



**It's Time to Take
Another Look at**

Collaboration

By DAVE SCHROPFER

Sharing each other's burdens, needs, hopes and dreams was the foundation of some of the first towns in the Commonwealth in the early 1600s, including one on Cape Cod originally called Nauset. For various reasons, however, between the mid-1600s and the mid-1700s, Nauset was broken into four unique towns: Eastham, Orleans, Truro and Wellfleet. Several centuries later, it is again clear that the towns need to share each other's burdens, needs, hopes and dreams. As Wellfleet Selectman Ira Wolf said recently, "In order to survive, we may have to put some of the towns of Nauset back together again."

In the fall of 2008, the Board of Selectmen in Truro, the town with the smallest population on the Cape, initiated a meeting with neighboring Wellfleet to explore opportunities for sharing some services. When I heard about it, I asked our town administrator in Eastham, Sheila Vanderhoef, to contact the other two towns to see if we could join them. They said yes and

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invited Provincetown to join as well, bringing together all four towns of the Outer Cape. The year-round population of the four towns is just under 14,000, but it swells to more than 125,000 in the summer months. So, although each town is unique, they share the major issues of servicing townspeople and visitors in an age of shrinking budgets and compromised services.

The first meeting was attended by sixteen of the twenty selectmen from the four towns, meeting jointly for the first time in anyone's memory. A report was distributed that cited twenty-six different programs, services or functions already being shared among the towns, Barnstable County or the Cape Cod Commission (the regional planning agency). These range from the use of weight and measure services from the county to the planning and mapping services provided by the commission. Clearly, we were not going it entirely alone.

Next, we formed the Inter-Municipal Cooperation Committee, which began to meet and search for the "low-hanging fruit"—the most easily attainable opportunities for collaboration. We were led to believe that this "fruit" might be in areas such as assessing, public works and building inspection services. One committee member said that police, fire, EMS and schools were not open for discussion. As it turned out, however, Provincetown's Board of Education, without the involvement of the Inter-Municipal Cooperation Committee, decided to close its high

school, the smallest one in the state, and gradually transfer students into the Nauset Regional Schools over the next three years.

The four towns cover eighty-five square miles, comparable to the size of some single towns. Two of the towns, Wellfleet and Eastham, have joined with Orleans to explore the possibility of sharing police facilities, services, and public safety answering points—or, as many call it, dispatching. A grant was requested from the Cape Cod Commission and the state to study the idea. Emphasis was placed on improving the already effective forces—to make them more efficient—and to examine not only sharing services but also a complete merger of the three departments over time. Another objective was to evaluate the opportunities for a combined force to have more positions for growth. The towns were helped in the process by the retirement of police chiefs in Eastham and Wellfleet. Retirements and resignations make merging an easier process.

Eastham has hired a new chief, Edward Kulhawik, with credentials and a track record from Wilton, Connecticut, to run a much larger department. The towns agree that any decision to share a chief is going to be dependant on many factors, not the least of which is assuring both or even all three towns that management of their issues and needs will be addressed at no less than present levels.

The study also indicated that perhaps more than \$1 million could be saved by consolidating facilities, sharing personnel and



Towns Take Steps Toward Police Department Merger

THE CAPE COD TOWNS of Eastham, Orleans and Wellfleet are now moving into the second phase of exploring the possible merger of their three police departments into a single agency. The towns have agreed to conduct a study to determine all of the stakeholders in a potential merger—particularly the public—and to identify and address their concerns. The study will be conducted by the state Office of Public Collaboration and is expected to be completed by early 2011.

The towns took the first step this past spring, when they engaged a consultant to conduct a comprehensive study of the police and dispatch services of the three communities and determine whether it is feasible to merge the police departments. The study gave local officials incentive to pursue the bold idea further. "The merger of the Eastham, Orleans and Wellfleet police departments is economically feasible and should save approximately \$1 million in personnel costs annually,"

according to the report, prepared by the MMA Consulting Group Inc. "The reduction in direct expenses and overhead costs should result in additional savings of approximately \$350,000 annually. ... The merger of the police departments would provide the same level of service as currently provided. Field supervision, dispatching and investigative services would be improved by a three-department merger."

