

A photograph of Mayor Robert Dolan standing in front of a fire station. He is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a red and white striped tie. He is smiling and has his hands in his pockets. Behind him is a red fire truck with "CITY OF MELROSE" written on the front. The fire station is a brick building with a large arched doorway. The text "MAYOR URGES LOCAL LEADERS TO..." is overlaid in white serif font on the upper part of the image.

# MAYOR URGES LOCAL LEADERS TO...

*Melrose Mayor Robert Dolan stands in front of the city's downtown fire station. He says regional fire departments should become a reality in Massachusetts.*





# ‘THINK DIFFERENTLY’ IN PURSUIT OF COLLABORATION

By JOHN OUELLETTE

The ongoing fiscal crisis, still far from over, has breathed new life into discussions about regionalizing local services. Across the state, local leaders are talking to their colleagues about ways to collaborate on services ranging from trash pickup to public safety dispatch. Progress can be slow, however. There are obstacles, many of them. Union contracts and personnel issues, public resistance, differing service models, an attachment to current practices—the list goes on.

But now is not the time to let obstacles stand in the way of collaboration, according to Melrose Mayor Robert Dolan, who was appointed by the governor to serve on the Regionalization Advisory Commission, which released a thorough report in late April. Local leaders need to keep pushing forward, keep making progress, no matter how incremental.

“I think we know one thing: It’s going to take at least eight to ten years before localities see local aid at a number greater than they saw it in 2004—probably about ten years,” says Dolan, who’s also the president of the Massachusetts Mayors’ Association. The Legislature, meanwhile, continues to stall on municipal health insurance reform, which could be saving communities an estimated \$100 million per year statewide. “So how do we take care of ourselves a little bit better, since no one else is? Regionalization is a way you can do it. But I think we need to change.”

Yes, Massachusetts has its long history of hometown pride, the cumbersome town meeting process, and a low opinion of county government, but the biggest obstacle to regionalization, Dolan says, is the mindset of local officials, who often cling to time-honored practices. "You have to look at things as, if you were starting anew, how would you operate?" he says. "People have got to start thinking differently." No one likes to cut jobs, he says, but when openings do occur, it's a good time to rethink how things are done and whether there's an opportunity to collaborate with a neighbor.

Dolan takes a no-nonsense approach to regionalization. "Everything is on the table," he says. "We're not afraid to do anything." Last year, the mayor pushed for the consolidation of the Melrose and Wakefield health departments, a rare city-town partnership. Dolan likes to think big. He sees opportunities. His next project is to make Melrose an information technology data hub, serving cities and towns throughout Massachusetts. "Cities would pay us to be their server—we'd provide the infrastructure, staffing, backup generators," he says. "We benefit because we could get a large portion of our IT department paid for through those fees, and they benefit because, if you're Belchertown or Scituate or wherever you are, do you really need those things?" When the subject of a regional public safety dispatch center in Essex County comes up, Dolan tells an aide, "Let's look into that," even though Melrose is not in Essex County. His big dream is to make Melrose part of the first joint fire department in Massachusetts.

"Right now, firefighting is regionalized, but unofficially under mutual aid," he says. "There's absolutely no reason whatsoever that communities cannot regionalize it. ... In New Jersey, where their version of Proposition 2½ is about to pass, townships are regionalizing their fire departments. They're all doing it right now.

"Look at it this way: Melrose and Wakefield combined are probably the same size as Peabody. So why wouldn't we model ourselves that way? IT, health, veterans' services, building inspection, fire, assessing. Why does everyone need to do their own assessing? ... I live as close to Wakefield Town Hall as I do to Melrose City Hall. Would it kill me to go over and get a building permit at Wakefield Town Hall?"

## THE COMMISSION

Dolan speaks highly of the work of the Regionalization Advisory Commission, which was created by the Legislature last summer. He calls the commission's report "a manual of examples" of successful regionalization efforts, described in layman's terms. "This was a very substantial and thorough commission, whose responsibilities were taken extremely seriously," he says. "And it was results-oriented, which is not always the case."

