

High Performance Partnerships Focus Group Report



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Executive Summary

As part of the High Performance Partnerships (HiPP) project, seven focus group discussions were held throughout Dakota County during the weeks of June 1 and June 7, 2004. A total of 60 residents of 13 different communities participated in the discussions.

The purpose of the focus group discussions was to obtain citizen reaction and feedback to a total of 18 opportunities for local government collaboration which have been selected for further evaluation in the HiPP process. For purposes of discussion, the opportunities were grouped in eight categories:

- Building Inspections and Code Enforcement
- E-Government
- *Joint Purchasing*
- Law Enforcement
- Leisure Activities
- Public Safety
- Street and Road Maintenance
- Transportation Planning

Focus group participants were provided with brief descriptions of all 18 potential partnerships for their review in advance of the meeting. At the focus group meetings, they were then told that it had already been decided to move forward with the joint purchasing activities, and that the discussion would further focus on the other seven categories.

The discussions began with a brief “rating” exercise. Participants were asked to rate three of the seven categories with a plus sign, indicating those partnership opportunities they were more inclined to support, and another three with a minus sign, indicating those which they were less inclined to support. The “net rating” (pluses minus minuses) is shown below for each category, and the categories are reviewed in rank order, from the highest positive rating through the highest negative rating.

Public Safety (+22)

Overall, most respondents indicated that 9-1-1 dispatch, EMS and fire services in their communities are very good, and cannot reasonably be expected to get much better. One respondent said that he had a heart attack about a year ago, and EMS services arrived at his home in two minutes. The most frequently expressed views, both pro and con (and leaning pro by a ratio of 2.5 to 1), spring from this belief that services currently are already very good.

If services cannot reasonably get much better than they already are, the primary goal in this area is to save money. The respondents understand that the technology in all three areas—and especially 9-1-1 dispatch and fire fighting—is expensive, so consolidating services can reduce the investment in potentially redundant technology.

Based on this understanding, there was no opposition expressed to consolidated 9-1-1 dispatching. Respondents were generally favorable toward consolidated deployment of EMS and fire services, assuming that response times are maintained or improved. No respondent would be supportive of slower response times—“public safety,” after all, “is the bottom line” for local government, according to one respondent. It is a matter of “life and death,” according to another.

So, overall, respondents were generally favorable to local government partnerships in the area of public safety but “the public needs to have a substantiated reason on why this was changed.”

Transportation Planning (+18)

Transportation, unlike public safety, is “essential, but not life threatening,” according to one respondent. It is a promising area for collaboration not for its great upside, but rather because there is little or no downside. By this, respondents mean that the service currently is not very good—“You can’t get from one place to another.... It’s a disaster.” Dakota County needs to develop “a vision...something that will serve us for the long term.” A new effort is very unlikely to do any harm.

The upside is limited not because this is not a problem area, then, but rather because there is skepticism whether Dakota County and the cities have the ability to effect positive change. “Dakota County could show you the vision, (but) all that’s missing is the money.”

E-Government (+14)

Many agree that, as one respondent said, “This area will only grow in popularity,” and that there are significant opportunities to reduce the cost of hardware and of the development of E-Government applications.

Others expressed a concern that “Some of us don’t get on the computer very often,” or “(Many) seniors don’t have access to computers.” They fear that an over-reliance on E-Government may result in a loss of services for some. Or at a minimum, local government must continue to provide staff for personal interactions with citizens and to answer incoming telephone calls. This, in turn, reduces to cost-effectiveness of E-government.

Law Enforcement (+7)

There was little or no opposition to the consolidation of backroom, support functions, including central 9-1-1 dispatching, non-felony prosecutions, homeland security, juvenile services, drug task force, shared information and records, holding cells, staff and administration, shared equipment, communications including 800 Mhz, SWAT teams and training facilities.

There was also little opposition to mutual aid agreements. And a few of the plusses specifically endorsed opportunities for collaboration in the deployment of officers in the community.

But there was widespread concern about changes in the deployment of police officers.

By way of comparison, fire and EMS responders do not need to “know the community” in order to respond to an emergency. A police officer’s work should properly include much more personal interaction with the community, and so personal relationships are very important to successful police work. For many, the local police department is one of the most important components in the creation of a sense of a community.

- “There’s a reason why they have local police. They are familiar with the community and establish connections.”
- “The county already has countywide law enforcement, but there’s a reason why the city has its own police, why it didn’t just stay with the sheriff. The advantages of local police are response times and knowing the community, familiarity with different areas of the community.”

Street and Road Maintenance (0)

The opportunity to save money in this area is obvious to some. Cost savings through local government collaboration are anticipated in the following areas:

- Equipment sharing
- Coordinated services
- Joint purchasing of equipment and supplies

Others are concerned about a potential loss of service quality, either because “We all need the same equipment at the same time,” or because different communities have different standards and expectations.

- “(Roads) are local things, different cities have different wants, different standards.”

These concerns are widespread enough that, overall, the participants are equally divided on the desirability of pursuing these opportunities.

Building Inspections and Code Enforcement (-14)

Those who support consolidation in this area do so based on two very different beliefs and for two very different reasons:

- Some believe that building codes are mostly mandated by state law and are very similar from one community to the next. Therefore, cities easily can share building inspectors, and perhaps thereby save money.

- About an equal number believe that building codes, or at least their enforcement, varies widely from one community to the next. Codes and enforcement should be consolidated, and should be more alike from community to community, so as to be easier for the average citizen to deal with.

Several respondents felt that consolidation would not work, because the building codes and ordinances in different cities are different—and should be different.

Leisure Activities (-27)

The focus group respondents were overwhelmingly opposed to collaboration in the area of leisure—primarily park and rec—activities. Along with a local police force, this is the area that is most important to the respondents as something that creates a sense of community for themselves and their families. This is especially true as it relates to youth activities and the involvement of community volunteers.

