster (which happened in the spring of 2013 when significant flooding occurred), bureau staff worked diligently with the Emergency Management Coordinator to identify the values of the real and personal property that had been damaged. This task was not easy, given the time constraints and requirements of working with the state and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Second, the bureau has also been a critical component in developing an inventory of county-owned property that has been used for any number of projects, including working with the Drain Commission to assist in its development of drainage plans and with the Sheriff's Department to identify street centerlines throughout the county for dispatch-related functions.

Organizationally, for those individuals who directly report to me, I have included—as part of their annual performance evaluation—a requirement for them to individually, and departmentally, develop and implement at least two meaningful collaborative efforts with other departments within the county. As a result, this organizational mission is tied to performance reviews and compensation.

### **Lessons Learned**

During my 36 years in government administration, especially the last decade or so, I have read and learned a number of things about cooperation and collaboration.

- 1. Partnerships or collaborations do not have to be equal, but they do have to be fair (Wagner and Muller 2009).** It makes sense, but until I read it, it did not resonate with me. A partnership is usually considered to be a 50-50, equal relationship. But it doesn't have to be. If a partner invests 30 percent of the resources, that partner shouldn't expect more than 30 percent of the return. If a partner invests 70 percent of the resources, that partner should very well expect to receive 70 percent of the benefit. This is, of course, an ideal, but it also has made me think about partnerships and fairness. This reciprocity of cost-benefit can lead to trust.



**2. Collaboration may not save money, at least initially.** Collaboration, in many instances, requires significant up-front investments. Although the Kent County area is innovative, its central dispatch service for public safety has fallen behind the curve. After several decades and numerous attempts, four years ago the call-taking function for dispatch services was centralized. At the time, there were five primary service answering points (PSAPs), four operated by local communities and one by the Michigan State Police. The governing bodies were persuaded to move toward a model that would reduce the number of PSAPs, based not on cost savings, but on the belief that service levels would improve and lives would be better protected. The initial costs were significant, but service delivery has improved. Currently there are two PSAPs (the county and the City of Grand Rapids), and the goal is one PSAP. Collaboration can cost more than the current operation but should improve the level of service offered.

**3. There is a difference between collaboration and cooperation.** I credit this lesson to a friend, an executive coach (Mary Jo Asmus, Aspire Collaborative Services, <http://www.aspire-cs.com/services>) who suggests that there are different ways to view partnerships. First, there is the win-lose, zero-sum game: there is a winner and a loser (or losers). Second, there is the win-win (getting to yes) level: partners go along to get along, with some level of giving up something. The third level is win-win-win: it is collaborating, which involves truly leaving vested interests behind to achieve

something compelling, exciting, or extraordinary for the group, the team, or the organization.

**4. Collaboration doesn't just happen.** Collaboration is a process, not an event. It takes time and patience. It is based on getting to know, understand, appreciate, and trust partners. Its hallmark is building relationships that may sometimes be strained. It builds social capital and fosters ownership of decisions. Collaboration enables better and more durable decisions to emerge, to build on complimentary strengths of the partners, and stimulate the creativity that exists when a group of engaged, energized individuals have robust, candid dialogue.

**5. More often than not, an alignment of events, needs, or circumstances results in an opportunity to collaborate.** This is almost contrary to the previous lesson, but there have been several circumstances—some of which are noted above—in which the planets are aligned in such a way that collaboration is a necessary and prudent action.

**6. A collaboration or partnership may not work.** Ego, control, funding, and political issues may exist. There may be unclear goals. Don't be afraid to walk away if it becomes obvious that it may not work. It's okay. It happens. Learn from the experience and move on.

### Suggestions

As a result of the lessons learned and both the successful and not-so-successful collaborations I have been involved with, I offer the following suggestions:

- Make cooperation and collaboration a *priority*. Communicate it. Put time into it. Nurture it.

- Make it *purposeful*. It's not the "flavor of the month." It can be a worthy endeavor.
- Use it as a *performance measure*. One of the governing or core values of Kent County as an organization is to collaborate. The county's collaborative efforts are tracked on an annual basis and are part of the performance evaluation of staff members.
- Don't be afraid to *try . . . and fail*.
- Every so often, *check the assumptions* about the partnership. Verify that each partner is on the same page. Things change over time. What started as an enthusiastic endeavor may have waned. This is different than simple project meetings; it's an intentional, purposeful act to ask the partners what is motivating them, what direction do partners believe the partnership should be taking, and what is their commitment to the ongoing partnership.
- Recognize that *anyone* can be a potential *partner*. Kent County has collaborations with other governmental units, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector. The county is a nondiscriminatory collaborator.
- Get it in writing. That was the lesson I learned from the property tax administration system issue. I trusted long-time (20–25 year) colleagues, but I didn't get it in writing. With very few exceptions, I now get things in writing. Trust is returning.

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Daryl J. Delabbio, Ph.D., came to Kent County, Michigan, in 1995 as Assistant County Administrator. He was appointed County Administrator/Controller in 1998. Kent County, including the City of Grand Rapids, is a full-service county of 600,000 persons. Delabbio is responsible for managing day-to-day operations of county departments, divisions, and agencies staffed with approximately 1,700 employees, and for preparing and administering a \$347-million operating budget and \$4-million capital budget. Prior to coming to Kent County, Delabbio was City Manager of Rockford, Michigan, for 11 years and held administrative positions with two other Michigan communities from 1977 to 1984. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a Master of Management degree from Aquinas College, a Master of Public Administration from Wayne State University, and a Ph.D. from Western Michigan University.

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