

It's Bean Counting Time Again

Collaboration is Key to Municipal Success in 21st Century

Seth J. Itzkan, John Michitson,
Darrien Crimmin

Efficiency and value of government services can not be increased by simply treating government like the private sector — such an approach ignores the basic differences in the mission of government compared with the goals of corporations that seek profit.

However, a mindset change to encourage collaboration may spawn innovation and creativity and re-use of best practices in the public and private sectors, respectively, to help move our cities and region forward.

Frankly, municipalities are stuck in the mud, engulfed with bureaucratic mandates from the state and outdated municipal charters. Further, the bureaucracy makes it hard for municipalities to escape or at least migrate from the past.

Many of the critical issues, such as the burgeoning cost of municipal retiree pensions and health insurance plans, require complex state and/or federal legislation to fix.

This creates an obstacle to finding a solution. Local politicians have little incentive to attempt to collaborate across the political spectrum to solve killer problems like pension cost explosion because it may take years of political wrangling and lawsuits from municipal unions to settle.

And then there is the state-mandated municipal budgeting process. Our elected officials are currently meeting several nights a week counting beans to determine the one-year budget for fiscal year 2007.

To formulate the core of the budget, mayors' tally up the number of workers, capital outlays (e.g., new roof) and expenses (e.g., supplies) in each department. They focus the budget on the inputs (e.g., how many workers did we cut from last year?).

Instead, they should focus on defining the outputs of services (e.g., desired firefighter response time to fires in each neighborhood) and then determine the resources needed to provide the acceptable level of service.

Further, the organization of departments, the budget process and union contract stipulations equate to a silo-based and rigid

service delivery system — exactly opposite to the global direction.

Further, while budget hearings are public, there is scant citizen involvement because bean counts are largely meaningless to citizens, whereas reducing time to respond to fires is tangible.

So how do we migrate to a more meaningful and agile budgeting and service delivery approach and re-direct the focus of elected officials to the critical long-term issues?

Instead of spending so much time muddling in 20th century bureaucratic processes, elected officials should be more focused on critical long-term issues such as: pension and medical insurance overload when baby boomers retire, the current brain drain occurring in the northeast due to the high cost of living here, and the long-term cost and quality of life impacts of extensive residential development.

The first step is to develop a collaborative mindset and evolve the silos out the door. Collaboration is a whole lot easier with the Internet and the availability of information to the top and bottom of organizations.

For example, a modified budgeting process should reinforce and strengthen the partnership between elected officials, the community and city staff to provide effective local government. In addition, a fully integrated approach to policy setting and service delivery in a results-oriented government environment is needed.

Now the networked community will have something to talk about and debate on a continuing basis to gain traction. An appropriate budget process would provide the opportunity for elected officials, citizens and staff to determine where the city is going and how it plans to get there. A meaningful budget process helps enable all who have a role in municipal affairs to communicate and understand each other.

The emphasis of the budgeting process should be on making various governmental systems more rational by: linking policy setting, budgeting, and execution; integrating short-range activities with long-range planning; and articulating service levels and quality of services provided by government.

Now let's extend the collaboration concept to breaking down the silos between departments, between cities, between cities and other government entities, between cities and business and so on.

Imagine that communities of interest (COI) would form at the grass roots level, perhaps by email at first, so that city clerk office workers across the Merrimack Valley would be networked together. Informal collaboration can start today to share lessons learned.

Now let's extend COI to include the state government offices that city clerks coordinate with. If they all form a network to collaborate, they can potentially identify the antiquated laws/rules that govern their work, then propose changes to lawmakers. While some of this interaction takes place

now, it usually happens on an exception basis.

Let's take it a step further and assume that we could evolve laws, government financial practices and

union contracts, as well as provide guidance and mayoral leadership, to encourage more informal collaboration between cities on behalf of taxpayers. For example, with some loose integration of electronic systems using Web technology across the Valley (at a cost), perhaps workers having a slow day in one city could help inundated workers in another city. Some collaboration takes place now (e.g., between police departments in different cities), but many obstacles exist.

Imagine if we could breakdown silos and view city workers across the state as a

- Somerville also has implemented a comprehensive program for tracking and evaluating city service delivery - so-called "SomerStat" program... It has led to cost savings and faster response times, among other improvements.

- An appropriate budget process would provide the opportunity for elected officials, citizens and staff to determine where the city is going and how it plans to get there.

loosely coupled engine working collaboratively, yet informally, to improve value and efficiency in government service delivery. And you wouldn't need a new top-down county government to achieve it. That's the old way.

The new way is to enable and encourage, but not force, collaboration; the resulting service delivery changes that add value will flourish, the ones that don't will drop off.

Collaborative budgeting and service delivery, as well as a focus on critical long-term issues, are not pie-in-the-sky approaches. There are some examples of such innovation happening right now in Massachusetts and in the Valley.

The Boston Globe reported that the mayor of Somerville collaborated with a brain trust of graduate students at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government on better ways to budget and deliver services. Somerville's openness to change and willingness to use technology have been cited as reasons for its success.

They have implemented a "311" telephone hotline (<http://crm.4gov.net/SOMERVILLEMA/>), accessible from nearly every telephone in town, for residents to call in for help.

Instead of tracking down the mayor, your favorite city councilor or the appropriate department head if you need your street plowed, you call 311 and the city takes it from there. Simple questions are answered on the spot, while more complex issues get a case number, the status of which can be tracked by residents on the Web.

Somerville also has implemented a comprehensive program for tracking and evaluating city service delivery — the so-called "SomerStat" program, modeled on the CitiStat program used in Baltimore and several other major cities. SomerStat is a computer database system that allows the city of Somerville to regularly review every aspect of its city government.

This advance in public administration serves as a transparent accountability and management tool through which the city can collect and thoroughly analyze data on an array of civic issues (e.g., crime, potholes, housing, and leaf collection).

The performance of each city department is now checked daily and addressed biweekly as opposed to annually. It has led to cost savings and faster response times, among other improvements.

Perhaps as a start, the mayors in the Merrimack Valley will form a Community of Interest for weekly collaboration with the intent of inspiring ways for their cities to help one another by connecting the dots across the Valley.

You can visit the
InnovationValley Website at
www.innovationvalley.com

The Innovation Valley initiative seeks to help stimulate economic growth and quality-of-life enhancements in the Merrimack Valley. Every month we will report on innovative businesses, practices, and ideas that are helping to make Merrimack Valley the place to be. Look for our article in print media and online at www.ivalley.org.



Seth J. Itzkan: Seth Itzkan is president of Planet-TECH Associates, a consulting agency identifying innovations in economic development. Recently, Mr. Itzkan helped The Boston Foundation to conceptualize and implement its Hub of Innovations tool. You can email him at seth.itzkan@gmail.com



John Michitson served as a Haverhill city councilor for 10 years; the last two as president. He is a manager and electrical engineer at the MITRE Corporation in Bedford, Mass. John and his wife, Heidi, are enjoying the childhood of their 4-year-old daughter and 6 year-old son. jmichitson@mva.net.



Darrien Crimmin, M.A., works as a freelance writer and environmental activist in the Boston area. He holds a degree in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University.

You can reach him at dariencrimmin@yahoo.com