Respondents are not generally opposed to coordinated marketing and communications for park and rec and community education activities, but they are very much opposed to any changes that would diminish the community orientation of the activity.

Many respondents also feel that “leisure activities are so good now that they could only get worse. It’s hard to imagine them getting better.”

Joint Purchasing

Discussion of joint purchasing opportunities was not planned, but several participants volunteered their support for pursuing these opportunities. No objections to doing so were voiced.

Major Themes

Several major themes arose from the discussion.

- Overall, participants regard the quality of their existing services in most of the areas discussed as being excellent. An often-expressed sentiment was that services are already so good that it is hard to imagine them getting any better. Therefore, if the proposed changes would affect their quality of services, they more often than not imagined that their quality of services would suffer.
- And the respondents, as a whole, made it clear that they value their current quality of services much more highly than any potential cost savings. They did not support any reductions in service quality, and they support only those partnerships that can achieve cost savings without any sacrifice in service quality.

- The respondents, therefore, wish for Dakota County and the cities to proceed cautiously, and to begin with incremental rather than major changes in service delivery.
- Changes also should not be made that might sacrifice the character of the community, which participants especially attribute to a local police force and local leisure activities, especially those for children and youth.

--“On anything that can create a community, at least do no harm.”

- Changes should not be made which diminish accountability, which means that citizens know who to call if they have a problem.
- Attitudes and opinions do not seem to vary among communities, with two exceptions.

--Hastings residents do not see themselves working with other cities due to geographic considerations. Rather, they see their opportunities being to partner with Dakota County or neighboring Cottage Grove in Washington County.

--Township residents are most concerned with road maintenance issues and would welcome more bidding, more “competition” for their contracts.

The Final Word

As a wrap-up to the discussion, participants were asked “What one message do you want to send to your city and county leaders (who are providing oversight for this project)?” About 40 percent of the responses fall into one of four categories:

- **“Communicate”/Citizen Involvement.** The participants want to receive follow-up information and reports concerning this process. Many would appreciate the opportunity to continue to be involved in an advisory capacity. Many recommend continuing citizen involvement as specific projects roll out.
- **“Do Something.”** The participants were equally concerned that this effort not “die on the vine.” “Do something! There are lots of great opportunities, just pick one, start someplace.”
- **“Proceed Cautiously.”** A variation on “Do Something” is “Proceed, (but) cautiously.” “Do the easy ones first to show it can be done, so citizens see it can work.”
- **“Address our transportation problems.”**

Background and Methodology

As part of the High Performance Partnerships (HiPP) project, seven focus group discussions were held throughout Dakota County during the weeks of June 1 and June 7, 2004. A total of 60 residents of 13 different communities participated in the discussions.

The focus groups represent the third of three phases of citizen participation in the HiPP project. The first was a citizen survey conducted via the World Wide Web in April, 2004, while the second was a citizen participation meeting held at the Rosemount Community Center Auditorium on May 6. The results of these first two phases were reported separately and also synthesized in an Interim HiPP Project Report dated May 17.

Participant Profile

The participants were recruited by the participating cities and by Dakota County. A total of 122 persons were invited to participate in the citizen participation meeting and focus group discussions. Eighty-three of these citizens participated in the Rosemount meeting, and 60 in the focus group discussions. All but one of the focus group discussion participants had attended the Rosemount meeting.

The place of residence was collected from 78 of the 83 participants at the Rosemount meeting, and from all 60 of the focus group participants. The distribution of participants is representative of the county to a high degree, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Panel Composition—Place of Residence

Place of Residence	Percent of County Pop.	Percent Panelists Recruited	Percent Rosemt. Meeting	Percent Focus Groups
First Ring Cities Lilydale, Mendota, Mendota Heights, South St. Paul, Sunfish Lake, West St. Paul	14.7%	15%	10%	12%
Second Ring Cities Burnsville, Eagan, Inver Grove Heights	43.1%	41%	42%	45%
Third Ring Cities Apple Valley, Farmington, Lakeville, Rosemount	32.5%	30%	40%	32%
Rural Areas and Towns	4.4%	8%	3%	3%
Free Standing Cities Hastings, Northfield	5.3%	6%	5%	8%

Demographic information was collected at Rosemount. This data was not collected for the focus group participants, but we believe that the focus group participants were substantially representative of the larger group that participated at Rosemount.

- The panel skews slightly older than the county as a whole—the average panelist was approximately 50 years of age versus the countywide average of about 45 years.
- The panel skews toward a significantly higher household income than the county as a whole, with 60 percent of the panel earning \$75,000 per year or more versus 33 percent

of households countywide. Middle income households accurately represent the county as a whole, while lower income households are underrepresented.

- In terms of household type, married households (with or without children in the home) are overrepresented while all other household types are underrepresented. Single parents are particularly poorly represented in the panel.
- While the types of communities shown in Table 1 are all fairly represented, selected communities are over and underrepresented. The two larger communities that are underrepresented in this process are South St. Paul and West St. Paul. Eagan was overrepresented in the focus groups with 15 participants, or 25 percent of the total.

Focus group participants were asked to introduce themselves and to share any prior experience in local government. The vast majority had served or are serving on one or more local government committees or commissions. A few are current or retired local government employees, while two are now local elected (township) officials. The focus group participants as a whole can be characterized as *extremely knowledgeable citizens*.

In fact, several of the respondents (including individuals in approximately five of the seven groups) had specialized professional knowledge in one area or another. These individuals acted as “resident experts,” sometimes answering questions from other participants and significantly swaying others’ opinions. For example, a retired police officer assured his fellow panelists that collaboration and cost reductions in the area of law enforcement (if managed appropriately) would not result in an increase in emergency response times. Most of his fellow panelists accepted this information and adjusted their opinions accordingly.

