Better Together: How Sharing Resources Can Help Vermont Towns Do More with Less

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Why did VLCT create **Sharing Municipal Staff: Options for Temporary Coverage and Long-Term Capacity**? Because we hear you and want to strengthen your work.

As workforce shortages, rising costs, and growing service demands challenge Vermont municipalities, sharing staff, equipment, and services offers a practical way forward. But successful partnerships require more than a handshake.

Across Vermont, municipalities are exploring new ways to share staff, equipment, expertise, and services as they navigate workforce shortages, rising costs, tight budgets, and growing demands for local government services. For many communities, particularly smaller towns with limited staff and financial resources, sharing resources offers a practical way to maintain essential services, build capacity, and make the most of taxpayer dollars.

But while these partnerships can offer significant benefits, successful arrangements require more than a handshake. Without clear expectations and careful planning, even well-intentioned partnerships can expose municipalities to unexpected financial, operational, and legal risks.

Finding Capacity Without Adding Costs

One of the biggest challenges facing Vermont municipalities is finding and keeping skilled, qualified employees. Towns compete for a limited pool of experienced municipal managers and administrators, finance professionals, zoning administrators, highway workers, water and wastewater operators, and other specialized personnel.

For a small town, hiring a full-time employee may not be financially practical, particularly when the position doesn't require 40 hours of work each week. Yet going without that expertise can create operational challenges, delays, and additional pressure on existing employees.

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Sharing staff offers another option.

Two neighboring towns might jointly employ a zoning administrator, split the cost of a specialized public works employee, or arrange for an experienced finance professional to work in both communities. One municipality might provide a particular service to another for an agreed-upon fee.

These arrangements can give towns access to skills and experience they otherwise might struggle to afford while distributing costs among participating communities.

Sharing resources can also help towns manage unexpected staffing shortages. When a longtime employee retires, becomes ill, or leaves unexpectedly, another municipality may be able to provide temporary assistance while a replacement is found.

Rather than scrambling to fill a critical gap, towns can establish relationships and arrangements ahead of time.

Sharing More Than Employees

The opportunities extend well beyond staffing.

Municipal equipment represents a significant investment, particularly for highway departments and public works operations. Specialized equipment may cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars but only be needed occasionally.

Instead of each town purchasing and maintaining equipment that sits idle much of the year, neighboring municipalities could explore joint purchasing, shared ownership, or arrangements that allow equipment to be used across town boundaries.

The same thinking can apply to emergency response, infrastructure maintenance, administrative functions, and specialized professional services.

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Resource sharing isn't necessarily about reducing services or eliminating positions. It's about finding ways to maintain or improve services while making better use of limited public resources.

A Handshake Isn't Always Enough

While municipal cooperation often begins with a conversation between neighboring officials, even the best-intentioned arrangements can create unexpected problems when the details haven't been worked out.

Consider a highway employee who normally works for Town A but agrees to help Town B operate equipment during a staffing shortage.

What happens if that employee is injured? Which municipality's workers' compensation coverage applies? Who is responsible if equipment is damaged or someone else's property is affected? Who supervises the employee, authorizes overtime, or determines which town's work takes priority?

These questions may seem unnecessary when two communities have a strong working relationship. But when something goes wrong, the absence of clear expectations can expose both municipalities to financial, operational, and legal risks.

A written agreement isn't a sign of distrust. It's a way to protect the partnership.

Before sharing staff, equipment, or services, municipalities should establish clear expectations about responsibilities, costs, supervision, insurance, liability, and how the arrangement can be changed or ended.

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They should also consult their **insurance providers and legal counsel** to understand potential coverage gaps, employment obligations, and applicable legal requirements.

Vermont law provides several ways for municipalities to formalize cooperative arrangements, including interlocal contracts and more structured regional partnerships. The right approach depends on the nature and duration of the shared service.

Not every arrangement needs to be complicated. A temporary staff loan may require a relatively straightforward written agreement, while a permanent shared position or service may call for more detailed planning.

The important thing is to address potential problems before they become real ones.

Planning Ahead Creates Opportunities

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for Vermont municipalities is to move from reacting to immediate problems toward planning for future needs.

What happens if a town's only water operator retires? Could neighboring communities cross-train employees to provide backup? Are there specialized positions that several towns could support together? Could equipment purchases be coordinated to avoid unnecessary duplication?

These are conversations worth having before a crisis occurs.

Sharing resources won't solve every workforce or budget challenge. But as Vermont towns look for sustainable ways to deliver essential services, working together may be one of the most practical tools available.

The goal isn't simply to spend less. It's to build stronger, more resilient municipal operations that can continue serving their communities well into the future. We hope

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Sharing Municipal Staff: Options for Temporary Coverage and Long-Term Capacity can help you do this.

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