



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

10 Lessons *from* Community Leaders

Rural community leaders, operators and managers of small water and wastewater systems balance a variety of tasks and challenges on a daily basis. Because technical assistance providers in the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP)[®] Network are on the ground, working directly with rural community leaders, they observe those challenges first-hand. Depending on the nature of issues a community faces, partnering - or regionalizing - may be a solution.

Whether to implement regionalization or not should be up to each individual community. RCAP serves as a neutral third-party, helping communities explore and pursue regionalization if they so choose. With that in mind, **RCAP spoke with community leaders and/or water and wastewater system operators and managers from across the country to learn what they think other community leaders and members should know about the process of partnering.** RCAP also spoke with technical assistance providers who have been integrally involved in facilitating partnerships.

Many of RCAP's interviews revealed ways community/system leaders can take a role in the regionalization process personally, starting with commitments they should make to both themselves and to the communities they serve. Small, rural and tribal system needs guided this research. Regionalization can be time-, emotion-, and effort-intensive. Ultimately, if regionalization is the best option in a given situation, it can result in better services to customers and provide for communities' futures.

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This summary accompanies RCAP's March 2020 research report, "Resiliency through Water and Wastewater System Partnerships: 10 Lessons from Community Leaders."

Regionalization simply means any type of partnership between multiple utilities, from informal partnerships such as mutual aid agreements in case of an emergency or sharing of heavy equipment, to more formal partnerships such as the formation of a Joint Powers Authority to develop a new water source or a full physical and/or managerial consolidation.

Some systems are using regionalization as a solution to build capacity and become more resilient, enabling them to successfully sustain their systems not only financially, but technically and managerially, for years to come.



RCAP is a national network of non-profit organizations working to ensure small, rural and tribal communities throughout the country have access to resources, tools, and technical assistance (TA) – creating capacity and opportunity for economic prosperity. The RCAP Network, consisting of six regional partners who employ more than 200 individual TA providers, uses a locally-driven approach to address various needs. See the map on the back of this summary for more.



FIRST, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS

1

DETERMINE WHETHER A PARTNERSHIP MAY BE RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

Key Questions ¹

- What challenges does my system face, and what is the nature of those challenges, i.e., technical, managerial, and/or financial?
- How might my system be able to work with another nearby system to address these challenges, informally or through a more formal arrangement?

Before moving forward with a regional approach, communities should consider if it is the right solution for them. Think about the issues the community faces and the different options to address them. Think about what types of partnership might make sense - how formal does it need to be? What opportunities are there to work with communities in your region or even beyond?

In interviews, RCAP learned about communities who asked themselves these questions.

A not-for-profit water corporation faced rising costs its customers could not afford. It turned to a nearby community who had already been providing informal assistance and sold the system after a community vote.

Two systems – one with excess capacity and one without enough capacity – partnered to combine drinking water treatment efforts after a voter mandate.

A Regional Water Authority created an opt-in environment; systems did not have to join the regional authority if they decided it was not the right option.

2

FIND OUT WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE AND BUILD YOUR TEAM

Key Questions

- Who can help? What experts are available to me?
- Am I connected with a local technical assistance provider, accountant or engineer? If not, how do I reach them?
- Who in the community can be a champion?
- What financial resources are available? Small grants for feasibility studies from the state or federal government? Can I issue bonds?

Find out what kinds of resources you have at your disposal - this can include funding sources, passionate individuals, members of your network with experience with regionalization, a technical assistance provider, or others. It helps to have support from the inside and the outside. A third-party facilitator may be helpful in keeping conversations on track and providing a neutral guiding hand throughout the process.

Some examples of resource identification RCAP observed included:

A tribe and regional council of governments brought resources to bear for two communities to form a regional entity; external facilitation was critical.

Systems seeking to regionalize or partner leveraged social capital as a resource by fostering community champions.

Resources available to aid partnerships may come in the form of technology or experienced personnel, allowing systems to share them and save costs.

1. For each lesson, RCAP lists questions communities considering collaboration (or who are in the process of developing a partnership) should ask themselves.



