

MORE: WHERE HAS IT BEEN AND WHERE SHOULD IT BE GOING?

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I. BACKGROUND

MORE is a 501(c)(3) founded in 1998 by fifteen municipalities (which grew to 22 communities in 2001) in Central Massachusetts for the purpose of exploring avenues for regional cooperation. With the demise of Worcester County government, these municipalities saw the opportunity to collaborate on various issues including joint purchasing and service delivery agreements, and to explore long-term projects involving economic development and promoting a regional identity.

The **MORE** communities believed that cooperation among the cities and towns of Central Massachusetts could yield significant benefits. First, interlocal agreements have the potential to cut costs arising from duplication of services. Second, regional cooperation can improve the delivery of existing local services. For example, municipalities might benefit by collaboration on public health and code enforcement activities such as restaurant food and milk inspection, septic system testing, and lead paint testing. Third, regional cooperation might allow towns to deliver services such as civil or traffic engineering that no single town has the resources to provide on its own. Finally, larger issues, such as economic development, transportation and environmental protection cut across traditional political boundaries and may be better addressed with the participation of the entire region.

In order to facilitate cooperation, **MORE** hired Mullin Associates, Inc. to conduct six public workshops that provided a forum for concerned citizens and community leaders to discuss possibilities for future regional collaboration. The workshops brought together more than 200 citizens from 26 communities. At the conclusion, **MORE** established a set of goals and a program to begin implementing regional collaboration.

There were eight short-term goals (years 0-3) and five long-term goals (after the first three years) designed to provide direction to this new effort. The short-term goals focused on establishing a small organization led by a board of directors comprised of representatives of all member communities. The board was expected to hire a regional coordinator for the following purposes: to arrange joint purchasing of goods and services for member communities, to assist in developing a legislative agenda to promote regionalism, and to initiate an effort to develop a regional identity. The **MORE** board was to consist of a cross-section of community and business leaders to provide strategic direction to the new organization. The small staff was expected to rely on assessments to the member communities, grants, and contracts to become operational. The first task of the staff was to negotiate changes in service delivery that would be of clear and immediate benefit to the citizens of the area.

Municipalities Organized for Regional Effectiveness was originally named WAREP (Worcester Area Regionalism Education Project).

The long-term goals focused on sustaining the organization, if it had been successful in showing that there were measurable benefits from regional collaboration, and expanding its services. Its two new initiatives would be to hold educational forums designed to inform the communities of “best practices” and new techniques, and to provide technical assistance to communities on a contractual basis.

II. MORE SUCCESSES

MORE established an ambitious agenda. What exactly has been accomplished? The list below is a summary (which is by no means comprehensive) based on a review of all the files available.

- A. Joint purchase of goods and sharing of services
 - Established two veterans’ districts (1999)
 - a. Douglas, Northbridge, Sutton, Uxbridge
 - b. Grafton, Northboro, Shrewsbury
 - Reduced costs of concrete, heating oil, diesel fuel, and office copy paper for participating communities (1999-2002).
 - Established joint purchase group for health insurance (2000). Ten participating communities saved \$600,000 in 2001.

- B. Task Forces
 - Established legislative subcommittee to develop agenda to present to area legislators (2000). Several meetings were held with Central Mass Legislative Caucus. One of the important issues raised by managers and addressed by legislators involved mercury emissions standards.
 - Established highway/public works advisory committee to address common infrastructure problems (2000).
 - Established health insurance subcommittee (2000).
 - Established EMS task force to develop a strategy for the region (2001).

C. Forums

MORE sponsored a number of forums to educate member communities on management techniques, “best practices,” and important policy issues:

- GIS (3/99)
- Telecommunications technology (5/99)
- MIS (9/99)
- The case for Regional Economic Development (co-sponsored with the Research Bureau)(10/00)
- Technology-led Economic Development (co-sponsored with Mass Government Information Systems Association). Unveiled website and intranet (1/0 1).
- The Case for a Regional Economic Development Alliance (co-sponsored with the Research Bureau)(10/00)
- EMS(1/02)
- User Fees and Charges (2/03) followed by development of database of user fees and charges from all towns choosing to participate (hosted on Research Bureau website)
- Addressing the Housing Crisis (co-sponsored with the Research Bureau)(4/03)

D. Communication Among Members

1. Newsletters

- Quarterly newsletters were published and widely distributed for more than two years.
- Newsletters reported MORE activities, meetings, and other business.
- Newsletters provided bulletin board to post requests, for example, sharing services, training of town personnel, partners for bid process, and questions regarding salary ranges. Many of those requests were filled.