Discussion Guide

The focus group discussions followed a discussion guide or outline which was reviewed and approved by the HiPP Steering Committee. The guide or outline was based on the Interim Project Report, which identifies 18 opportunities for local government collaboration for further study and evaluation. For purposes of discussion, these opportunities were grouped in eight categories:

- Building Inspections and Code Enforcement
- E-Government
- *Joint Purchasing*
- Law Enforcement
- Leisure Activities
- Public Safety
- Street and Road Maintenance
- Transportation Planning

Focus group participants were provided with brief descriptions of all 18 potential partnerships for their review in advance of the meeting. At the focus group meetings, they

were then told that it had already been decided to move forward with the joint purchasing activities, and that the discussion would further focus on the other seven categories.

It was not possible to discuss all seven categories in the time available for each focus group discussion. So the discussions began with a brief “rating” exercise. Participants were asked to rate three of the seven categories with a plus sign, indicating those partnership opportunities they were more inclined to support, and another three with a minus sign, indicating those which they were less inclined to support. The worksheet used for this exercise is shown on the following page as Table 2.

This exercise had two purposes:

1. The exercise provided a very general indication of the “top-of-mind” support (or lack of support) for each of the opportunities, based on the participants’ first impressions.
2. The ensuing discussion was structured around the results of the exercise. In each group, those topics to which the group responded most strongly—by virtue of the most total plus and minus ratings, for example, or by the widest division between plus and minus ratings—were the ones that were selected by the moderator for detailed discussion.

Most of the groups discussed four or five of the seven categories of opportunities, and over the course of the seven discussion groups every category (except one) was discussed by at least four of the groups.

Respondents were then asked why they had rated each item with a plus or a minus, and in this way lengthy and detailed lists of pros and cons were developed. This activity took up most of the hour-and-a-half of discussion in each group.

Time was short in two of the groups—so, in these groups, only two of the categories was fully discussed. Participants were then asked which of the remaining categories they regarded as the most promising area for local government partnerships.

About This Report

This report will first summarize the discussion surrounding each of the seven categories. For each category, this includes the general levels of the participants’ support (or lack of support), and the pros and cons expressed for each. The report will then go on to summarize certain themes that emerged from the discussions, such as quality and cost of services, sense of community and community identity, and so on.

The results from these focus group discussions—along with citizen input from the citizen survey and the Rosemount citizen participation meeting—will then be instrumental in the final evaluation and recommendations made in the HiPP Project Final Report.

Table 2
Partnership Opportunities for Further Evaluation

√	Category	Summary Description/Examples
	Building Inspections/Code Enforcement	Consolidated staffing and/or purchasing of building inspection services.
	E-Government	Joint development of government services online, including Web site development and hosting, etc.
	Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a shared service and support center. • Deploy police services across municipal boundaries to maximize public safety. • Consolidate non-felony prosecutions. • Develop of one-stop shop for juveniles services.
	Leisure Activities	Coordinated programming, scheduling, registration for park & rec, continuing ed, etc.
	Public Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidate 9-1-1 dispatching centers. • Coordinated deployment of ambulance/ emergency/first responder (EMS) services across municipal boundaries • Coordinated deployment across municipal boundaries from larger fire districts and combination (full-time/paid-on-call) depts.
	Street and road maintenance	Coordinated/consolidated maintenance crews and scheduling of city streets, county roads, etc.
	Transportation Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated planning and construction of streets and roads, especially for better east-west travel • Coordinated delivery of transit services among DARTS, Metro Transit, MVTA, other (?).

Limitations of the Research

As noted above, the focus groups represent the third of three phases of citizen participation in the HiPP project. For a full appreciation of the citizen input, all three of the research reports should be consulted.

Additional limitations of this focus group research process should also be noted:

- The discussions engaged 60 residents of Dakota County. Because of their limited numbers, and also because they are not fully representative of the county on certain demographic variables, their reflections cannot be taken to be representative of all of their fellow Dakota County residents.
- The focus group participants also revealed themselves—both in their introductions and in the discussions themselves—to be exceptionally well-informed about the activities of local government. On the positive side, this enabled them to provide informed advice and comment to the HiPP process. But again, on the side of caution, we should recognize that that advice and comment may not be representative of the opinions of their fellow residents.

Next Steps

The focus group discussion results will be instrumental in guiding the final project recommendations which will be presented in the Project Final Report.

Public Safety

The focus group respondents, as a whole, were most supportive of local government collaboration in the area of public safety. Thirty-seven of the 60 participants assigned public safety a plus sign while only 15 gave it a minus, for a net rating of +22.

As shown in Table 2, public safety was defined as including 9-1-1 dispatching, ambulance/EMS and fire services. Several participants stated that they think of law enforcement and police services as a public safety functions as well. But for purposes of this discussion, they had no difficulty separating law enforcement and police services as a separate category.

Summary

Overall, most respondents indicated that 9-1-1 dispatch, EMS and fire services in their communities are very good, and cannot reasonably be expected to get much better. One respondent said that he had a heart attack about a year ago, and EMS services arrived at his home in two minutes. The most frequently expressed views, both pro and con (and leaning pro by a ratio of 2.5 to 1), spring from this belief that services currently are very good.

There was no opposition to consolidated 9-1-1 dispatching expressed. Respondents were generally favorable toward consolidated deployment of EMS and fire services, assuming that response times are maintained or improved. No respondent would be supportive of slower response times—“public safety,” after all, “is the bottom line” for local government, according to one respondent. It is a matter of “life and death,” according to another.

So, finally, respondents were generally favorable to local government partnerships in the area of public safety but “the public needs to have a substantiated reason on why this was changed.”

Pro

If services cannot reasonably get much better than they already are, the primary goal in this area is to save money. The respondents understand that the technology in all three areas—and especially 9-1-1 dispatch and fire fighting—is expensive, so consolidating services can reduce the investment in potentially redundant technology.

Con

Those who expressed concerns about this area wondered—if the goal was to save money, would the quality of service be sacrificed to that goal? One respondent said, “If we consolidate, we may not have the ambulance in time.” Another wondered what would happen in a “large” emergency situation. “How do you decide who gets the equipment first?” Finally, “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.”