The report cites benefits of collaboration that include cost savings, better access to professionalized and specialty services, and an improved ability to meet mandated responsibilities. The report also identifies significant barriers to regional efforts, particularly human resources issues (such as reconciling collective-bargaining agreements, benefit packages, seniority, and civil service status between communities that want to share services). Other hurdles include the cost of conducting feasibility studies to determine the potential benefits of a regional program, and limited financial resources to cover up-front

costs associated with a new collaborative effort. "Only a small portion of attempts to form cooperative relationships among municipal governments make it to the intermunicipal agreement stage," the report states. "Labor issues, determining [each] municipality's cost share, and other similar issues have a tendency to upset such efforts."

The report, and Dolan, also point out that certain state laws stand in the way of collaboration among communities. For example, Chapter 115 restricts veterans' services districts such that they may include no more than one city government, and it requires that the participating municipalities be contiguous.

Dolan becomes animated as he discusses the issue of veterans' services. He sees it as a "no brainer" for regionalization. It no longer makes sense, he says, to have a veterans' agent in each city hall and to make veterans come in to seek services. A better idea would be to have a private, regional office with professional social workers and case managers who

visit veterans in their homes. "The predominant cases coming through the door right now, in veterans' services, are extraordinarily complex and need professional assistance—drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment, social work, family life, education, massive state and federal bureaucracy. Those cannot be done properly by someone who's not professionally trained." It's a classic example, he says, where regional services would mean better services.

"The old model doesn't work anymore," he says. "You could do a regionalized model, and you could assess the communities any way you'd like, based on population, or have five communities go in together, whatever it may be. Right now it can't be done because every city has to have its own veterans' director. The only purpose for that law is to keep people working and limit flexibility. ... Why do you need laws like that?"

In addition to the statutory barriers, the Regionalization Advisory Commission report says the state should do more

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to facilitate local collaboration. For example, the state could fund regional pilot programs and provide incentives and funding for a range of activities in support of regionalization, including facilitation and technical assistance for planning, implementation, host agency capacity-building, and transition and start-up costs. "Municipalities that hope to form either a mutual aid agreement or formal contract," the report states, "need objective, third-party facilitators to ensure that each municipal corporation is getting a fair deal in the arrangement."

The report recommends that the state conduct a study of municipal governance issues that present a challenge for collaboration. The state should also look into human resources matters relevant to regionalization and develop a list of recommendations, including best practices and ways to address the challenges. Dolan boils the state's role in regionalization down to this: "You have to give people who are doing the right things some incentive to be creative and to try things."

There is work to be done, but Dolan credits the Patrick administration for its commitment to regionalization. He cites the administration's support of legislation that eased the rules for regional health services (a change that allowed Melrose and Wakefield to combine their health departments), as well as the state's incentive programs for regional public safety dispatch centers and the 2008 law changing the requirements for inter-municipal agreements, which can now be approved by a board of selectmen rather than town meeting. Despite the political risk, the governor, in his "municipal relief" package, proposed that regionalization decisions be exempt from collective bargaining, though the Legislature declined to pass the measure. "That is a big deal," Dolan says. "Because once that happens, everything is possible."

Dolan relates a story about a recent regional effort that was halted by labor issues. "We came very close to some regionalization of building inspection offices with Stoneham. Melrose residents would have to go to Stoneham Town Hall, and Stoneham residents would have to come to Melrose City Hall, on certain days, to get building permits," he says. "We weren't able to do it because we negotiated a citywide wage freeze, and the one thing that all the unions wanted, to get that, was no decrease in staff, and we would have had to decrease staff, so we had to put that on hold."

## OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges, Dolan says, there are abundant opportunities for communities to collaborate today, particularly in areas such as pension systems, public safety dispatch, building inspection, and assessing. Many services, such as mosquito control, flu shots, and water and wastewater treatment, can be far better provided on a regional basis.