2. Website

Because of the need to process information and requests frequently (more often than quarterly), the Executive Director applied for and received an \$8,000 grant to develop a website to serve as a clearinghouse for information, and to link all member towns by email. This project was completed.

E. Grants

- Applied for and received four challenge grants from local foundations as seed money to establish organization (1998).
- Received Greater Worcester Community Foundation website grant mentioned above (2000).
- Applied twice unsuccessfully for Municipal Incentive Grant from DCHD.
- Requested unsuccessfully line item in State budget.

III. INFORMAL CONTACTS

While there is no written documentation, MORE members have commented regularly on the increase in informal contacts for sharing information with one another and soliciting requests from one another. With the loss of an executive director in 2002, Worcester Differed to coordinate all joint purchasing through its purchasing office. Unfortunately, members have not chosen to take advantage of this opportunity. The original fear that Worcester, by virtue of its size, would dominate MORE has not materialized.

IV. MORE FAILURES

- MORE had three executive directors in as many years. There is general consensus among member towns that only one had the professionalism, drive and leadership skills that resulted in many of the successes referred to earlier. The lack of continuity and appropriate leadership contributed considerably to the organization's present difficulties.
- The organization was unable to secure any steady stream of funding other than modest assessments of each town in spite of having applied twice for State Municipal Incentive Grants.
- While MORE reached out to the media and did get quite favorable and regular coverage, it was unable to generate much interest outside its membership.
- While MORE changed its name from W.A.R.E.P. and developed a logo, there was never an effort to develop a regional identity by broadening the conversation outside the membership as envisioned in the Mullin Report.
- While MORE met with the Legislative delegation several times to discuss regional issues, no real agenda was established.

- MORE efforts to work with Central Mass Regional Planning Commission were met with lack of interest.
- Involvement of business and community leaders in the task forces, which would have broadened the scope of and interest in the project, as envisioned in the Mullin report, never occurred.
- Without a demonstrated record of success during the first five years and a solid base of financial support, MORE was never able to take on broader regional issues such as developing a plan for solid waste management.

V.ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR REGIONAL COLLABORATION

In order to provide suggestions regarding the future direction of MORE, the Research Bureau reviewed several alternative models of regional collaboration in Massachusetts that seem to have institutionalized the kinds of successes MORE has had while avoiding the failures that left MORE in a weakened condition.

A.Southeastern Regional Services Group (SERSG)

SERSG, which was established in 1996, is comprised of 18 communities (as diverse as the City of Brockton and the towns of Mansfield and Wrentham) that came together to act jointly on governmental problems and to realize the financial benefits of joint purchase of goods and services. Each community is a member of the SERSG Board and pays dues of about \$3,100 per year, which has been supplemented by grants from the Executive Office of Communities and Development. The Board, which meets monthly, is responsible for hiring an executive director, the only employee, to carry out the organization's mission. The SERSG has had one executive director since it was established, and its budget for FY04 is \$70,000.

In return for the annual assessment, SERSG provides the following basic services:

- Collection and dissemination of information on changes in laws or programs likely to affect SERSG members.
- Procurement Services
- Personnel Training
- Government Surplus Property Acquisition
- Initial Feasibility Investigation of Special Project and Grant Applications

According to its literature, SERSG members have reaped a number of benefits:

- Saved in aggregate hundreds of thousands of dollars on joint purchases of supplies and services
- Received hundreds of hours of training for staff members and for municipal managers on a variety of personnel and management topics
- Been the recipients of grants through SERSG sponsored joint grant applications
- Benefited from a variety of SERSG sponsored meetings of Town Administrators, Highway Superintendents, Water Department Superintendents, and Police Chiefs and from workshops for Elected Executives and other Town Officials.

This year's projects included cooperative bids for office supplies, construction services, and gasoline and diesel fuel. In addition, the executive director provided information and assistance to every town on drafting a stormwater management plan as required by the Commonwealth. She also provided information to those communities that are part of a

regional vocational school district and wanted to challenge the Chapter 70 education reform distribution formula (similar to the situation in the Wachusett Regional School District).

SERSG has also established several advisory councils that provide ideas, expertise and influence:

- Academic Council, composed of political scientists from area institutions of higher education, who provide access to ideas and scholarly research;
- Executive Council, consists of all of the serving Chief Executive Officers of each SERSG member community, provides seasoned political judgment to SERSG, and serves as a source of disciplined accountability to SERSG.
- Legislative Council, consists of those members (or designated staff representatives) of the United States House of Representatives, the Massachusetts State Senate and the Massachusetts House of Representatives whose districts include SERSG communities, to provide SERSG with current knowledge of changes in law, regulations, and programs at the Federal and State level which could have an impact on SERSG communities, and to provide a channel of communication through which legislators can receive sound practical advice on the perceived impact of proposed laws, regulations, and programs.