Other Pros and Cons

Other pros and cons in these areas also were expressed. A few respondents indicated a belief (or hope) that the quality of services might also be improved. Some respondents said that they hoped that perhaps a first responder could arrive more quickly at the scene of an emergency by crossing a municipal boundary.

In addition, a few respondents were not certain that every community had as good of service as they do—specifically, they wondered if rural areas have as good of service. The respondent who had the heart attack said, “With more collaboration, everyone should have that kind of service (that I had).”

Others stated a secondary concern—that there is already a lot of collaboration in these areas. So, according to one respondent, “There’s not as many new things to do.” Another said, “I don’t know how much more you can do.” These respondents, in other words, are confident that their local government would not sacrifice their quality of services, but rather they wonder if there are really any significant cost savings available.

In fact, several of those who rated public safety as a “minus” said that they would support collaboration in this area. They simply did not think that changes in 9-1-1 dispatch, EMS and fire services would “get the most bang for the buck.”

9-1-1- Dispatching

No opposition to further consolidation of 9-1-1 dispatching was expressed in these discussions. There is a general understanding that the communications technology operates almost instantaneously across distances. Further, consolidating to one or two county-wide dispatching centers might allow for advanced technology that would support even more sophisticated and beneficial deployment patterns.

EMS/Ambulance Services

Some respondents expressed a belief that EMS response is “too good.” That is, too many vehicles and responder—ambulance, fire and police—are sent out to an emergency. This is viewed as costly and wasteful. Others, however, believe that it is good to err on the side of over-responding in what they consider to be matters of “life and death.”

Fire Services

There is a general belief that fire fighting equipment is expensive and that there is probably more such equipment—at least in some areas of the county—than is really needed.

Several current and retired volunteer fire fighters participated in the discussions, who provided particular insights concerning fire services. They did not dispute the idea that there is excess equipment in certain areas of the county. They did not oppose further

consolidation of fire districts. They said that the consolidation into larger, hybrid (full-time and volunteer) departments would be very difficult, however, due to differences between the full-time and volunteer fire fighters, and the ways in which the two types of departments prefer to operate.

These differences were given as a reason to support greater consolidation of 9-1-1 dispatching, however. Apparently, many fire calls come directly to the departments rather than to 9-1-1, and those sending in the call do not know who to call—that is, who is the closest and has the appropriate equipment for that call. Further, full-time and volunteer departments are reluctant to call on one another for mutual aid. According to one retired fire fighter, “Central dispatch can sort it all out and make the right call.”

Homeland Security

Several respondents expressed concerns about homeland security, and respondents who claimed special knowledge in this area added to the sense of alarm. First, one respondent said that homeland security mandates were draining resources away from routine, day-to-day public safety services. Secondly, several respondents complained about the lack of progress on the 800 Mhz communication system. One said that this system was the one thing that would most significantly enhance the safety and security of Dakota County residents.

Overall, the impression given is that homeland security is a hodge-podge of costly and poorly coordinated activities. Therefore, there must be some opportunity for collaboration in this area.

Transportation Planning

Focus group participants were generally very supportive of local government partnerships for the purpose of countywide transportation planning. Thirty-five of 60 participants assigned transportation planning a plus and only 15 a minus, for a net rating of +18.

But while the rating is almost identical to that for public safety, the rationale for that rating is 180 degrees different. Public safety is a matter of “life and death,” and there is a very large upside to local government collaboration in the form of cost savings and improved services.

Summary

Transportation, on the other hand, is “essential, but not life threatening,” according to one respondent. It is a promising area for collaboration not for its great upside, but rather because there is little or no downside. The upside is limited not because this is not a problem area, but rather because there is skepticism whether Dakota County and the cities have the ability to effect positive change.

Pro

Several respondents see this as a macro issue, because “you can’t get from one place to another.... It’s a disaster.” Dakota County needs to develop “a vision... something that will serve us for the long term.”

Others see it as a micro issue, and that specific development—housing, ice arenas, high schools, etc.—needs to be adequately serviced at the time it is occupied. These respondents are particularly anxious that better transportation planning leads to better traffic safety in these particular “hot spots.”

In between the macro and micro, then, are those who see the problem expressed at municipal boundaries, where city streets fail to connect in an effective fashion.

Cons

Those who rated transportation planning as a minus agreed with the analysis provided by the “pros”—that is, that our transportation system is “broken.” But they doubt that even at a countywide level any significant progress can be made. One respondent with specialized knowledge doesn’t “think that much more can be added (at this level).... It’s a political battle for the money.... Coordinated planning is good, but it’s not going to happen due to the politics.... Dakota County could show you the vision, (but) all that’s missing is the money.”

Others said that there is already a great deal of collaboration in this area, and don’t see how the transportation system could be any more or any better coordinated. One simply said, “There’s collaboration now. What’s the problem?”

The Vision

Respondents eagerly debated competing transportation solutions, without regard to whether a county wide effort could actually implement their solutions. When asked if they thought the county or cities could effect their ideas, most agreed with the analysis of the cons. Yet their vision is very passionately felt and expressed.

- Those who were most vocal on this issue expressed strong support for more mass transit, including circulator bus service, Cedar Avenue BRT and Hiawatha light rail. Some advocated for a countywide transit authority, whether by joining with MVTA or otherwise opting out of Metro Transit.
- Others (and several of the same respondents) want better and/or wider roads including a third freeway ring around the Twin Cities. Highway 42 is considered by many to be inadequate because of local connectivity and “too many stoplights.”

One respondent advocated for a \$1 additional gasoline tax to pay for better roads and to encourage transit use.

E-Government

The focus group participants were generally very supportive of collaboration in the area of E-Government. Twenty-nine of 60 respondents assigned E-Government a plus sign, and 15 assigned it a minus, for a net rating of +14.

Summary

Many agree that, as one respondent said, “This area will only grow in popularity,” and that there are significant opportunities to reduce the cost of hardware and of the development of E-Government applications.

