

Local communities work together

By Meaghan Wims/Daily News staff

1/28-29/2006

From jointly purchasing copy paper and carpeting to making regional land-development decisions and group negotiating for health care and utilities, Newport County's communities work together more than you might think.

The six municipalities have established formal, and informal, partnerships to save money and share resources. Local leaders agree, however, that there is potential to work even closer.

Perhaps one of the largest examples of regional partnership - and the potential for future cooperation - is the West Side Master Plan, unveiled in November by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. The plan, years in the making, put forth a detailed collection of recommendations on how to improve transportation, the environment, commerce and quality of life along the 10-mile swath of land on Aquidneck Island's west side, from Newport to Portsmouth. It's now up to the local communities to implement the plan's recommendations, and collaboration will be key.

"I think partnerships will become even more important with the cost of services increasing so much," said Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. "Financing is always a motivation. Beyond that, a cooperative effort just makes sense and we hope to see more of it. We see that as our role."

"Regional planning is incredibly important and it's appreciated at the state level," said Portsmouth Town Administrator Robert G. Driscoll "That's a huge plus for the island and leads to a climate of cooperation between the communities. We want to think about what a stoplight in Middletown does to Portsmouth and vice versa. Too often in the past, land-use decisions have negatively affected other communities. That's long in the past and that's a good thing for all of us."

Other collaborative efforts:

Besides joint land-use planning, area communities also are considering collaborations for waste management, recycling and water treatment, and standardizing emergency radio frequencies, among other initiatives.

The local communities are members of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns, which represents the municipalities' interests before the General Assembly. It also administers the Rhode Island Energy Aggregation Program, a buying consortium for electricity.

The program's joint buying power has saved Rhode Island municipalities \$8 million since it started in 1999, according to Daniel L. Beardsley Jr., the league's executive director.

The league also participates in the U.S. Communities program, a national cooperative purchasing program. Beardsley estimates local communities save about 70 percent on their costs by buying through the consortium.

"There's literally nothing we buy that we don't do on a regional basis," Driscoll said. "No town is on their own in trying to get the best price."

Through the Governmental Health Group of Rhode Island group, communities have saved "tens of thousands" through group purchasing of health care, Middletown Town Administrator Gerald S. Kempen said.

Sometimes at odds over annual budgets, local municipalities and school districts do collaborate on many efforts.

For example, Portsmouth recently formed the Joint Administrators' Review of Services - made up of the superintendent, town administrator and the school and town finance directors - to explore money-saving and sharing opportunities.

And school districts work together regionally, as well.

The Rhode Island Association of School Committees is in the final stages of creating a purchasing collaborative for telecommunications services. It would create a pool of school districts to buy local and long-distance phone, Internet and cable TV plans, said Timothy C. Duffy, the executive director.

The association, which supports school committees statewide and already has an energy-purchasing partnership, also is exploring joint purchases of workers' compensation and life insurance plans.

"You create an economy of scale, a combined pool," Duffy said. "The larger the pool, the greater the value."

Middletown, Portsmouth, Tiverton and Newport also are members of the East Bay Collaborative, which provides professional development, student programs and curriculum services.

"These are beneficial things that would otherwise be very difficult for us to afford," Portsmouth Superintendent Susan F. Lusi said.

Portsmouth, Middletown, Tiverton and Little Compton also are members of the Newport County Regional Special Education district, which allows the school departments to pool their resources in educating special needs students.

It's not just about money, Lusi said. The partnerships "create a learning community. It really gives you a broad group to learn from and share information with."

School resource-sharing efforts are under way at the state level, too. State Reps. Paul V. Crowley, D-Newport, and Raymond E. Gallison Jr., D-Portsmouth, are two of the sponsors for a proposal to create a statewide school purchasing program for supplies and insurance.

Lunch meetings:

The Portsmouth, Middletown and Newport municipal managers try to meet once a month for lunch. Any movement for greater collaboration helps, Driscoll said.

Finding new areas for resource sharing could mean talks on more controversial topics, like merging public safety units and fire stations. Those issues go to the heart of independent communities.

"We're at a point where the areas of further coordination are going to be difficult, I think," Driscoll said. "It's not what people want to hear. We've picked off the 'easy targets.'"

"The problem is parochialism," Beardsley said. "Towns and school districts view themselves as entities on their own and there may be problems in giving up their autonomy.

"I believe that if the Aquidneck Island community identifies just one particular cooperative venture they could undertake and, if it works smoothly, it could go a long way toward erasing our fears about other areas they may share. The biggest hurdle is taking the first step."

- Jan. 28-29, 2006