"The biggest, most effective one is public safety—regional dispatch—without a question," he says. "There are several hundred to a few thousand police officers who are trained at the academy, given a gun, and then sit behind a desk every day and answer the telephone. As a taxpayer, if I train someone to fight crime and to have the responsibilities that they have, if they're not on the street, or in a senior position to manage

those people on the street, those are wasted dollars. Wasted." According to the Regionalization Commission report, Massachusetts has 262 public safety call centers, or one for every 24,000 people, while Maryland, a state with a comparable population and land area, has only twenty-four. "You have got to put more police officers on the street," Dolan says, "and the only way to do it is through this kind of stuff."

He emphasizes that regionalization, the pooling of resources, will almost always result in better training, better equipment, and higher quality services for the public, regardless of whether it saves money. "If you're into regionalization for saving money, it's not necessarily going to work," he says. "What you want to do is, if you can save money that's great, but you want to maintain cost controls as well as provide a better service and have the ability to keep that service at a certain level for a long period of time. That's the key. If you go into it to save ten grand, maybe you can do it, maybe you can't."

Dolan points out that some of the most innovative regional collaborations have been established in western Massachusetts and on Cape Cod, areas where there's already a regional identity and shared interests among communities. This, he says, can serve as a model for others. "You have to have a partner that you have relationships with, that you're similar to socio-economically, expectation-wise, management structure," he says. "It's a marriage, so you can't go into a marriage with someone ... that you don't have a lot in common with, or you don't work well together."

In the Internet age, with its highly active and often critical local bloggers, Dolan acknowledges that it takes courage for local leaders to propose doing things differently, particularly if there's a perceived loss of autonomy. "If you're a town manager and you're in the second year of a three-year contract, or you're a mayor going for re-election—and we just lost thirteen mayors last fall—do you want to say, 'I want to eliminate my fire department,' ... even if it makes sense?" After nine years in office, and with the benefits of a city form of government and a four-year mayoral term, Dolan recognizes that he has flexibility that other leaders may lack. But he urges his col-

leagues to step forward and explain the advantages of regional service delivery.

"If you talk to people without a heavy spin and just give it to them," he says, "there is going to be a percentage that is going to kick you, because that's what they want to do, but the silent majority is going to get it. You have to believe that. And it's hard sometimes to believe that. But for people who are out there more, you see it. You get the nods, you get the feel, you get the people saying you're doing the right things. And let those seven people on the blogs who are telling everyone how bad everyone else is, let them be seven people. Because we live in a city of 27,000 people."

In time, Dolan hopes his strategy will result in Melrose being part of a joint fire department.

"Melrose and Wakefield can put more firefighters on a fire with a smaller overall staff by combining stations," he says. "Do you think that if we combine fire stations tomorrow and there's a fire that it's not going to be put out? It's going to be put out. There is a zero chance that it's not going to be put out." He knows, however, that convincing the public will not be easy. It could take years of discussion and planning. There will be delays, complications, stalemates. The plan will gain momentum, only to stall again. Despite the challenges, he says, the effort is still worth pursuing.

"We're not afraid to be first in this," he says. "And that's why it's exciting for us. Since we did the health, I've had about fifteen or sixteen cities and towns call me and say their selectmen want us to do that, too. If we do the computers, other towns will be doing the computers. Once one town does it, east of Worcester, it's going to be in the *MMA Beacon*, and every selectman's going to put it on their agenda and ask their town manager why they're not doing it. And then the dominos fall."

"I probably won't be mayor when Melrose and Wakefield or Melrose and another town have a regional fire department," he says. "But the more I talk about it, the less taboo it becomes. And I guarantee you, before my kid goes to high school, there will be a regionalized fire department. That will absolutely happen."

*The report of the Regionalization Advisory Commission is available on the MMA website ([www.mma.org](http://www.mma.org)).* ■