Others expressed a concern that “Some of us don’t get on the computer very often,” or “(Many) seniors don’t have access to computers.” They fear that an overreliance on E-Government may result in a loss of services for some. Or at a minimum, local government must continue to provide staff for personal interactions with citizens and to answer incoming telephone calls. This, in turn, reduces to cost-effectiveness of E-government.

Pros

Those who wanted to see more local collaboration in the area of E-Government saw several potential benefits:

- Many believe that Web site development and hosting, as well as the related equipment, “is very expensive.” Therefore, cost savings for hardware, hosting and Web site/application development can be realized through local government collaboration. One respondent reported that the city of Roseville has a Web development department that contracts out to other cities. “If every city had to figure how out to do (water billing online, for example), it would be a waste of time.”
- Or, rather than saving money, cities could re-invest those savings in developing new applications and/or updating information more frequently. When asked what new applications they would like to see, respondents mentioned the following:

- Motor vehicle license tabs
- Drivers license
- Recreation and community education offerings
- Camping reservations at county parks
- Water billing
- Permit requirements and applications
- Local ordinances
- Voting
- More/more current information about local government, issues, where your taxes go, etc. (Some wanted such information via email rather than U.S. Mail.)
- Online chat about current issues in local government

Most of these applications were named about once or twice in the course of the discussions—though general information about the operation of local government was named by several respondents. Many of these applications are already available, of course. Respondents, in fact, had difficulty naming applications not already available that they would like to see.

- Many (others, generally) hope that there would be more consistency among local government Web sites. Many now find that “every city’s Web site is different, so it’s hard to find stuff.” Links between city Web sites would also make it easier to “find stuff.”

Cons

As mentioned above, the primary drawback to the development of E-Government is the fact that many citizens do not have easy access to the Internet. So E-Government will not obsolete the need to have local government staff available to meet citizens and answer the telephone. This mitigates the cost saving opportunities. Or, an overreliance on E-Government could result in a loss of services for some.

Many assigned E-Government a minus because they had “used up my plusses” on other, higher priorities.

Law Enforcement

Focus group participants expressed mixed feelings about local government collaboration in the area of law enforcement. Twenty-nine assigned this category a plus sign, and 22 a minus sign, for a net rating of +7.

Summary

There was little or no opposition to the consolidation of backroom, support functions; non-felony prosecutions; and juvenile services. There was also little opposition to mutual aid agreements. There was, however, widespread concern about changes in the deployment of police officers.

By way of comparison, fire and EMS responders do not need to “know the community” in order to respond to an emergency. A police officer’s work should properly include much more personal interaction with the community, and so personal relationships are very important to successful police work. Therefore, for many, the local police department is one of the most important components in the creation of a sense of a community.

Pros

The “pros” listed a variety of services that they felt could be consolidated, with a goal of both improving the services and reducing their cost. Some cited existing partnerships as examples of the kinds of services where collaboration makes sense. Others endorsed the

proposed areas of collaboration. The services are listed here in the order of frequency of mentions:

- Central 9-1-1 dispatching
- Homeland security
- Juvenile services
- Drug task force
- Shared information, including CrimeNet and related
- Holding cells
- Staff and administration
- Shared equipment
- Communications, including 800 Mhz system
- Prosecution services
- SWAT teams
- Training facilities

A few of the plusses, however, specifically endorsed opportunities for collaboration in the deployment of officers in the community. Several said that, “In an emergency, they should come from anywhere (that is) closer, faster.” Two respondents used the term “seamless borders,” one of whom noted that criminals cross boundaries and so law enforcement officers must do so as well.

At the extremes, one respondent endorsed the idea of private “contract cops. If they can contract out (police services) and cut costs, at least look at it.” Another said, “The county should run all of the law enforcement.... Each city could be a precinct, but all officers would be employees of the county.”

One respondent with specialized knowledge said that “the service (could) all be mapped out so that response times are at least the same as before (and perhaps better).” A few others echoed this idea.

Some expressed envy at those smaller communities that contract with neighboring cities or the sheriff’s department. They imagined that if there is real “bidding,” real competition among neighboring law enforcement agencies, that these cities can negotiate excellent service at an affordable price.

It should be noted, however, that even some who assigned law enforcement a “plus” rating said that they only meant to endorse the types of services listed above. Some of those respondents did not endorse the consolidation of the deployment of individual officers for the same reasons cited by the “cons.” But one respondent said, “It doesn’t matter who shows up. We don’t have any sidewalks, so they’re not walking the beat. It’s just how fast they get there, I don’t need the feel-good community thing.”

Cons

Many were very adamant that “It is important for each city to have its own police department.” Some cited response times, but police officers’ personal knowledge and understanding of their community was a vastly more important concern.

- “Someone from my community may be more sympathetic, more friendly, more helpful.”
- “The tone of a local cop is different....”
- “I want to see kids interacting with the cops. Keep the cops and the money in the community.”
- “There’s a reason why they have local police. They are familiar with the community and establish connections.”
- “I like the idea that the same officers are patrolling my neighborhood every day.”
- “Local police know the neighborhoods, they’re more available, better response times.”
- “The county already has countywide law enforcement, but there’s a reason why the city has its own police, why it didn’t just stay with the sheriff. The advantages of local police are response times and knowing the community, familiarity with different areas of the community.”
- “When we first moved out here (to Apple Valley), the sheriff would come out here from Hastings. We don’t want to go back to that.”
- “I’m stuck on the local police car. They can share stuff between departments, but I like that there’s a local department.”
- “It has great meaning if you see a cop car with your city name on it.”

Mutual Aid

Even the cons were very clear, however, that they have no objection to mutual aid. A retired police chief said, “Police already work hard to share. If someone needs help, they’ll get it. Our guys will be there in a heartbeat if they need us in Apple Valley.” Another respondent said, “I have no problem with my local police responding elsewhere, or West St. Paul responding in (Mendota Heights). (But) I like the neighborhood policing concept.”