Credit: Matthew Osborne

3

COMMIT TO TRANSPARENCY FROM THE START

Transparency and trust go hand-in-hand and are key to building a successful partnership. Don't leave your community members and residents out of the process. Some tips community leaders shared with RCAP were:

- Be up-front, clear, precise, and honest about the costs and benefits of partnership.
- Keep the public involved at all stages.
- Consider establishing an advisory committee of community members who can help you to understand the public's needs, wants, and fears.

One of the examples RCAP heard about was:

Information gathering on water rights before pursuing a partnership was a crucial step which made regionalization a feasible and desirable option for communities in New Mexico.

Key Questions

- What information do I need to make an informed decision?
- What information does my community need to be kept in the loop?
- How can I create a culture of transparency?

4

COMMIT TO A WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN, BE RESPECTFUL AND FIND MUTUAL BENEFIT



Credit: Matthew Osborne

Having respect for one another is one of the most important practices RCAP can think of for most change management, including regional collaboration. We learned that successful partnership building requires respect, plus a willingness to listen and compromise.

Many people told us that solutions have to be “win-win” in order to work – if a regional solution is beneficial to all the partners involved, it can address several of the most common barriers to regionalization.

Key Questions

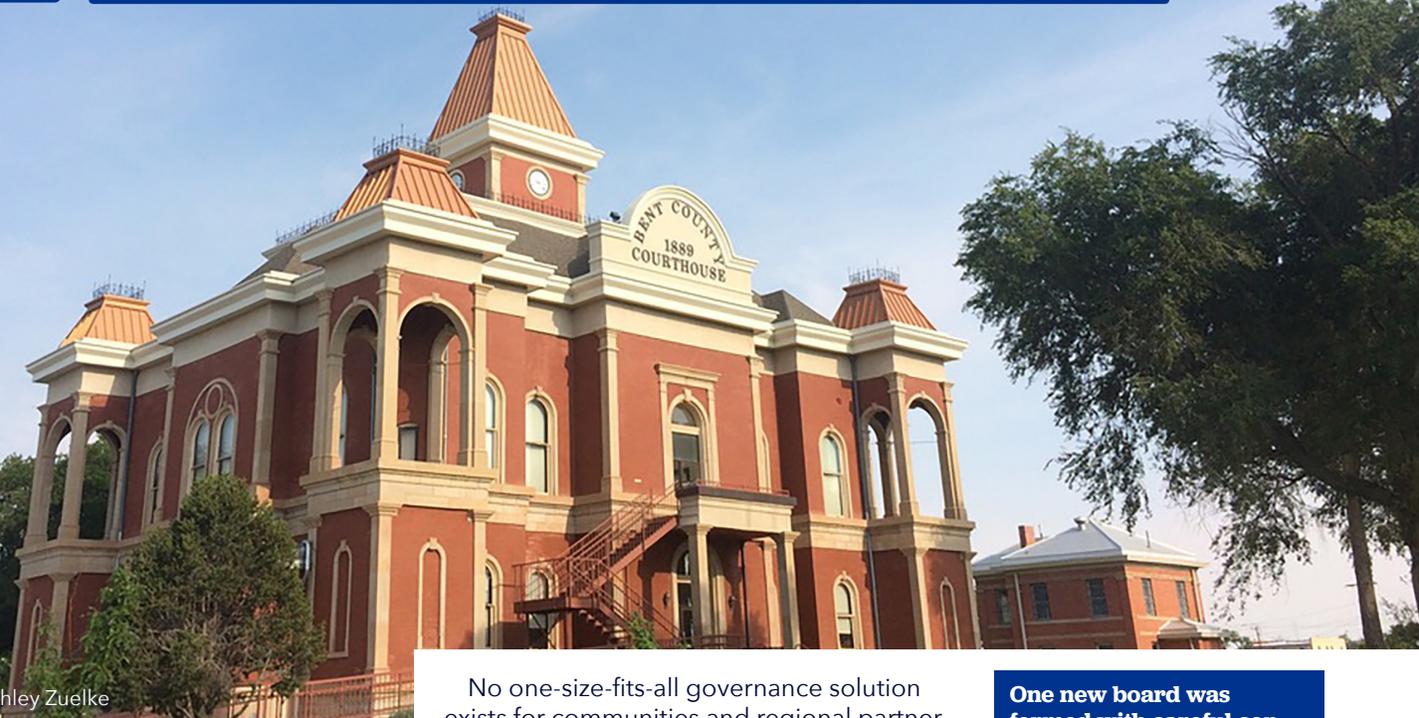
- What ground rules can I set to ensure all parties respect one another's opinions?
- What decision points can I be flexible on?
- How can I find a “win-win” situation?

