Partnerships vital for county government

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Partnerships with non-governmental entities help counties do more with less, a panel of Columbia County officials said Monday.

As host of the monthly Intercounty Coordinating Committee meeting, Columbia County showcased how two of its departments — the Land and Water Conservation Department and the Columbia County Economic Development Corporation — to offer examples of how government bodies can work with non-government bodies, both in formal partnerships and informal cooperation.

"It really comes down to getting a bunch of heads together," said Kurt Calkins, Columbia County's Land and Water Conservation director.

For example, he said, the department works with farm organizations such as the Farm Bureau and the Farmers Union to consider ways to balance the goals of farmers with the environmental impacts of agricultural practices, and with the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association on research probing how and where pollutants get into the water supply.

Nancy Elsing, CCEDC executive director, said she couldn't do her job of promoting Columbia County's economic development without partners such as community and technical colleges, local Chambers of Commerce and the Madison Region Economic Partnership.

"I think when you borrow an idea from others, it's a compliment," Elsing said. "And I have borrowed many ideas from others sitting at the table."

Yet, most of the officials from ICC's member counties — Columbia, Dodge, Green Lake, Jefferson, Marquette and Sauk — acknowledged it can be formidable for county elected officials and departments to form and maintain such partnerships.
Dan Hill, specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension Local Government Center, gave each participant an electronic keypad, and asked them to record their responses to various questions related to partnerships.

The first question invited responses of true or false: "State resources for county government will increase significantly in the next two to five years?"

When only one respondent said "true," Hill quipped, "Apparently, there's one person from Illinois here."

Hill said collaboration with other entities is one way to stretch increasingly scarce resources.

Officials said, however, that the scarcity of two key resources — money and time — makes formulating such partnerships a challenge.

Columbia County Supervisor Andy Ross said a situation common to all Wisconsin county supervisors is "being able to fit in everything that needs to be done."

If a county official wants to ask a non-governmental organization representative to form a collaborative relationship, Ross said, then "we've got to show value for the time that we want them to put in."

Kathleen Haas, community resource development specialist for the University of Wisconsin-Extension Columbia County, said building trust is key to forming cooperative relationships — and sometimes the trust established in one endeavor can lead to cooperation in other areas. For example, Columbia County's Farm to School effort, to get local food products into school meals, stemmed from relationships that the Extension had built previously, on other projects, with groups such as local food producers.

Calkins presentation

http://www.wisconsin.com/news/local/article_eb95eb75-4a15-5c4c-972c-c5fb3150&d24.html#vymxw2d5l3i.email