Street and Road Maintenance

Focus group participants were evenly divided on the potential for local government collaboration in the area of street and road maintenance. Twenty-six of 60 participants assigned this area a plus, and 26 assigned it a minus, for a net rating of 0 (zero).

Summary

The opportunity to save money in this area—on equipment and supplies, and through coordinated service delivery—is obvious to some. Others are concerned about a potential loss of service quality, either because “We all need the same equipment at the same time,” or because different communities have different standards and expectations.

Pros

Several benefits of local government collaboration in this area were mentioned (and are listed here in rough order of frequency of mentions):

- Equipment sharing.

- “Equipment could be shared rather than everybody owning redundant equipment.”

- “There’s no reason for everybody to have big trucks.”

- “The state highway department bought a pothole truck, and now one guy can do the work that used to take six. If the cities could share that truck, it would be more cost efficient.”

- Coordinated services. Several respondents mentioned the scenario of city snow plows driving down county roads with their plows up to get to the city streets that they plow. One added that the city plows three to four hours earlier than the county, so the city could provide a better service (complete the plowing earlier).

- “That’s silly. Just drop the plow.”

- “The city could do more road maintenance and plowing, since they have to drive over county roads to get to the city streets.”

- Joint purchasing of equipment and supplies.

- “There’s lots of room to save money on purchases.”

- “The cities should get together and go out for bid.”

Cons

Many respondents felt that different cities have different standards in street and road maintenance, and expressed concern that a partnership with a neighboring jurisdiction would result in a loss of quality for their community.

--“This won’t work from city to city. Roads are independent type things, and cities have different ideas about how to maintain them in (both) summer and winter.”

--“(Roads) are local things, different cities have different wants, different standards.”

--“Some cities take better care of their streets. Some want better quality, not just to save money.”

Related to the issue of standards and expectations is the issue of accountability. One respondent said, “Don’t make it a big bureaucratic entity.... If I have a problem, I want it locally managed (so) I know who to call.”

Others noted that road maintenance, especially snow plowing, often all needs to happen at once. Everyone needs the same service at the same time.

--“We all need the same equipment at the same time, especially when it snows. We can’t wait to use the road after it snows.”

--“If my city needs the equipment, chances are another city needs it at the same time.”

--“It’s hard to do this because we’re all busy at once. What gets done first?”

A retired city maintenance employee said that “People are more demanding (now) than ever. It used to be we wouldn’t plow unless there was two inches of snow. Now, it’s a few flakes. And if you don’t plow by 6 a.m., you get complaints.”

So the quality of service in the area of street and road maintenance is very important.

Building Inspections and Code Enforcement

Respondents were somewhat skeptical about the potential for positive outcomes in the area of building inspections and code enforcement. Seventeen of 60 participants assigned this area a plus, while 31 assigned it a minus, for a net rating of -14.

Summary

Respondents were of two minds about the building inspection/code enforcement process, so their responses to collaboration opportunities therefore diverged significantly.

- Many respondents believe, whether from personal experience or hearsay, that building inspectors are too “fussy” and/or that different inspectors enforce the codes in very different ways. Others believe that building inspectors are not “fussy” enough, and should perform more of a consumer protection or advocacy role.

- Respondents were also somewhat divided as to whether building codes are largely driven by state law, and therefore are similar from one community to the next; or whether they vary (and whether they should vary) from community to community.

Pros

Those who support consolidation in this area do so based on two very different beliefs and for two very different reasons:

- Some believe that building codes are mostly mandated by state law and are very similar from one community to the next. Therefore, cities easily can share building inspectors, and perhaps thereby save money, because
- About an equal number believe that building codes, or at least their enforcement, varies widely from one community to the next. Codes and enforcement should be consolidated, and should be more alike from community to community, so as to be easier for the average citizen to deal with.

--One respondent said, “We hear a lot about how fussy they are in Lakeville, that some contractors won’t even work here. Everybody should have the same set of rules.”

Cons

Several respondents felt that consolidation would not work, because the building codes and ordinances in different cities are different—and should be different.

--“I gave it a negative because the standards are different in every city. We don’t want all cities to be alike. We’re not Eagan and we want to keep it that way.”

--“They have to understand the values of the community, the unique elements of each community.”

--“Different communities have their idiosyncrasies. For the inspector, it would be nice if they were all the same. But how would you get the cities to be the same?”

--“Building inspectors need to know their area. You can’t move them around.”

Building Permits

These issues revolve primarily around code enforcement. Most agreed that it does not matter where the inspector comes from. What is important is that they know their codes and ordinances, that they understand the community values, that they’re properly trained, and that they enforce the codes fairly and equitably.

Building permits are a different matter. The inspector comes to “you,” but “you” (the applicant) go to the permitting authority. So even some who don’t care where the inspector comes from, want the permitting authority to be conveniently located.

Consumer Protection

Several respondents raised quality concerns. Two respondents have experienced construction quality problems in their homes, and want the inspector to be more of an advocate for the consumer: “The consumer has no idea, and relies on the inspector” to fix these issues. Other respondents echoed that desire for a consumer protection mindset on the part of the inspector.

Two respondents felt that if the same inspector works frequently with the same contractor that this element is lost. One said that the inspector becomes too friendly with that contractor, while another (former city employee) said that perhaps the inspector becomes intimidated by that contractor.

But, as noted above, several respondents also feel that the inspectors are too “fussy.”

Leisure Activities

The focus group respondents were overwhelmingly opposed to collaboration in the area of leisure—primarily park and rec—activities. Thirteen of 60 respondents assigned this area a plus sign, and 40 assigned it a minus sign, for a net rating of -27.

Summary

Along with a local police force, this is the area that is most important to the respondents as something that creates a sense of community for themselves and their families. This is especially true as it relates to youth activities and the involvement of community volunteers. Respondents are not generally opposed to coordinated marketing and communications for park and rec and community education activities, but they are very much opposed to any changes that would diminish the community orientation of the activity.

