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Innovation in Iowa

West Des Moines, Iowa, may not seem a likely hot spot for public management innovation, but it thinks big when it comes to delivering value.

By Jim Chrisinger

With a population of roughly 50,000, West Des Moines, Iowa, may not seem a likely hot spot for public management innovation. But in a number of areas, this small city thinks big when it comes to delivering value through competitive sourcing, regional partnerships and other innovative practices.

My recent column on how the city competitively outsourced trash collection in 2000 illustrates this innovative way of thinking. Outsourcing wasn't the goal, maximizing value was the goal.

Faced with the need to replace two existing street sweepers, the city sent out an RFP for street sweeping to 14 companies in five states. When it didn't receive any bids, West Des Moines replaced their two sweepers, and now plans to take on work by sweeping streets for neighboring cities. It's all about generating the best results for each tax dollar, regardless of who does what.

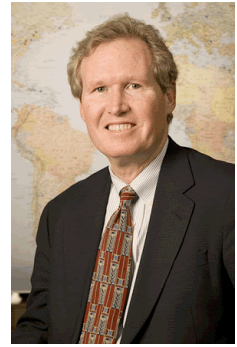
The drive for innovation starts with Mayor Steve Gaer, who isn't stopping with these accomplishments. He's looking for even more ways to improve West Des Moines city government, including better aligning compensation with performance.

One of the reasons West Des Moines and their leadership have been so successful is a willingness to challenge the status quo and take on barriers to change.

By demonstrating that they are serious about demanding value from each tax dollar, city officials also gain more leverage when it comes time to renegotiate union contracts. Many Iowa officials feel bound by a framework of statutory collective bargaining and mandatory arbitration that reduces their influence over the majority of their spending. As Public Works Director Bret Hodne observes, "We need to be careful not to price ourselves out of the business."

"There's only so much money," Gaer adds. "If we have to spend more on existing salaries and benefits, then there's that much less for training, equipment, new hires and so on. We have to meet in the middle somewhere."

Several years ago, in better budget times, the city got the union to agree to accept a new health plan as their existing plan was "simply not sustainable." The union also agreed to contribute more to it.



Sitting among a swath of suburbs, West Des Moines has also led the way in service sharing. A decade ago, Clive, Urbandale and West Des Moines combined their 911 call centers into an entity called Westcom. This shared facility and function has proved to be a winner. For example, all three jurisdictions share one computerized records management system for police and fire. Sworn officers can view case write-ups, arrests and crime analysis across all three cities on their vehicles' computers so when a chemical plant explosion required that a highway be shut down, the state made one call to Westcom and all three jurisdictions executed the closure quickly and smoothly. Administrative overhead -- for human resources, payroll, purchasing and other functions -- also is shared, stretching dollars for all.

One of the most substantial barriers to these kinds of innovations is making the up-front investment in analysis and guidance to determine whether there's a better deal to be had, and how to get it. Gaer is a businessman who knows that you need to invest in change, and has found those investments can be a tough sell to his peers. "It's hard to get smaller cities to put up their share of a five-figure consultant contract to make the case for a different way of delivering the service." Sometimes West Des Moines has to take on more than its share to get projects off the ground.

IT Director Mark Lumsden also points to the city's long-time quality initiative as a strong influence. Lumsden reports that the West Des Moines Quality Team regularly "cuts out layers of decision-making, acts aggressively on employee suggestions and constantly improves processes." Most importantly, Gaer sets the tone at the top, a prerequisite for culture change. On West Des Moines dedication to innovation, Hodne says, "It's our culture now."

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