Of the models observed, SERSG seems most similar to the original purpose of MORE. Its ability to sustain itself over the first eight years seems is due in large part to the continuity provided by one executive director and demonstrated success in terms of savings and assistance.

B. Hampshire Council of Governments (<http://www.liampshirecot~.or~>)

The Hampshire Council of Governments is a voluntary association of cities and towns in the Hampshire County area organized to identify problems shared by member towns that may be amenable to a regional solution, and to implement programs accordingly. MGL34B, Sect 206 ratifies the charter voters approved in the 1998 General Election. (It was the third revision of a charter originally approved by voters in 1986.)

The COG's primary established programs include: building inspection and zoning enforcement, cooperative purchasing, distribution of Federal surplus equipment, health insurance, and short term rehabilitation and long term health care. It is in the process of developing a plan for providing lower cost electricity to the region, initiating and supporting the development of a regional all-hazards emergency response plan in collaboration with UMass and the local emergency planning committee, and planning for development of the 106-acre Hampshire Park. The COG has also secured grants and other funds to support clean water protection, construction of a hospice facility, emergency response planning, regional pre-arraignment lock-up, and tobacco control.

The COG is governed by a 25-member council elected biannually by the voters in member towns at their municipal election. Votes on the Council are weighted, according to city or town population with no town having less than one member. The Council elects a five-member executive committee from its members. It also sets priorities, adopts a budget, oversees programs, and appoints a Council administrator who serves as executive director of the organization. He is supported by a team of professionals who administer day-to-day operations of the Council's programs and services.

The operations are paid for by assessed membership dues, program fees, grants and earned revenues. Until FY04, membership dues of about \$700,000 supported an annual program cash flow of about \$27 million. The charter set initial membership dues at .0001 of the town's equalized property valuation (EQV) subject to the same provisions of Proposition 2 1/2 rules that apply to cities and towns. Because of the mounting state and local funding crisis, members have approved two 10% reductions in membership assessments. In addition, a cost/benefit analysis of programs that return a direct savings to town budgets, has shown that, in general, returns on the membership dollar has been in reverse proportion to the size of the town. While the smaller towns may realize as much as a seven-to-one return, the larger ones, which do not use all the services, see only slightly better than a one-to-one return. As a result, seven of the original twenty towns withdrew at the end of FY03, and the Council capped dues for any one member at \$40,000. The effect of these changes was to reduce dues revenue from \$747,832 in FY02 to \$188,824 in FY04, a reduction of 75%. In addition to reducing staff by 50% (from 12 to 6 full time employees), the bulk of the deficit has been made up by withdrawing about \$353,000 from reserves.

C. Franklin Regional Council of Governments (<http://www.frco2.org>)

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) is both the regional planning agency and governmental membership organization serving the 26 mostly rural towns of Franklin County (in the north central part of the State) comprised of 70,000 people over 740 square miles. Its goal is to integrate regional and local planning, human services advocacy and coordination, and municipal services.

FRCOG is governed by three bodies: the 29-member council, consisting of representatives from the select board of each member town, 2 members elected regionally and one from the regional planning board; the Franklin Regional Planning Board, consisting of representatives from boards of selectmen and planning boards, acting as an advisory body on regional planning issues and policies; and a 5-member executive committee, the 2 council members who have been elected regionally, 2 appointed by the council and one appointed by the planning board. The council and its committees identify the needs of the region and direct the focus of the FRCOG. The annual assessments paid by member towns, which currently total about \$335,000, leverage a total budget of about \$3 million used to provide services to the region. The formula for determining assessments is based 90% on population and 10% on EQV.

FRCOG services include the following:

- Advocacy – FRCOG brings together constituent groups to identify regional priorities and advocate on behalf of Franklin County towns on regional, state, and federal levels. Some examples include securing access to state funding for community health programs and developing recommendations to amend the Chapter 70 formula for local aid related to education reform.
- Regional Economic Development – FRCOG takes a lead role in planning and coordination of initiatives to support economic development such as CEDS to become eligible for EDA funding and the Brownfield Revolving Loan Fund, which provides low interest loans for cleanup of hazardous sites. FRCOG was also instrumental in establishing Franklin-Hampshire Connect, the goal of which is to have affordable, reliable, advanced broadband services available throughout the two-county region.