The three Outer Cape towns provide services to a year-round population of 14,500 and a seasonal population of more than 68,000. The police departments respond to approximately 26,000 calls for service each year, with a collective budget for fiscal 2010 of approximately \$5.3 million.

The report finds that a joint three-town police department could eliminate "a duplication of administrative systems, command positions, and dispatch services," and reduce staff by eight full-time personnel, including the elimination of two chief positions.

"The service demand of each town is sufficiently similar to allow integration of resources in an effective manner," the report states. "The merger of dispatch centers would provide for a more effective deployment of personnel and sharing of resources."

The report estimates that a three-department merger would "result in some one-time implementation costs of approximately \$80,000 to \$200,000, to prepare communication and other facilities for the merged operations." The report lays out the various routes to a merged department, as well as cost-allocation models and governance and management recommendations.

The report also finds that a two-town collaboration—the merger of the Orleans and Eastham police departments, or the Wellfleet and Eastham police departments—"is also economically viable," with expected annual savings in the range of \$550,000 to \$600,000 in either scenario.

— *John Ouellette*

reducing the number of chiefs gradually to one. An observation at the first meeting of the Joint Public Safety Study Group, which I chair, is that on the midnight to 8 a.m. shift, the forty-eight square miles of our three towns are serviced by more police officers than Plymouth, which has at least four times the population and twice the territory. Efficiency is begging to happen.

The Joint Public Safety Study Team is now taking a closer look at the initial steps in combining selected activities of the departments. Sharing shift work, cross training, joint dispatch and court duties are in discussion. "The towns want to correlate their next study with the study being considered by the Cape Cod Chiefs of Police regarding shared police dispatch or working jointly with the county sheriff's dispatch in Bourne," said Chief Kulhawik.

Not Just for Small Towns

In Connecticut, where I lived for thirty years, there are two large cities, Bridgeport and Hartford, that have remained in their small footprint without merging with neighboring towns or the counties surrounding them. As a result, the migration of people to the suburbs, coupled with the increasing demands placed on larger cities to help their aging and often poorer citizens, has led to rapidly increasing property taxes and a general decline in services. Time and again, malls, theatres and corporations selected sites just outside the borders of both cities. Thus, they escaped the city taxes and yet drew upon the cities for medical care, transportation, roads, customers and services such as sewerage treatment and water, as well as to back-up their smaller towns' sometimes inadequate public safety services. There appeared to be no attempt to bring the cities and towns together, as Stamford had done in the late 1940s, joining the city of Stamford and the suburban town of North Stamford.

I first experienced the concept of merging or sharing town services fifteen years ago, when my career in management and communications led me to Louisville, Kentucky. My wife and I selected a home in a small suburban village called Riverwood in Jefferson County, which included Louisville and the surrounding eighty-three villages. We loved the proximity to downtown, the stimulating cultural events, the Kentucky Derby, and the sports activities in the city of Louisville. But we had no obligation to Louisville, even though we had the option to use Louisville as our address rather than the village name. We did pay Jefferson County taxes and received some services from the county.

Louisville had tried unsuccessfully to join with the geographically larger Jefferson County starting in the mid-1950s, but the ballot box sunk their hopes. Later votes in the mid-1980s also failed, according to Chad Carlton, communications director for Louisville. After those failures, the county and the city signed a municipal agreement to combine the County Parks Department with Louisville's famous Olmsted park system (the same designer of Boston's Olmsted parks and a part of the Emerald Necklace). The schools had already been combined into a county system, and, much to the chagrin of those who fought against change, the departmental mergers led to an improvement in quality, effectiveness and efficiency.

Fears abated sufficiently by 2000, as the populace witnessed the results of the gradual introduction of shared services and

Recommended Reasons for Regionalizing

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of municipal services
- To increase negotiating power with vendors
- To become more efficient

Recommended Gentle Moves

- Seek low-hanging fruit.
- Seek to merge or share services that are less controversial.
- Avoid causing layoffs, unless they are happening for other reasons.
- Review mandatory and probable retirements to find opportunities in the near future.

