

Regionalization

By TIMOTHY P. MURRAY



Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray holds a proclamation declaring Massachusetts Regionalization Month during the first "Regionalization Tool Kit" conference in September 2009.

COURTESY PHOTO

Can **Preserve** Essential Services and **Streamline** Service Delivery

As a Worcester native and former mayor of the city, I understand what hometown pride is all about. In Massachusetts, we cherish our individual communities, and rightfully so. We often display this pride during high school sporting events and local town parades.

Yet Braintree and Quincy, two cities that still debate the birthplace of John Adams, managed to put aside their lingering debate and hometown pride to band together and negotiate a revolutionary trash-collecting alliance that would make John Adams proud. Joining with Weymouth, the three communities increased their bargaining power for a new trash contract, and as a result, the bidders sharpened their pencils and produced a money-saving deal. The payoff was worth it, with the first-year savings of \$410,000. Taxpayer savings over the course of the nine-year contract are projected at \$3.65 million. That's a big impact for those communities, especially during these difficult economic times.

Governor Deval Patrick and I understand that if we remain too parochial about

providing local services, we risk duplicating efforts and spending limited taxpayer dollars unnecessarily. We know that's an unsustainable model for Massachusetts.

Even before the economic and fiscal crisis, the administration had made it a priority to partner with cities and towns to find new ways to provide essential municipal services. Since 2008, for example, the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security's 911 Department has been providing grants to encourage the development of regional 911 public safety call centers. Massachusetts currently has 262 public safety call centers spread across the state—that's one for every 24,000 residents. And yet in Maryland, a state with a population and land area comparable to Massachusetts, there are only twenty-four call centers, or one for every 233,000 residents. By offering incentives to Massachusetts communities to share this kind of local service, we can deliver services more efficiently and effectively.

As we move ahead on the road to economic recovery, we have an opportunity to move even more swiftly on a range of fronts, including joining forces to provide services on a regional basis that historically have been provided by each community individually. By creating partnerships large and small, neighboring

municipalities can engage in shared services, inter-municipal agreements, municipal collaborations, consolidations, mutual aid, and regional planning. These concepts may seem high-minded or even evoke concerns about a loss of local control, but in reality regionalization means working together—reaching out to your neighbor to get the job done together. Regionalization can create better means for accomplishing services that municipalities need and can lead to cost-savings and more efficient processes. Pooled resources will help preserve essential services and streamline service delivery.

Regionalization Advisory Commission

This past year, I chaired the Regionalization Advisory Commission and had the opportunity to bring together representatives from the Executive Branch, legislators, local officials, and regional partners to study a range of opportunities, benefits, and challenges of sharing local government services, similar to the efforts of Braintree, Quincy and Weymouth.

With 351 cities and towns spanning the Commonwealth, there are countless opportunities to collaborate and work together to maintain important local services and deliver those services effectively and

Timothy P. Murray is the lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth and a former mayor of Worcester.

efficiently. The Regionalization Advisory Commission focused on the variety of opportunities within education, elder services, municipal finance, green communities, housing, information technology, libraries, public health, public safety, transportation and public works, and veterans' services.

The Report of the Regionalization Advisory Commission, released this past spring, cites examples of successful collaborations already under way and makes a number of recommendations to further support regionalization efforts on a broad scale as well as within several targeted areas.

A primary recommendation of the commission is to have existing regionalization resources—such as sample agreements, best practices, and success stories—compiled in a centralized loca-

Leading by Example

The Regionalization Advisory Commission report examines the current status of regionalization in Massachusetts and how other states are addressing the issue. For example, the state of Texas, with a population more than three times that of Massachusetts, has only 107 local public health departments, while Massachusetts has 351. Each Massachusetts city and town has its own board of health responsible for providing (or assuring access to) a set of services defined by state law and regulations. Massachusetts ranks thirteenth in the nation in population and forty-fourth in land area, but it has more local health departments than any other state in the country.

In the summer of 2009, Melrose and Wakefield took a major leap forward when they signed a three-year contract to

Following the release of the Regionalization Advisory Commission report, the administration partnered with the Legislature's Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government and the Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies to continue the dialogue about municipal collaborations with municipal officials and interested residents by holding a series of public hearings across the state in May.

This past session, the Patrick-Murray administration filed a municipal relief bill with the Legislature that included several provisions to support regionalization. The bill that was passed included our proposals to encourage collaborative purchasing efforts and strengthen the ability of municipalities to enter into inter-municipal agreements or join a regional entity. Our bill also included provisions to require state agencies to prioritize grants for municipalities that apply jointly in regional efforts.

Though the Regionalization Advisory Commission has fulfilled its legislative duty by completing its report, I am continuing the work set out by the commission. This administration wants to position the state to facilitate and encourage regionalization. On June 30, Governor Deval Patrick signed the fiscal 2011 state budget, which includes \$2 million for the District Local Technical Assistance Program. Through this program, the state partners with regional planning agencies to fund regional initiatives by applying a relatively small allocation of funds to expand collaboration among communities.

As the Patrick-Murray administration continues its efforts to encourage regionalization of local services and to explore a blueprint for regionalization in the Commonwealth, at the end of the day, the state can do only so much. To get to the next level of sharing local services in Massachusetts, all of us have to separate hometown pride from the nuts and bolts of delivering public services. We have to look to our neighbors, get them across the table, and start the conversations that are necessary to work together for the benefit of each community and the entire Commonwealth. ■

This administration wants to position the state to facilitate and encourage regionalization.

tion. Organizing these resources in one location, such as a website, would allow municipalities interested in exploring regionalization and sharing services to learn a great deal by studying past regionalization efforts.

Franklin County, the state's leader in sharing services and creating economies of scale, has many best practices and success stories that can benefit other communities. When county government in Massachusetts was, in essence, dissolved, the twenty-six communities in Franklin County realized they needed one another. They were stronger and more efficient working together than separately. Franklin County's model for sharing local services, including accounting, inspection, public health, planning, and cooperative purchasing, has delivered savings and increased efficiencies. It is a model that can be replicated in other regions of the Commonwealth.

Additional recommendations in the report will help municipalities move closer to sharing services with their neighbors.

combine the two public health departments. Under the agreement, Melrose's health director now directs the Melrose-Wakefield Health Department. The agreement maintains each town's local board of health as a policy-making entity, but offers opportunities to provide more efficient and effective services, such as combined flu clinics and tobacco control efforts. The Regionalization Advisory Commission hopes such a model can be replicated in other communities across the state.

That fall, more than 300 municipal and planning leaders from across the state, representing 135 cities and towns, attended a conference called "The Regionalization Tool Kit: A Practical Guide to Sharing Municipal Services." These leaders listened, learned and shared their experiences about reaching across borders to save money and maintain vital services. As recommended by the report, the Patrick-Murray administration held the second annual statewide regionalization conference in Worcester on September 2.