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Exploring the Potential for Shared Services in Jefferson County

Enhanced collaboration among municipalities could enhance operations, save costs

Jefferson County fire and dispatch services show high potential for achieving service level improvements and possible cost savings through enhanced service sharing or consolidation, while police and public works show more limited – but still beneficial – possibilities, according to an analysis by the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

“Of all the services reviewed,” the report notes, “fire and dispatch have the highest number of ‘thumbs up’ scores for service sharing or consolidation potential, and each would benefit from further analysis that would aid in developing detailed options and implementation plans.”

Jefferson County commissioned the report from the Forum, the state’s leading nonpartisan, independent public policy research group, to help address service delivery challenges resulting from budget constraints and human resources limitations. At the same time, new technologies, aging populations, and economic growth are driving increased demands for local services.

The intent of the Forum’s broad review of municipal services was to provide initial guidance for local officials in the Jefferson County region. The purpose was not to make recommendations, but to provide fiscal and program analysis that would help officials and citizens themselves decide whether further research or action is warranted.

The report focuses on the county’s largest municipalities: Watertown, Whitewater, Fort Atkinson, Jefferson, Lake Mills, Waterloo, and Johnson Creek. It also recognizes smaller communities facing similar challenges may benefit from service sharing. The Forum’s emphasis on the seven communities listed was intended simply to limit the project scope in this initial high-level review.

The opportunities highlighted all involve core services that are relatively consistent across municipalities, the report states. They also involve activities that do not logically end at municipal borders:

Fire: As one of the most capital-intensive areas in municipal government, fire services often offer the greatest opportunity for cost reductions through service sharing or consolidation. For Jefferson County fire departments in particular, high capital costs paired with the potential for a more stable volunteer firefighter staff and better response times make this a service area ripe for further research on consolidation or service sharing possibilities. Fire engines, ladder trucks, and other emergency vehicles require costly capital investment, and consolidation or service sharing could

offer the opportunity to strategically deploy vehicles in a manner that would reduce the overall fleet and eliminate certain replacement costs. Further, response times potentially could be shortened under some sharing and consolidation options and recruitment and retention challenges for part-time and volunteer firefighting staff might be best addressed through collaborative efforts.

Dispatch: Some Jefferson County municipalities maintain their own public safety dispatch operations but pay property taxes to support both their dispatch centers and the center operated by county government. Capital equipment and technology costs are substantial and the four municipalities with dispatch centers – Watertown, Whitewater, Fort Atkinson, and Jefferson – may be able to benefit financially and programmatically from transferring their dispatch services to the county or consolidating among themselves.

Police and public works services also posted positive scores in the Forum’s six-point approach to analyzing shared services potential, although full-scale consolidation of municipal departments for these functions was not considered realistic. Nevertheless, enhanced service sharing for certain activities within these functions may offer significant potential for improved efficiency and service:

Police: Law enforcement leaders from the communities suggest that inefficiencies could be reduced via greater cooperation in areas including data collection and analysis, training, mental health-related calls, and purchasing of IT and camera equipment. Also, creating a multijurisdictional tactical team could shorten response times by streamlining the chain of command process.

Public Works: Each municipality identified particular areas of public works expertise - such as GIS, engineering, design, construction, etc. – that may be pooled and leveraged for their mutual benefit. Also, the high cost of equipment may present opportunities that could lower costs, either through joint purchasing, sharing specialized pieces of equipment, or more efficient fleet management generally, such as storage of backup equipment at the county level in the event of a mechanical breakdown.

Other service areas considered in the review include property assessments and building inspections. While these two areas showed more limited opportunities for service sharing, both may benefit from joint procurement of contracted service providers as a means of securing better pricing and/or efficiencies in contract monitoring. Emergency Medical Services are not covered in this report but are the subject of a separate service sharing analysis that the Forum launched late in 2019.

Go [here](#) to read the Jefferson County report.