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

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Vermont towns have a long tradition of helping their neighbors. Whether lending a piece of highway equipment, assisting with storm cleanup, or providing temporary staffing support, municipalities have often relied on cooperation to get things done. Today, that spirit of cooperation is taking on new importance.

Across Vermont, more municipalities are exploring ways to share staff, equipment, expertise, and services as they confront some familiar challenges: difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified employees, rising equipment and operating costs, tight municipal budgets, and growing expectations for local government services.

For many communities, particularly smaller towns with limited staff and financial resources, sharing resources may offer a practical alternative to trying to do everything independently.

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.

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

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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.

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.

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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.

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

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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.

To help municipalities explore these opportunities, VLCT recently released a new resource, **Sharing Municipal Staff: Options for Temporary Coverage and Long-Term Capacity**. The guidance outlines different approaches to sharing employees, explains Vermont's legal options for intermunicipal cooperation, and identifies important considerations for developing successful agreements.

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.

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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.

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