- Municipal Resources - FRCOG conducts and publishes an annual survey of wages and salaries in the region and publishes a regional directory of relevant information on, for example, public officials, regional programs and associations, and statistics on population, and tax rates.
- Workshops -FRCOG sponsors workshops with grants secured from State government, such as the Municipal Incentive program and the Department of Industrial Accidents.
- Community Services -FRCOG administers several fee-for-service programs to assist communities with administrative functions and the provision of services. These include cooperative bidding and purchasing programs, engineering assistance, grant writing, and health inspection services. In addition, the community services division is responsible for the community coalition for teens, which provides preventive programs, develops community awareness and resources, coordinates services, and guides teen action. One of its functions is to distribute on an application basis Department of Public Health funds from the Teen Challenge Funds to prevent teenage pregnancy. The final function of community services is to provide tobacco education with grants from DPH.
- Planning and Development -As the Regional Planning Agency. FRCOG has the same responsibilities as all RPAs: to provide regional planning. FRCOG divides its work into four areas of concentration: economic development, land use, natural resources, and transportation. In addition, it provides computerized mapping services using GIS technology and was designated by EOEa to provide build-out analyses for the communities in Franklin County. FRCOG maintains a complete set of US Census Bureau data and provides free statistical information to the public on request. The data are used to develop business plans, conduct research, write grant applications, and develop policies.

VI. SERVICE REQUESTS BY MORE MEMBERS

A recent survey of MORE members yielded a substantial and varied list of services that they would like to see provided by a regional organization.

Shared Services and Personnel

Inspection Services
 EMS/Ambulance
 Dispatch
 Fire and Mutual Aid
 Emergency Management
 Police
 Regional Police Lockup
 Engineers
 Planners
 Grant Writing
 Health Insurance
 Assessing and Appraisal
 Employee Training

Regional Data

Salary Surveys
 Fees and Charges Database

Other Regional Projects

- Solid Waste Hauling and Disposal
- Affordable Housing Plan and Shelter Space for Region
- Regional Support for Airport
- Brownfields Development

Lobbying

- Increase Local Aid
- Relief from State Mandates

Worcester's Proposals for Collaborations

- Code Enforcement Inspection Activities
- Public Health Services –lab tests, food inspections, animal control I.T.
- Purchase of Goods from Worcester's Bid List

VII. OPTIONS FOR MORE

What mode of regional collaboration is most compatible with providing the services member are seeking? Based on the models of regional collaboration discussed above, it would seem that SERSG most closely resembles the work that MORE had been doing successfully under the leadership of Jill Myers. The SERSG budget of about \$70,000 in FY04 which comes from member assessments is in a similar range to MORE's budget of two and three years ago. Since MORE was not successful with this model, and there does not seem to be much enthusiasm by members to pursue a failed strategy, we need to look at other options at this time. However, the academic, executive and legislative advisory councils established by SERSG should be incorporated into the future structure of MORE since they are a way of expanding the influence and education of MORE members.

The Hampshire Council of Governments, first chartered in 1986, has a much more elaborate governing structure and a much more ambitious agenda than SERSG. Besides cooperative purchasing, the COG provides building inspections and zoning enforcement, as well as running rehabilitative and long-term health care facilities. As a voluntary membership organization, however, it suffers from one of the same problems as MORE: shrinking town revenues led seven of twenty towns to withdraw, leaving assessment revenues at one-quarter of those in FY03. In addition, before any interest can be generated in developing an elaborate governmental structure that is authorized by the Commonwealth, MORE would need a several-year track record showing demonstrable benefit to its members.

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments, as noted earlier, is both a regional planning agency (like CMRPC) and a governmental membership organization providing services similar to those envisioned by MORE members. For example, FRCOG serves as an advocate for the region with the State and Federal governments; it conducts and publishes an annual survey of wages and salaries in the region; it sponsors workshops for municipal officials; and it administers fee-for-service programs including cooperative bidding and purchasing programs, engineering assistance, grant writing, and health inspection services. There does not seem to be anything in the statute governing RPA's (MGL Chapter 40B) that would prevent CMRPC from providing such services if that were the desire of its members. The advantage of having access to these services through CMRPC is that it is an established agency with a regular income stream from member assessments and government programs. CMRPC could establish within its framework a

mini-consulting team consisting of a grants writer/lobbyist, an administrator to organize and coordinate joint purchase of goods and services, an engineer and any other specialists deemed appropriate by the members to meet their needs. In addition, consultants could be hired to address specific projects such as developing a regional solid waste plan or a regional EMS plan. These positions would be funded by the current mandated member assessments, fee-for-service arrangements as well as grants obtained for specific purposes. MORE members would have to work with their representatives on the CMRPC Board as well as the representatives of other CMRPC towns to require CMRPC to broaden the scope of its operations. This seems like the most viable approach for MORE to pursue at this time.