Many respondents also feel that “leisure activities are so good now that they could only get worse. It’s hard to imagine them getting better.”

Cons

Respondents provided a range of reasons for opposing changes in this area. They are listed here in rough order of frequency of mentions.

- “Programming should be at the city level,” because each city has a different demographic mix with different interests.
- “Leisure activities are so good now that they could only get worse. It’s hard to imagine them getting better.”

- Several believe it's important for kids to "connect with their community," and to make friends with whom they can share other activities through the years.
- Some respondents simply saw this area as "not a big cost saver," in part because so much of the work is done by volunteers.
- Volunteers are more likely to get involved if the activity is centered in the local community.
- Proximity is important to some. "I'm more likely to use it if it's available locally."
- Several indicated that they did not really see this area "as a negative, but "it's not essential" and "other areas are more important."

Pros

Respondents generally agreed that there are opportunities for coordinating the communication and marketing—in catalogs, on the Internet, etc.—of park and rec, and community education offerings.

A few respondents also said that there are specialized activities—such as running events, dog parks, skate board parks, etc.—that not every community can offer. Another noted that there are no activities for single women in her community. "Maybe the county could pool such activities."

Joint Purchasing

Several joint purchasing activities are under active consideration and evaluation in the HiPP project. In the interest of time (and because we did not believe these activities to be controversial), we did not intend to discuss such activities directly. However, joint purchasing activities were frequently mentioned by respondents, especially in the following areas:

- E-Government: Joint purchasing of Web development services and hardware.
- Public Safety: Joint purchasing of equipment.
- Street and Road Maintenance: Joint purchasing of equipment and supplies.

Respondents were overwhelmingly favorable toward the idea of joint purchasing activities in all of these areas. One respondent, when asked which of the seven categories offered for discussion was the most important, chose the eighth—joint purchasing.

Major Themes

The participants clearly understood that local government collaboration is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means to achieve other, more important goals, including cutting costs or enhancing the quality of services.

Quality of Services

Overall, participants regard the quality of their existing services in most of the areas discussed as being excellent. An often-expressed sentiment was that services are already so good that it is hard to imagine them getting any better. Therefore, if the proposed changes would affect their quality of services, they more often than not imagined that their quality of services would suffer.

And the respondents, as a whole, made it clear that they value their current quality of services much more highly than any potential cost savings. One respondent said, “In this economy, we wouldn’t be having this conversation of it wasn’t about money. I’m reluctant to endorse any change, because it’s just about saving money. I want quality services, I want good public safety.”

So they responded skeptically to changes to those services which they valued the most, those being:

- Services that are seen as “matters of life and death,” such as the deployment of fire and EMS services. “Public safety is the bottom line.”
- Services that are seen as most important to creating a sense of community for them and their families, such as the deployment of police officers and leisure activities, especially youth activities. To a lesser degree, the local variations in building codes and ordinances may also be understood as contributing to the character of the community, and therefore some respondents were also skeptical about changes in that category.

The only area where the status quo is seen as being of significantly poor quality is in the area of transportation planning. The transportation system at a macro level is “a disaster,” according to one respondent, and most would probably not disagree.

There also are quality concerns, but to a much lesser degree, in the areas of building inspections and code enforcement, and E-Government. As a result, these three areas offer more upside potential (and less downside) in terms of quality of service.

Cost of Services

Since they were not favorable to any reduction in their quality of services, the responses to the various categories of opportunities were heavily driven by the perceived cost savings. This includes both the perceived magnitude of cost savings and the perceived

likelihood of realizing those cost savings. (And it also includes the question of whether costs could be reduced significantly without sacrificing their quality of services.)

In other words, the perceived likelihood of achieving cost reductions is related to the following factors:

- Whether—like public safety, road maintenance and law enforcement—it is a “big ticket item,” or not. Some, to the contrary, perceive leisure activities as not very costly because of the prevalence of volunteer labor.
- Whether the category is already characterized by a lot of collaboration or other forms of innovation, or not.
- Again, the respondents are much more interested in maintaining their quality of services than in achieving cost reductions. They were not interested in accepting a lower quality of service in order to achieve a lower cost.
- On the contrary, some respondents would be more open to paying more for a higher quality of service rather than vice versa. As one respondent said, “I’m not so worried about extra taxes. But if there’s an additional cost, what do I get for it?”
- But finally, the more widespread expectation is that “if a service is well designed, we can get both—quality and cost savings.”

Risk Taking

In short, the participants could overall be said to be mildly risk-averse. They are most likely to support those local government partnerships where:

- The services are not essential.
- The quality of service is not already excellent, where the quality of service might be improved.

As one respondent said, “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.”

In short, the respondents are generally hoping for incremental results from this project rather than major changes in the delivery of important services. For example:

- “There are lots of opportunities and they should proceed...cautiously.”
- “Do the easy ones first to show it can be done; to show citizens that it can work.”
- “Focus on the simple things.”
- “Make little changes.”

Sense of Community/Community Character

It has already been noted that respondents are exceptionally sensitive to those services that build community, and therefore it bears repeating. So there is opposition to anything that is perceived as pushing towards a “cookie cutter” model of services and of community.

One respondent said, “There’s a reason why we live where we live.” Another said, “Keep in mind that we are marketing our cities.... People choose to build their homes in the cities with (appropriate) services.” Another added, “Each city has a different expectation, and each city just needs to meet that expectation. They don’t all have to be the best.”

Another chimed in: “So the competition (between cities) is healthy.”

Services that are seen as most important to creating a sense of community include:

- The deployment of police officers on a community and/or neighborhood basis, and the opportunity for police officers to build personal relationships with the community (and vice versa).
- The availability of leisure activities, especially for youth, within the community, and the corollary opportunity for adult volunteers to contribute significantly to those activities.
- To a lesser degree, local variations in building codes and ordinances may also be understood as contributing to the character of the community.

