



State of the Cities 2011 In-depth Analysis: Barriers to Collaboration

Background

For the 8th year, the League of Minnesota Cities sent its members a fiscal conditions survey. The annual survey asks several core questions about key revenue shortfalls, budget-balancing actions, and general fiscal outlook. The 2011 survey also asked city officials about many timely issues, including collaboration and resident views of taxes. The main findings of the core survey questions are available from the [League](#). Results for the additional questions will be released as separate mini reports. The topics are as follows:

- Barriers to Collaboration
- Property Taxes and Service Expectations
- Drivers of Change in Cities

This short paper relays the findings on the question related to collaboration. City officials were asked to identify the barriers to collaboration that they have experienced.

Cities seeking to collaborate

Cities are facing increasing pressure to do things differently. The economic recession and slow, drawn out recovery has created a wide range of challenges for cities. Those challenges include increases in foreclosures, reductions in state aid and a growing resistance to the property tax. Much of the focus on doing things differently centers on cities working together with other local governments to provide services. There has been growing scrutiny of the extent to which cities across the state are collaborating.

The idea, however, is not a new one. Cities have been forming relationships with their city, county, school district, and township neighbors for years in order to provide a whole range of services—including police and fire, park and recreation, street maintenance, and snow plowing. Over the last several years, the League has attempted to inventory the different ways that cities are already collaborating to provide services. In 2004, more than a thousand collaborative arrangements were identified. Since then, the League's database of collaborative efforts has grown to include even more examples.

Cities experience a range of different barriers when trying to collaborate

Collaboration doesn't just happen. It requires significant work and commitment and can be time-consuming to establish. And in some cases, it is not a viable approach. As part of the most recent State of the Cities survey, the League asked cities to describe the kinds of barriers to collaboration that they have experienced. Respondents could select up to eight different barriers or obstacles to collaboration or offer one that didn't appear on the survey instrument.

More than 150 cities identified at least one barrier and on average, cities indicated that they had experienced 3 different barriers. Almost 50 cities identified more than 3 barriers while 25 cities reported facing more than 5 different barriers in pursuing collaborations for providing services.

The table below shows the overall results with the most frequently identified barriers appearing at the top. The three most common barriers were a concern about losing identity, political issues and concerns, and concerns about declining service levels or availability. Each of these was mentioned by about one third of the cities that identified at least one barrier.

Barrier to Collaboration	Share of Respondents identifying at least one barrier
<i>Concern about loss of identity</i>	36%
<i>Political issues and/or concerns</i>	35
<i>Concern about decline in service level and/or availability</i>	33
Lack of willingness to change/lack of leadership to encourage change	27
Lack of agreement on who would pay what	21
Conflict in values and/or goals with potential partners	18
Geographic distance	16
Upfront costs and investment needed	16
Statutory constraints	5

Concerns about a loss of identity as a result of collaboration stem from city officials understanding that residents in their communities value familiarity with who is providing a service. A simple example of this is residents feeling a sense of recognition upon seeing the city’s police vehicle in their neighborhood. If two cities form a joint police department and give it a new, unique name, that feeling of familiarity will be gone. City officials worried about how residents might react to losing that sense of recognition may be less inclined to enter into serious discussions about collaboration with a potential partner.

Political barriers seem to center on issues of turf and control. Collaboration requires that each partner give up a little bit of control. Finally, changing the way a service is delivered brings up worries that the level of the service will be significantly altered. That might mean fewer patrols each day or less frequent snowplowing.

The survey instrument also allowed city officials to list barriers other than the ones appearing as part of the question. Only about 20 did so. Comments included conflicting ideologies, union issues, difficulties getting conversations started with other local governments, and concern about failure to realize cost savings

Cities across the state report collaboration barriers at similar rates

The table below shows the most common barriers to collaboration for cities in the seven-county metro area as a group and for cities in greater Minnesota as a separate group. Overall, the patterns of barriers identified are very similar. A slightly larger share of metro cities reported political issues and a lack of agreement on what each partner would pay. Greater Minnesota cities were slightly more likely to have experienced a lack of willingness to change when attempting to pursue collaboration. Somewhat surprising is that the two groups did not differ more in the rate at which they identified geographic distance as a barrier. Overall that was not one of the top obstacles to collaboration; six percent of metro cities and eight percent of cities outside the metro area reported barriers of geography.

Barrier	Share of Metro Respondents	Share of Greater MN respondents
Political issues and/or concerns	19%	16%
Concern about loss of identity	17	17
Concern about decline in service level and/or availability	17	16
Lack of agreement on who would pay what	12	9
Lack of willingness to change/lack of leadership to encourage change	10	14
Conflict in values and/or goals with potential partners	9	8
Upfront costs and investment needed	8	8
Geographic distance	6	8
Statutory constraints	2	2