



Interview Report

Municipal Leaders of Cumberland County

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I. Introduction

Cumberland County includes 28 cities and towns and more than 270,000 residents. For the County government, ongoing and meaningful communication with its many regional partners and constituents is critical to understanding and addressing the needs and priorities of the county's communities and citizens. To that end, Cumberland County has sought input from a wide range of constituents over the past decade, including the Cumberland County Advisory Council, which is comprised of representatives from the business, education, nonprofit, and governmental sectors. The County also conducts discussions with municipal leaders on an ongoing basis. The information, suggestions, and concerns raised by these various constituencies has played an important role in the development and implementation of the County's strategic plan, first created in 2001, and subsequently updated in 2006.

Promoting stakeholder communication is especially important today, as the County seeks to improve services in a difficult economic environment. In a recent edition of the County newsletter, *The Chronicle*, County Manager Peter Crichton shared his views of the County's responsibility to improve services: "We recognize that we are in challenging times and aspire to do nothing more than to provide efficient, quality public services to our municipalities and citizens. We view this as a binding commitment to our communities and we are continually seeking out the best way to utilize our economies of scale and modern technology for the benefit of our citizens."

To ensure that communication with key partners is ongoing, candid, and instructive, this year the County has supplemented its regular outreach efforts with a series of individual interviews of municipal officials. The meetings were designed to explore several key areas, including opportunities for greater collaboration, and they represented a follow-up to a similar series of interviews conducted in late 2004. The results should be considered a point of departure from which the County can more strategically target its efforts and discussions with municipalities.

This report summarizes the responses from the stakeholder interviews, which were conducted by independent consultant Valerie Landry from April to June 2010. The invitations to participate were based on a representative sample of municipalities in Cumberland County, including urban, rural, large, and small communities. The following nine municipalities participated in the process:

Bridgton	Harpswell	Scarborough
Falmouth	Portland	South Portland
Gorham	Raymond	Standish

Although interviews were conducted largely with municipal managers, several local elected officials were also able to provide input during a group interview session. While participants were generally asked the same questions, they were also encouraged to raise other issues of particular interest to them. Comments are not attributed to specific

individuals or municipalities. To convey the extent to which different topics and opinions were mentioned, the report uses the following descriptors:

<i>Substantial majority</i>	→	mentioned often, if not unanimously
<i>Majority</i>	→	mentioned consistently
<i>Several</i>	→	mentioned by two or more interviewees

This effort would not have been possible without the guidance and support of the County Commissioners and County Manager, and the generous participation of the municipal officials who provided substantive and thoughtful input.

II. Themes

Although officials' responses sometimes varied, that variation was not necessarily based on the size (big versus small) or location (urban versus rural) of the communities they represented.

A. Communication

A substantial majority of those interviewed gave the County high marks for its efforts to facilitate communication through the County newsletter, Commissioners' meeting minutes, and the periodic convening of municipal officials and state legislators to discuss issues of importance to the region. Several respondents commented that while such communication was appreciated, the County ought not "overdo" the collaboration message for fear that it could be misconstrued as an effort to "grow County government." One official expressed appreciation for the newsletter's coverage of the "broader policy issues" facing the County. A substantial majority praised the efforts of individual Commissioners, the County Manager, and the Assistant Manager in reaching out personally to municipal officials. One official indicated that it might be useful for the County to distribute regional demographic information—such as crime statistics and trends—to municipalities. Another official suggested that the County send out in advance the agendas for upcoming Commissioner meetings.

B. Knowledge of County Services

A substantial majority praised the County staff for their professionalism and expertise, and expressed satisfaction with County services. One official stated, "We know that the County is there if we need them." At the same time, a substantial majority indicated that both elected officials and citizens are largely unfamiliar with the role of County government—with the exception of law enforcement, and (for some) dispatch services. Several officials commented that elected officials largely see the County as a "tax consumer," and not offering much "value" to municipalities.

A majority indicated that it would be helpful for the County to present information at municipal meetings regarding County services (possibly once every two years). Officials who expressed interest in this possibility also expressed interest in having a better

understanding of “how” their financial contribution to the County is being used. There were several comments in this regard. One official stated, “There is no way to know if we are getting value out of our assessment.” A minority of those interviewed commented that County presentations to local elected officials would be of little value, as their interactions with County operations are minimal.

