

LET'S PARTNER ON REDESIGNING GOVERNMENT

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By David C. Olson

There's no silver bullet as policy-makers prepare to tackle the projected \$6 billion shortfall in the state's general fund. At the same time, it's clear that state government - indeed, government at all levels - must be more pro-active in reducing the per-unit cost of programs and services.

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and its network of local chambers are eager to be partners in this effort. Private-sector businesses have faced similar challenges in order to survive the recession and emerge stronger. They've responded with innovation and creativity.

We also anticipate the push-back from some, not all mind you, public officials - that government cannot be run like a business; it is obligated to provide essential public services.

The goals of the public sector and private sector need not be at cross-purposes. Indeed, state government can learn from the efforts of their counterparts in local government. The Minnesota Chamber Board of Directors was addressed by a panel of local government representatives at its annual planning retreat in August. I've heard numerous presentations during my 30-plus years of chamber work, and this one ranked at the top. The panel deservedly received a standing ovation.

The panelists challenged:

- Tim Houle, Crow Wing County administrator: "We can do a better job of sharing information and coordinating delivery of services." The county has reduced its budget by \$4.5 million - 69 full-time equivalent positions, 16.5 percent of its workforce in anticipation of reduced government aid.
- Dave Osberg, Hastings city administrator: "Can we do this service better, or do we even need to do it? We start programs and never end them." The Hastings Fire Department will soon need a new ladder truck; He stated that he already has asked the question during meetings with the Fire Department: "Could we at least consider looking into sharing with neighboring communities?"
- Tamara Uselman, Perham Schools superintendent: "Don't ever let schools off the hook for delivering educational excellence. We believe our public schools can educate Minnesota's young better than any vendor out there. With the investment we make, you should demand excellence." Before supporting school levy referendums, she said citizens should ask what's been done with school services in order to reduce costs.

These individuals or governments are not alone in their initiatives. One needs only to review newspaper headlines across the state.

Otter Tail County's Human Services Agency, seeing employees doing more with fewer people due to a hiring freeze since December 2008, is taking a close look at

sharing responsibilities with Becker, Clay and Wilkin counties. The Pearl Street 911 Center, already a consolidation effort among Rice and Steele counties and the cities of Owatonna, Faribault and Northfield, is part of a study to consider further consolidation of dispatch centers with Le Sueur, Waseca, Mower, Freeborn and Faribault counties.

The Minnesota Chamber and local chambers pledge to be partners in building support and collaboration for advancing substantive cost-saving ideas. To that end, thanks to a grant from the Bush Foundation, the Minnesota Chamber has identified six pilot projects on government redesign focusing on sharing and collaboration.

Projects will be carried out by: Brainerd Lakes Chamber and Crow Wing County; Staples Motley Area and Long Prairie Area chambers and Todd County; Austin Area Chamber and Mower County; Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism and city of Owatonna; Rochester Area Chamber and city of Rochester. We also anticipate a metro-area project involving a number of Twin Cities chambers. Outcomes of these pilot projects will be publicized as successful models of redesign and cost-savings.

Change is inevitable in the delivery of public services. We continue on a collision course between an older population requiring more government services and a shrinking pool of workers to pay for public programs. The public sector is fast becoming permanently broke, and nothing suggests that the economy will grow us out of our problems.

The challenge is clear: Government must determine priorities and define measureable outcomes. We stand ready to assist.

David Olson is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. For more information, visit the Web at www.mnchamber.com.