Recommended Communications

The fastest way to find opportunities is to:

- Exchange capital budgets to see if sharing would save on expensive purchases
- Report employee changes, expected vacancies, and retirements
- Work together on larger projects to avoid unnecessary redundancies
- Encourage department heads to meet with their counterparts in neighboring communities to consider ideas
- Seek ideas and comments during department head meetings that could lead to collaborating with other communities or the county

– Dave Schropfer

experienced the successful merger of the schools. The county and city governments were finally merged that year as a result of a 54-46 percent vote in favor of the change.

A before-and-after comparison of the merger shows that Louisville increased from an area of sixty square miles (about the same as the four towns on the Outer Cape) to 386 square miles (about the same as Barnstable County). More important for Louisville was the increase in population, from 256,000 to 694,000, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Louisville's ranking among the country's largest cities rose from sixty-seven to sixteen. By comparison, Boston is the twenty-first largest city in the country, with a population of 621,000. Louisville's median household income also rose as a result of the merger, from \$28,843 to \$39,457, as the merger brought back into the tax base those who weren't able to support the city from the suburban towns. The merger permitted all the smaller towns to maintain their tax base and their twenty-three separate fire districts spread throughout the county. (Today, after voluntary mergers, there are seventeen fire districts, which work with the others through mutual aid.)

Asked how residents feel about the effects of the merger, Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson replied, "They see the results!

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The parks are groomed. The potholes are filled. Our ten police districts have been consolidated into eight, while reducing crime significantly. But very important in this down economy, we've avoided the draconian budget cuts required in many large cities near us. We're not just more effective; we're more efficient."

The mayor gave an example of paving a road pre-merger: "We used to have the city paving equipment stop at the arbitrary line separating the two entities. Then the county equipment would take over and finish the job in their territory. Now one team does the whole job. People see that and they understand that it's smarter, it's better.

"Louisville," Abramson said, "is now one community, with one agenda, with one group of leaders accountable to one group of voters." I asked this popular mayor, who was Louisville's mayor before being elected mayor of Louisville/Jefferson County, if there was anything he thought didn't work well in the merger. "Yes," he said. "We have twenty-six councilors who are all affiliated with one or the other political parties, so there's a lot of posturing that takes place among them. I wish the enabling legislation required them to be unaffiliated."

County Services

In Massachusetts, Barnstable County is one of the few with fully functioning county-wide services, which is a big advantage to the four towns on the Outer Cape. (It's unfortunate that so few county services are available throughout the state.) The Inter-Municipal Cooperation Committee continually invites county department heads, procurement staff and other experts in to see what they can do for the towns. We see the county as a valuable asset.

When asked what value functioning counties provide to the state and municipalities, Barnstable County Commissioner Sheila Lyons replied, "The fact that our county is recognized by the General Court enables it to be even more effective than a council of governments (COG). Barnstable can leverage financial and service resources that the towns can't do and the state doesn't do. ... We are not only able to provide technical services, but we're happy to do it."

In fact, the three-town Public Safety Study Group is evaluating the additional

savings that could be realized by using the county dispatch service for fire and EMS initially and then adding police dispatch at a later date. One concern being raised in some of the towns is that the dispatcher is sometimes the only person in the police station at night. Voters question what happens to anyone who goes to the station only to find it empty. But there are solutions to this problem. For example, anyone with an injury should go to the fire station, since it's also where the EMS staff is located in most towns. Injuries from an accident are usually the most pressing problem, but fire department staff can

call in a patrol car if police services are needed, too.

On Your Watch

It is up to us, elected and appointed officials, to provide the best government we can under trying circumstances and within tight budgets. Regional sharing, merging and collaborating can help tremendously to serve citizens better. Local officials throughout the state are advised to begin this amazing learning and sharing process as soon as you can. Residents will reap benefits almost from the start, and you will leave a legacy of achievement. 🌟

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