A majority expressed support for expanding the number of County Commissioners as a means to increase contact with the County, but as one official stated, “only if it doesn’t cost us more.” One official observed that the Maine Municipal Association (MMA) orientation for newly elected local officials contains little, if any, information about County services. This official suggested that MMA should—at a minimum—include a packet of information about County government in its orientation materials.

C. Collaboration

Regarding collaboration, there were several consistent themes, and a number of individual suggestions and concerns. While several specific areas of collaboration received high marks, the *general topic* of collaboration prompted some reservations about the County increasing its role as a regional provider. One municipal official put it this way, “Due to the ardent independence of both individuals and entities, most are unwilling to give up any authority, even if it serves the greater good.” Several officials made the observation that counties statewide are evaluating ways to collaborate with other units of government. One official put it more simply by saying, “Counties are having an identity crisis.” Individual concerns regarding the general topic of collaboration included the following:

- Accountability is higher at the local, rather than the regional, level.
- Local elected officials are not knowledgeable about County services or capacity.
- The expertise and vision for collaboration resides with the County Manager and not with the County infrastructure, thus rendering it potentially vulnerable in future years.
- Consolidated services would not result in higher quality and would reduce long-term costs.
- Several of those interviewed expressed the desire to collaborate with neighboring municipalities rather than the County, as it would be an “easier” fit.

The following comments were made regarding *specific* collaborative initiatives currently underway:

- *Advocacy.* A substantial majority of respondents praised the County’s efforts to convene local, regional, and state officials to consider issues of mutual importance. For most, the County is the logical entity to bring together stakeholders to discuss issues that affect the entire region. A substantial majority

expressed interest in the County continuing this practice. In particular, advocating for resources for Cumberland County was high on the list of respondents' priorities. One official described the County's efforts at bringing people together as effective both "in Augusta and at the local coffee shop," as a way to emphasize both the state and local aspects of regional initiatives.

- *Assessment.* A substantial majority expressed awareness of the County/Municipal effort to explore a unified property assessing service as a less costly, more effective alternative to the current system of local assessors. A majority of those interviewed (who were also familiar with the effort) advised that it should be "shelved" or "put in hibernation" for the time being. Comments on the topic varied, and included the following:
 - Some municipalities are happy with their current assessor (in house) or contractual arrangement.
 - Some are concerned about the potential loss of local knowledge if a regional effort were adopted.
 - Some believe that if the concept holds promise in the short term, it is with the smaller, rural communities, and that the County should pursue discussions with those entities.
 - One official suggested that the County consider becoming an intermediary between contractors and municipalities, in an effort to streamline the contracting process, increase consistency across municipalities, and reduce costs.
 - One official suggested that the assessment be structured into three or four payments instead of one lump sum.
- *Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).* A substantial majority praised the County—and particularly the County Manager—for having the foresight and perseverance to obtain the CDBG. Several expressed support for continuation of similar efforts, in which the County leads collaborative efforts to bring new sources of revenue to the County.
- *Dispatch.* Among those municipalities using County dispatch services, a substantial majority spoke highly of its value and effectiveness. Several expressed the need to have a better understanding of the finances in the "out years." One official described the regional dispatch center as a "good platform" on which to build other services.
- *Emergency Management.* Several officials mentioned the importance of maintaining a regional focus on emergency management to help municipalities remain abreast of new regulations and homeland security issues.
- *General Assistance.* One official mentioned the potential for General Assistance to become a contracted service at the regional level.

- *Grant writing.* A majority of those interviewed praised the County’s grant writing capacity and staff, and expressed interest in seeing this capacity expanded.
- *Law Enforcement.* A majority of those interviewed gave high marks to County law enforcement, and regard the County as having the structure and experience to train and support law enforcement personnel. However, several officials commented that having an elected—as opposed to an appointed—Sheriff is a barrier to closer collaboration or consolidation of municipal and county law enforcement. In general, a majority regards an elected position as having less “accountability” than would a position that reported to the County Commissioners or County Manager. In making these comments, officials were quick to point out their satisfaction with the high quality of leadership under the current Sherriff. However, they believe that the current structure holds the potential to become problematic, with little recourse available to municipalities. On a related topic, one official mentioned that greater collaboration would require County dispatch and Sheriff services to be consolidated under one management team. Another official commented that “it was a good thing” that the state is in the process of assuming responsibility for the jail system, as the “return on investment from the County assessment” is not always evident, particularly for small municipalities at some distance from Portland. One official described the need for a higher level of awareness among all municipalities—large and small, urban and rural—regarding the increasing impact of drug-related crimes, including domestic violence.
- *Public Health.* A substantial majority spoke favorably about the role of the Cumberland District Public Health Council as an entity that could keep municipalities informed about emerging issues (such as H1N1) and resources. Most however, were not familiar with the County’s role in spearheading or supporting the effort. Public Health was mentioned consistently as an issue requiring a regional solution.