One respondent said, “On anything that can create a community, at least do no harm.”

Accountability

Respondents are also concerned that accountability not be lost in any changes that are made, and accountability generally implies someone at the local (city) level.

- “Don’t collaborate to the point that you lose accountability.”
- “Don’t make it a big, bureaucratic entity. If I have a problem, I want it locally managed (so) I know who to call.”
- “You can call up the mayor or city manager. When was the last time you talked to your county commissioner?”

City Employees/Employment

Respondents do not generally care whether services are delivered by an employee of the city or county, or not. The exceptions to this rule are those areas, described above, where knowledge of the community is of particular importance to the job. Those areas include

police and building inspectors. There were some respondents who explicitly stated that even these could be private contractors, but the majority of respondents disagreed.

Respondents were asked whether they would support local government partnerships and new service delivery models if they would have the effect of eliminating some local government employment. One respondent noted that “Efficiency almost always affects jobs.” On the other hand, another said that “If we lost staff, that would be upsetting.”

Others noted, however, that “We could eliminate redundancy, but (Dakota County is) still growing, so we could redeploy our employees” to other activities.

Local Variation

As noted in the introduction to this report, almost 75 percent of the focus group participants live in Dakota’s County’s “western metroplex” of Apple Valley, Burnsville, Eagan and Lakeville. We believe, however, that the major findings of this report fairly represent the attitudes and opinions of most of the participants regardless of their place of residence. The exceptions to this are two: Significant local variations were expressed by residents of the city of Hastings and of the rural areas.

Hastings: There was significant skepticism expressed in Hastings that the city would benefit from collaborating with other Dakota County cities. As one respondent said, “Burnsville can work with Apple Valley. (It makes sense to partner) when you’re adjacent.” Another continued, “(But, here) things will get worse instead of better.... Hastings has different challenges.”

Finally, another respondent said, “(The most productive and efficient relationship) for us is with Dakota County. We’re the county seat. We can also look at partnerships with Cottage Grove.”

The Rural Areas: There were only two participants from the rural areas—one from a small, rural city and another from a township—so it not possible to generalize about opinions in the rural areas.

The township representative said, “We already partner with the cities (for fire and ambulance services). And we’re fine the way we are. The services are excellent.” Later he said, “I’m not sure what can come of this for our area (townships). We’re partnering already.”

The representative from the rural city said that the most pressing need is for street and road maintenance, including equipment sharing and employees. She is “not sure what makes sense, if (her community) should partner with another small city or with the townships.... All the small cities are struggling.” So, “if the county could help the cities and townships in joint purchasing—salt, equipment—(the city) would like to pursue that.”

The Final Word

As a wrap-up to the discussion, participants were asked “What one message do you want to send to your city and county leaders (who are providing oversight for this project)?” Their responses are grouped to reflect the frequency with which they were mentioned, with the exception of endorsements of specific opportunities which are grouped at the end.

“Communicate”/Citizen Involvement

The single most frequently mentioned message was a virtual dead heat between two ideas. First, the participants want their city and county leaders to communicate—both with themselves, and also with the communities at large.

The participants want to receive follow-up information and reports concerning this process. Many would appreciate the opportunity to continue to be involved in an advisory capacity. Many recommend continuing citizen involvement as specific projects roll out.

Further, the community at large needs to hear more about government activities. “Make sure they let people know what they’ve done. Dakota County is the leader (in local government collaboration), but we don’t hear too much about it.”

Finally, “tell people what you decided NOT to do, so they don’t see this as a slippery slope.”

“Do Something”

The participants were equally concerned that this effort not “die on the vine.”

- “There are lots of doable things that can cut cost and get things done.”
- “You have to do something with this. Don’t be afraid to take risks to do better services.”
- “Do something! There are lots of great opportunities, just pick one, start someplace.”

“Proceed Cautiously”

A variation on “Do Something” is “Proceed, (but) cautiously.”

- “Focus on the simple things.”
- “Do the easy ones first to show it can be done, so citizens see it can work.”
- “Do the ‘no-brainers.’”
- “Take existing successes, where you already have a track record, and expand that to neighboring cities.”

“Create the Vision”

Several respondents were concerned that all of the opportunities explored in the discussion groups were “tactical” in nature. They wondered whether there was a vision that was driving the effort. If so, what is it? If not, then we “need to create the vision first.”

“Create a Community”

- “(Concerning) anything that can create a community, at least do no harm.”
- “Base (the) choices on quality and value.... The quality, in this case, is that the individual character of the community is maintained.”
- “Tread lightly on the cities.... People live where they live because of the character of the community, respect their autonomy.”
- “(Make sure) the partnerships are realistic, feasible. (Otherwise), consolidation could just be big government taking over.”

“Get Input from the People Who Do It”

Several respondents said that “it would be a huge mistake not to get input from the people who do the work”....”who actually deal in these areas.”

“Save Some Money”

- “Seek out more ways to collaborate, and see if you can save some money.”
- “Do whatever makes the most sense to save more money.”

“Thank Them”

- “Thank them for doing this, for seeking our input.”
- “(It shows) great respect for the citizens to be a part of this.”

Other Messages

The following comments were stated once each.

- “Think 10-20 years ahead.”
- “Dakota County should go head to head with the Met Council. It should be disbanded.”
- “Make Dakota County a model.”
- “Private industry can also help.”
- “It’s not clear how Dakota County can help. It’s better with the cities sharing.”
- “Don’t think about your own turf.”
- “People want lower taxes, but they’re more concerned with quality and safety.”
- “(Determine) what would be best for citizens based on a cost/benefit analysis.”

Endorsements of Specific Opportunities

A number of participants used this as an opportunity to endorse local government collaboration in a particular area.

- “Address our transportation problems” was mentioned by four participants.

The following were mentioned once each.

- Joint purchasing of road maintenance salt and equipment
- Courts and corrections
- One building code for all
- Joint building design and construction
- Elections
- 9-1-1 dispatching