



Collaborating Across Municipalities

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The great rivers and streams of Northwest New Jersey stretch across 50 municipalities, a web of water that sustains life and livelihoods for millions of people. Many of these rivers are also “boundary waters” painting the borders between municipalities, as well as between counties and states. So often it is the boundary waters that are most cherished for recreation and yet also uniquely challenged by issues like poorly planned development and contaminated stormwater. The best way to keep these shared waters safe is for local leaders to work together at a regional scale.

The Council of Governments model

There is a proven model of municipal coordination known as a “Council of Governments.” The council approach is widely used in other regions of the country to share in the costs of planning and permitting, to identify “boundary issues” before they become problems, to resolve zoning conflicts among member governments, and to bring new resources to the region that may be beyond the reach of a single municipality acting alone.

No longer would each town shoulder the hefty price-tag of consultant engineers and planners; the pooled funds of the Council would support a shared group of full-time professional staff. By sharing this back office ability to zone, develop ordinances, review projects, plan traffic, conduct wastewater reviews, and municipalities free up bandwidth to secure other resources. Imagine a scenario where municipalities have more time to apply for state and federal grants that support their planning work, or to secure investments in transportation, health, and rural development.

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Structure and governance

The structure and governance of a council is flexible and adaptable. Its only authority is that which is defined by the municipalities themselves. In some cases, Councils have served as the official Metropolitan Planning Organization for their region. In others, the Council's role has remained narrow, confined to matters of building, zoning enforcement and inspections.

Used to its fullest potential, a Council of Government model can attract significant new funding to its region, including the ability to administer federal aid, often resulting in regional economic development initiatives and tourism promotion; bike and trail networks; and consistent design standards across development projects.

Councils can also be as diverse in their structure as they are in their focus. Some operate as non-profit organizations, while in certain states they form a new class of corporation allowed for inter-governmental agencies and services.

At a glance: Councils of Government at work

- Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments (ME) covers a three-county area, with many, but not all, municipalities in those counties as members. They provide a wide range of planning and environmental services. Their landscape and population is very similar to Warren County – small manufacturing towns, abundant agriculture, forest, and water resources, limited transportation corridors due to mountainous terrain, development pressure from nearby larger communities, and plans for a shift from manufacturing to tourism.
- Central Keystone Council of Governments (PA) focuses on zoning, building permits, and inspections.
- Western Riverside Council of Governments (CA) offers an excellent explainer page about the Council of Governments model, including template documents, like a Joint Powers Agreement and Bylaws. They focus on a wide range of programs and services from energy and water resources to health and financial services (e.g. payroll and benefits administration).
- Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (DC, MD, VA) is a large region Council that crosses state lines.
- North Carolina Council of Governments (NC) includes both municipalities and counties as members in their model. State legislation formalized the organically-developed Council of Governments that had already formed in the state, and required all regions to have a Council. It looks like all municipalities and counties may be members of a Council of Governments. They have a great page listing the service they provide.