The following comments were made regarding *potential* areas of collaboration:

- *Animal Control.* One official suggested that the County assume responsibility for animal control countywide.
- *Economic Development.* Although several officials commented on the need for a regional approach to economic development, they expressed uncertainty about the County’s role in this regard, vis a vis other groups such as the “Metro Coalition” and the Greater Portland Council of Governments.
- *Marketing.* One official suggested that the County could play a more visible role in “marketing the region to the rest of the nation.”
- *Financing.* One official suggested that—due to its financial stability and expertise—the County could play a helpful role in accessing financial markets to assist municipalities.

- *Geographic Information Service (GIS)*. One official indicated that individual municipalities are not able to develop the scope of information needed in this area, and that the County could become a regional GIS provider.
- *Green Space*. One official suggested that the County could work with municipalities on bond initiatives for open space acquisition. Several commented on the fact that explosive growth in and around their communities is generating concerns about growth management.
- *Homelessness*. One official acknowledged that although Portland bears the greatest burden in terms of providing services, the entire County is affected by homelessness. (*Note: This comment was not made during the Portland interview.*) In this regard, it was suggested that the County consider initiatives that better address the problem on a regional basis.
- *School Collaboration*. A substantial majority of municipal officials referred questions regarding school service collaboration to their respective school superintendents. Several described efforts to build collaborative relationships between the school district infrastructure and the municipal infrastructure as challenging “in and of itself,” and commented that collaboration on a larger scale would be a complicated process and, thus, beyond County time or resources to tackle.
- *Tax Bills*. Several officials commented that the County could become the issuer of tax bills countywide.
- *Technology*. A substantial majority expressed little interest in a countywide technology initiative. A sampling of comments on this topic included the following:
 - Municipalities are satisfied with their current services and information technology staff or contracts.
 - Some municipalities do not perceive any difficulties sharing information using current technologies.
 - Some municipalities have complex, multifaceted systems that are interconnected to other systems (such as those used by their school districts) and believe that further aggregation would be counterproductive in terms of effectiveness or cost.
- *Transportation*. Several officials commented that the County might consider increasing its role in developing a more rational public transportation system for the region.

III. Conclusions

A substantial majority of municipal officials interviewed for this project hold Cumberland County Commissioners, the County Manager, and County staff in high regard. County services are viewed as credible and professional. Officials praised the efforts of the Commissioners and County Manager to reach out to municipalities to gain advice and observations.

While municipal managers generally understand the County's role, it is not well understood by local elected officials or citizens. A majority of those interviewed see this as a barrier to collaboration. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the County has made great strides in communicating with local officials through its newsletter, minutes of Commissioners' meetings, and outreach to local officials. Thus, with the exception of the recommendation to hold periodic public meetings with local elected officials, there were few suggestions for how to close the information gap.

Overall, local officials were somewhat ambivalent regarding the concept of closer collaboration with the County. A substantial majority of those interviewed see opportunity for successful collaboration in specifically defined areas that would not result in any weakening of local control. For example, high marks were given to areas that had long been County-delivered—such as law enforcement. In addition, local officials applauded new regional initiatives in public health, advocacy, and resource generation. A number of other ideas were raised by individual officials, ranging from assistance in securing financing to regional animal control.

In almost every interview, the culture of “local control” was raised as a formidable—but not insurmountable—barrier to consolidation of services. A majority of local officials are grappling with declining revenues, and thus are attuned to identifying new strategies that add value and lower costs. At the same time, officials made clear that the desire for local control and local accountability often overrides the desire to reduce costs.

Going forward, officials expressed a high degree of support for the County's efforts to convene stakeholders around regional issues, disseminate regional demographic information (including crime trends) that can be used for planning purposes, and pursue strategies that bring new revenue to the region.

A substantial majority expressed appreciation for the County's efforts to reach out to them for candid input. To a person, each local official interviewed for this project is considering new strategies to improve value and reduce cost for citizens. Clearly, the interviews revealed that, through continued discussion, new possibilities for partnership and collaboration will emerge.