Cities sharing services to cut costs, improve efficiency

Judge Ronald Heslop holds municipal court at the Bonney Lake Justice Center, Dec. 5, 2016. Eatonville and Sumner also hold court at the justice center. Peter Haley phaley@thenewstribune.com

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When residents of the small former mining towns of Wilkeson and Carbonado in the shadow of Mount Rainier call for police help, it’s not the town marshal who responds.

In fact, neither community has a police department or jail. Instead, it’s the patrol division of the Buckley Police Department that answers their calls.

“It makes sense to provide police services to those communities,” said Buckley Mayor Patricia Johnson. “Two of our officers live in Carbonado. On their way to and from work, they’ll check out what’s going on in Carbonado and Wilkeson, and if things are quiet in Buckley, they’ll head down the road from time to time to extend their patrols to those two towns.”
The two smaller towns (Wilkeson’s population is 490; Carbonado has 635 residents) pay Buckley (population 4,550) for police services in a contractual arrangement that’s increasingly common among smaller communities in Pierce County and Washington. Buckley has been providing police service to Carbonado since 1991 and to Wilkeson since 2008.

While Buckley prides itself in having its own law enforcement, it closed its jail and emergency dispatch center a few years ago and now outsources the services to other public agencies.

Though figures on the number of cross-community service agreements are difficult to determine, the number of special governmental districts that provide services across municipal boundaries is large. According to 2012 census data, Washington ranks 10th among states with 1,285 special governmental districts, such as fire districts, conservation districts and transportation districts that provide service to multiple municipalities.

As the standards for municipal services become more stringent and money becomes tighter, small towns are forming alliances with their neighbors to create economies of scale and levels of sophisticated services that they could not afford alone. Larger jails and dispatch centers can employ multilingual jailers and dispatchers and hire full-time medical staff to deal with health conditions, for instance.

While multicity alliances save money, some communities say they miss the local touch of having a town dogcatcher or cop who has a long history with local folks.

“While economies of scale are real, there is a point at which it may no longer be efficient to get bigger,” said Tracy Burrows, executive director of the Municipal Research and Services Center, in a message to government managers.

“If the consolidation does result in a significant cost savings, it will likely come at the expense of your control over the level of service provided. If you are moving from an owner of a service to a customer or subscriber, weigh whether the savings are worth it,” she wrote.

Nationwide, the movement to merge governments wholesale has had mixed results, said Mark Funkhouser, a former mayor of Kansas City who wrote for Governing magazine.

Between 1921 and 1996, there were 132 formal consolidation attempts, with only 22 successes, said Pat Hardy of the University of Tennessee’s Municipal Technical Advisory
Service. Many such attempts, such as the 1995 effort to merge the city of Spokane and
Spokane County, were turned down by voters, and others failed after mergers because
both partners were weak when they entered their union, said researchers.

Kurt Thurmaier, director of the Division of Public Administration at Northern Illinois
University, says that while the selling point for merging governments is efficiency, that
doesn’t happen often.

He cites political differences among the governments, employee concerns, differences in
tax bases and historical rivalries.

But less ambitious consolidations of functions — at least in Pierce County — have
proven largely beneficial, say local officials.

Subir Mukerjee, Fife’s city manager, said he expects cities to share even more services in
the future. Fife is preparing an agreement to provide building inspection services for
neighboring Milton, and Fife contracts with Edgewood to provide information
technology services to that city.

“It’s not cost-effective for every city to provide every service itself,” said the Fife
manager. “It really makes sense to consolidate operations because the demands are
becoming more technical and complicated every day.”

Marc Greenough, a Seattle attorney specializing in municipal government, said tight
budgets are pushing local governments to pool resources in intergovernmental
associations.

The city of Bonney Lake, population 20,000, for instance, provides services to other
cities and buys them from some of the same governments, said Bonney Lake Mayor Neil
Johnson. Neighboring Sumner (population 9,705) recently expanded its sewage
treatment plant to meet the burgeoning demand from growing Bonney Lake, as well as
its own expanding requirements. Sumner owns and operates the plant, while Bonney
Lake pays on a per capita basis for the sewage treatment services it uses.

Sumner, on the other hand, said city spokeswoman Carmen Palmer, just this year began
contracting with Bonney Lake to provide it with municipal court services.

“We looked at that possibility about 10 years ago and decided to keep our own municipal
court operation here,” said Palmer. “It would have been inconvenient for our own
residents to travel to Bonney Lake to go to court.”
But a shifting pattern in the home locales of people being ticketed by the Sumner Police Department (a majority lived outside Sumner) as well as the advent of electronic payment systems and internet court access persuaded Sumner to cast its lot with Bonney Lake.

“We projected that we would save money, and we have,” said Palmer. The city hasn’t yet totaled those savings for its first year of operations in Bonney Lake.

On the west side of the county, other cities have followed that same consolidation path. University Place (32,230 residents), Lakewood (population 58,800), Steilacoom (6,170 residents) and DuPont (population 9,330) have joined their municipal court functions into a single operation based in Lakewood.

University Place was the first to join up with Lakewood in 2011. Steilacoom moved its municipal court functions to Lakewood in 2013, and DuPont joined in 2015.

“It allowed those smaller cities to have services such as probation officers that wouldn’t have been practical on a smaller scale,” said Deana Wright, the Lakewood court’s administrator. Combining courts also saved each city money.

Among the larger governmental service consolidations has been the creation of several large fire districts to handle fire and rescue operations in broad areas of the county. In many cases, former municipal fire departments as well as smaller local fire districts have been melded into larger fire districts. Puyallup, for instance, gave up its own fire department to Central Pierce Fire and Rescue in 2009. In addition to Puyallup, the larger fire district covers South Hill, Frederickson, Parkland, Spanaway, North Puyallup, Summit View and Elk Plain.

The fire district is the fifth largest in the state with more than 200,000 residents within its boundaries. Puyallup Mayor John Hopkins said the larger fire district has definitely improved service, but he says he and other business people are alarmed because taxes have gone up disproportionately on commercial property owners.

When the fire service was operated by the city, he said, the burden was more evenly spread.

Central Pierce Fire Chief Dan Olson said fire districts’ funding mechanisms differ from cities. Those districts, for instance, assess a “fire benefit charge” that is based on the risk a building poses, among other factors, rather than simply on assessed property values. That difference may have caused some commercial building fire charges to change.
That lack of direct accountability is one downside of consolidation of services, said some city officials.

Council members in Bonney Lake recently expressed some alarm that their costs for sewage treatment in Sumner would increase more than 40 percent next year. City officials said they have reached agreement about absorbing the increased cost.

Sumner said Bonney Lake knew those cost increases were coming. The plant is adding three employees to handle the additional volume of sewage, and regulatory agencies are requiring the plant hire an additional employee to monitor the plant’s operation.

There are other risks too.

Fife found that building facilities larger than its needs in hopes of contracting with other cities for services doesn’t always pay. The city 16 years ago chose to build a larger jail. Fife’s formula worked for several years, but the city last fall announced it would be closing the facility because it had become a consistent money-loser after it lost its biggest client, the city of Tacoma, to competition from Pierce County.

Former Fife Mayor Winston Marsh said despite that experience, he still believes in cities uniting to provide joint services.

“If there are things that we can do together and be more efficient, I’m all for it,” he said.

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