



## Accelerate plans to share service

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There are 3,900 units of local governments and public education in Ohio governed by more than 20,000 elected officials. The Center for Governmental Research determined that Northeast Ohio and Minneapolis-St. Paul had the greatest number of governmental units among the regions included in its nationwide study.

All these public bodies in Ohio spent \$107.2 billion in 2009, 124 percent more than they did in 1993. Meanwhile, the gross state product was \$462 billion in 2009, 72 percent higher than in 1993, and the state's population was 11.5 million in 2009, 3.6 percent more than in 1993.

In northeast Ohio, the per capita cost of government rose nearly 70 percent, more than twice the rate of inflation, from 1992 to 2002.

This government growth is why Ohio had to plug an \$8 billion deficit in its current biennial budget. The state accomplished this with a 25 percent cut in the local government fund that helps townships and municipalities. The 2012-13 state budget includes another 25 percent reduction in that fund and beginning in January, there will be no more estate tax, which local communities have used as an income source.

That means it's time for local governments to accelerate their efforts to share and collaborate. That message is delivered loud and clear in "Beyond Boundaries: A shared services action plan for Ohio schools and governments," a report that education, local government and business professionals from across Ohio helped prepare.

As a result, the state has approved legislation that previously prevented some governments from sharing. The state also created the local government innovation fund that rewards the best new collaboration. Trumbull County Highway Engineer Randy Smith and several local communities received a \$500,000 interest-free innovation fund loan because, instead of each constructing salt barns to meet upcoming EPA requirements, they decided to share one.

There are already many other ways that local governments in the Mahoning Valley are sharing and collaborating. The county engineer's office, for example, will plow West Farmington streets this winter. Previously, an engineer employee would plow until he reached West Farmington, raise the blade, drive across the village, then lower the blade to resume plowing.

Don't laugh. There are many examples like this one. Many school districts send nearly empty buses to John F. Kennedy Catholic High School. Along the way, they pass through towns that also send nearly empty buses to Kennedy.

A few years ago Niles firefighters, with their trucks and equipment handy, watched a house burn down because it was in Weathersfield. Weathersfield police cars probably spend as much time on

Niles roads, driving between Mineral Ridge and McKinley Heights, as they do on their own roads. Some Warren leaders want to build a \$9.5-million government center independently, even though Trumbull County also needs to rent or construct space in the same neighborhood.

It's not all about money. Summit County merged its health department with counterparts in several cities. The number of restaurant inspections increased while the annual cost to the restaurants decreased.

Imagine how much better served Niles and Weathersfield residents would be if the boundary lines didn't matter and the nearest police officer responded to calls.

Actually, because of the new legislation, boundary lines don't matter. Communities simply need to develop sharing plans with each other, much like the highway engineer did for the salt barn and snow plowing.

Beyond Boundaries calls these "simple agreements." Mahoning Valley governments already have many simple agreements. Many, many more are needed.