



Chris Rickert: Many things stand in the way of collaborative government

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For the first time in recent memory, the oddly shaped, sparsely populated and slated-for-extinction town of Blooming Grove will have its own ambulance service.

The nearly \$800,000 it's spending to do this includes the cost of a new fire station, an ambulance and staff. Despite the start-up costs, town administrator Mike Wolf contends that residents will end up paying less for the service than before, after taking into account the sale of the town's old public works garage and a contract with the town of Burke to serve its residents, too.

Still, \$800,000 to begin ambulance service in a town of 1,753 that in 16 years will be absorbed by the city of Madison? It seems ridiculous to Arnold Berg, a 13-year member of the town's board who called me last week to bend my ear about the project.

"It's not government operating at its best," Berg said.

Time will tell whether Blooming Grove's ambulance turns out to be a good deal. But Berg and other officials I spoke with last week say turf battles, state laws and unions don't always make it easy for municipalities to save taxpayers money by cooperating on core services.

Perhaps the biggest barrier is the taxpayers themselves.

Tim Krueger, administrator of Maple Bluff, one of the three municipalities that participated in a now-defunct shared ambulance service with Burke and Blooming Grove, believes part of the reason the towns abandoned the partnership was because the ambulance was based in Maple Bluff.

"I think they always looked at it as Maple Bluff's district and not all three of theirs," he said.

That kind of home-team bias is not confined to small towns.

Madison's firefighters have first dibs on all its fires, even if they occur at the periphery of the city and another department could respond more quickly, department spokeswoman Lori Wirth said. The same goes for all but the most serious medical emergencies, in the case of paramedics.

But I'd wager that people in medical crisis or whose homes were burning down don't care whose name appears on the side of the ambulance or fire truck — as long as it gets there quick.

Madison Fire Chief Debra Amesqua said she is "a strong, strong believer in regionalization" of fire and emergency medical services. But she and others said the debate is often driven by a vocal minority of residents who are not currently in any medical crisis or watching their homes burn down and who want to keep their local services local.

Such parochialism can be not only dangerous, but expensive.

A few years ago, the town of Madison counted 230 fire and emergency vehicles in Dane County. Town fire chief David Bloom told me Wednesday that it's likely a lot of these vehicles spend a lot of their time idle.

Departments like his do collaborate with others on services, he said, but "my opinion is we are very territorial and we protect our territories in the fire service."

It's not only emergency services.

In 2008, Blooming Grove chose to stick with Veolia, a private garbage and recycling firm, rather than switch to the city of Madison, which would have charged slightly less in the first four years and probably significantly less in the years to follow, once the cost of buying Madison's bins was paid off, Wolf said.

Still, the board opted for Veolia in part because some residents "don't want the city of Madison's name on the side of the truck

that picks up their garbage,” Wolf said.

Of course, a constituent’s mind is a fickle thing, but representative democracy usually tempers that. Usually.

State law provides a path for municipalities to establish joint services, according to Curt Witynski, assistant director of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. It just doesn’t provide incentives for doing so. In fact, a law passed in 2009 can do just the opposite.

Pushed by police and firefighters unions, the Maintenance of Effort for Emergency Services law is ostensibly a way to make sure cities don’t balance their budgets by gambling with residents’ safety. It requires cities to annually spend as much on emergency services as they did in 2009 — unless they can provide a really good excuse — or face losing some of their state funding.

In other words, small communities looking to consolidate must either spend the same amount they were spending before consolidation — thus defeating a main reason for consolidation — or jump over a series of bureaucratic hurdles in the hope that they can prove their case to state bean counters.

Tax-cut-happy Republicans now in control of state government might do well to consider that and redirect a bit of their zeal municipalities’ way.

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