

Local Government Survey Results

What Local Governments Say About Cooperative Land Use Planning

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Over the past few years, the calls for intergovernmental cooperation have grown stronger and seem to be coming from everywhere. State and local leaders, academics, and nonprofit associations have worked hard to document the costs and benefits of municipal collaboration for the delivery of services. Of course, there is already a good deal of cooperation between townships and other municipalities in providing necessary services such as fire and safety, libraries, and recreation (e.g., Citizens Research Council). Unfortunately, much less is known about intergovernmental cooperation in land use planning and regulation. Indeed, there appear to be very few examples of such cooperation anywhere in the state.

To help gather more information, the Michigan Townships Association (MTA), the Michigan Municipal League (MML), the Land Information Access Association (LIAA) and Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute (LPI) collaborated to conduct a land use planning and intergovernmental cooperation survey, late last year. With support for the *Partnerships for Change Program* and funding provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's *People and Land* (PAL) project, written surveys were sent to all of Michigan's 1,777 cities, townships and villages addressed to township supervisors, city managers or mayors, and village managers or presidents. By January 2007, we had received 658 properly completed surveys, for a response rate of just over 37%. Though not a true random sample, these survey responses came in from all over the state and at similar rates for cities, townships and villages.

The Role of Planning Commissions

Predictably, survey responses demonstrated significant differences in the way cities, townships, and villages work with their planning commissions. In general, townships appear to rely more directly on planning commissioners to perform land use planning and regulation activities. While most local governments reimburse for training and education costs, they vary greatly in paying commissioners for meetings. Approximately 86% of the townships responding provide a payment to planning commissioners for each meeting with an overall average payment of \$44.06. Only 29% of city responders and 49% of village responders reported making payments to commissioners, with average payments of \$21.26 and \$27.04 respectively.

At the same time, townships and villages appear to rely less on paid staff or contractor support for planning and regulation activity than the cities surveyed. About 91% of city responders reported using paid planning and zoning staff (or contractors) at an overall average of 1,692

hours per year. About 65% of townships use paid staff for an average of 727 hours per year; while 63% of villages reported using staff support for an average of 447 hours per year.

Paying For Planning

The survey results hint that there may be a trend among local governments toward spending more on land use planning and regulation. Although most local governments report spending about the same amount of money as in previous years, over one-quarter of the responders reported spending more in 2005. Average spending for land use planning and regulation reported for 2005 was considerably higher for cities (\$223,987) than for townships (\$66,557) and villages (\$32,901). When calculated on a per capita basis, average spending was highest in villages (\$6.84 per person), followed by cities (\$4.90), then townships (\$3.86). Nearly half of all townships (48%) report using permit fees to help pay for land use planning and regulation. About 65% of cities and 53% of villages also use permit fees in this way.

Barriers to & Incentives for Intergovernmental Cooperation in Planning

The survey asked a series of questions concerning intergovernmental cooperation in land use planning and regulation, including the current level of cooperation and the perceived barriers to cooperation. The last question set was intended to tease out what incentives might be most effective in encouraging new cooperation.

In total, 64% of the responders indicated that their local governments cooperate with others in land use planning and regulation. However, a little over one-third reported that they *do not cooperate* (36% of responders). Further, the frequency of cooperation was low for all of the specific forms identified by survey questions, suggesting that intergovernmental cooperation in land use planning and regulation is mostly *informal* or on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, only about 10% of planning commissions meet with neighboring planning commissions at least once a year. Similarly low levels of cooperation were reported for *shared resource management plans* (15%), *joint planning agreements* (6%) or *shared planning staff* (11%).

The question concerning barriers to intergovernmental cooperation in land use planning and regulation asked respondents to characterize each of five barriers independently on a four-point scale: *not important*, *somewhat important*, *important*, or *very important*. These barriers were characterized as:

- The time and expense of getting the process started
- A history of past disputes with neighboring jurisdictions
- Lack of information or knowledge about how to start
- Lack of local leadership
- Unwilling or unequal partnering municipalities

Most of the answers provided by cities, townships and villages were similar, with a few exceptions. In ranking the five barriers, 68% of township respondents identified both a *lack of local leadership* and *unwilling or unequal partnering municipalities* as important or very important. Townships ranked both *time and expense* and *lack of information* as important or very

important 62% of the time. Only 39% of townships ranked *history of past disputes* as important or very important.

The answers of city and village respondents differed from township responses in a couple of areas. Cities identified a *lack of information* as important or very important much less often than the others (38%), but ranked *history of past disputes* important or very important more often (55%). On the other hand, villages ranked *lack of information* as highest on the list (70% important/very important) and *history of past disputes* least important (52% important/very important).

About 101 of the 658 respondents identified other barriers than those listed as important. These included financial disparities between municipalities, the threat of annexation, loss of autonomy, fear of big government, and differences in values, goals or philosophies. Notably, there were no physical or legal limitations mentioned.

The final survey question asked what additional incentives could encourage intergovernmental cooperation. Respondents were again asked to characterize each of six incentives independently on a four-point scale ranging from *not important* to *very important*. The incentives listed were:

- Grants of support to help start the planning process
- Information and examples of successful inter-jurisdictional planning
- Local public interest and support
- Protection from legal challenges for exclusionary zoning practices
- Avoiding or saving some of the costs associated with planning and regulation
- Additional grants or funding to reward cooperation

All of these incentives appear to be important to most local governments. Indeed, over 70% of all townships ranked every incentive as important or very important. However, two of these incentives were particularly important to townships: *local interest and support* (87% important/very important) and *protection from legal challenges* (86% important/very important).

For their part, cities ranked the listed incentives with the greatest variation. City respondents ranked *local interest and support* as important or very important 92% of the time. The next most highly ranked incentives were *rewards for cooperation* (78% important/very important) and *start-up support* (77% important/very important). The incentive of *information and examples* was ranked important or very important least often 69% of the time.

In general, villages ranked the listed incentives as more important, more frequently than the cities and townships. Village respondents identified *start up support* as the most important incentive (92% important/very important). Over 80% of the villages ranked all of the other incentives as important or very important.

Can We Expect Greater Cooperation?

The last question on the survey asked for the opinions on the value and appropriateness of inter-jurisdictional cooperation in land use planning and regulation. We received over 400 thoughtful

responses to this question, with over half of these expressing strongly positive views. Only about 12% of the responses were negative or unsupportive toward cooperative planning.

These survey results suggest that most local governments are ready and willing to consider expanded cooperation in land use planning and regulation. Indeed, there is plenty of opportunity for additional cooperation. However, the political and institutional barriers to formal cooperation remain quite significant.

Overall, the survey results indicate that *local public interest and support* is needed to help overcome political barriers such as a *lack of leadership* and *unwilling or unequal partners*. Better and more effective community-wide education programs may well be necessary to help usher in greater cooperation.

The survey responders also tell us that the removal of a single barrier or the provision of a single incentive is not enough. Rather, programs designed to encourage intergovernmental cooperation in land use planning need to offer a mix of information resources, support services and financial incentives. Finally, local governments will need greater assurance that such cooperative planning and land use regulation will, in fact, protect them from legal challenges for exclusionary zoning.

Future statistical analyses of the survey data by MSU's Land Policy Institute could help tease out which barriers and incentives are most important to which local governments (e.g., location, economic status). In the meantime, the *Partnerships for Change Program* is gearing up for another round of service grants designed to help cities, townships and villages work more effectively together in planning successful communities.