In three examples, mutual respect and satisfaction as well as flexibility were credited for successful partnerships: the willingness to listen to and consider others' opinions was key.



5

RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING THROUGH, AND REACHING AGREEMENT ON, GOVERNANCE



Credit: Ashley Zuelke

Key Questions

- What is important to my community regarding how our system or a new regional system may be governed? How will my community want to be represented?
- How will my community handle it if a governance agreement needs to be changed later?

No one-size-fits-all governance solution exists for communities and regional partnerships. This is partly because there are many different forms of partnerships and partly because every community is different.

The key is that your community is comfortable with the ultimate decision and that it is tailored to fit your specific needs. Many community leaders RCAP spoke with felt that: a) the specific model of governance they ended up using, and b) the careful consideration that went into it, were critical to the success of the partnership in their region.

One new board was formed with careful consideration of how many positions to assign to each community.

In three examples, leaders went out of their way to ensure all communities were involved in governing the new entity because they believed it was important for success and fairness.

6

KEEP A PATIENT MINDSET, AND KNOW THAT THIS IS A LONG-TERM DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY

Key Questions

- What is the ideal outcome in 5 years? 10 years? 20 years?
- What could drive partnership? Maintain momentum?

Enter a partnership knowing you and others involved will need to be patient. Also, be realistic – this is going to be hard work and it could take a long time. Good things are worth working and waiting for! Plus, if you try to rush the process, you risk having it fall apart in the future.

Three leaders explained why patience matters: it may take time to reach decisions in multiple jurisdictions; it may take years to be ready for a formal agreement.

The process will likely move faster if you are experiencing some kind of crisis – financial, source water contamination, drought, or workforce-related, for example. This might serve as an impetus for community members and/or decision makers to realize that regionalization is a good option. However, the ideal is to start working towards a more sustainable and resilient system before crisis hits. (Check out the full “10 Lessons” report for some resources to help decision makers in your community understand how big of an undertaking running a water or wastewater system is, and how important it is.)

ONCE IN THE PROCESS, THESE ARE ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS:

7

BE REALISTIC ABOUT LONG-TERM COSTS AND CAPACITY TO KEEP UP ANY NEW INFRASTRUCTURE

Be careful to think about your community's long-term ability to maintain whatever results from the agreed-upon partnership. It may be tempting to take advantage of grant funds to build a fancy new treatment plant, but communities must perform longer-term calculations to ensure they can continue to sustainably operate and pay down debts.

What if a community can't afford to pay an operator with the proper class of license, even when pooling resources with neighboring communities? It helps to take the time and care to make high-quality projections about costs.

Similar concerns prompted a warning from several community leaders we talked to, as they said:

Key Questions

- Will my community be able to pay off any loans and maintain new infrastructure in the long run?

It is important to avoid the trap of taking on more than you can reasonably manage and afford to maintain over the long term.

8

HELP SYSTEM LEADERSHIP AND BOARDS DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The board, or equivalent decision-making body for a water or wastewater system, plays a huge role in determining the success of both an individual system and any potential regionalization opportunities.

Encourage or provide board training on what it takes to run the system or, ideally, ensure members have relevant expertise. Having decision makers who care about the

well-being of the system can make a huge positive difference to your community. RCAP learned about examples where:

Board member knowledge made a difference for one regional authority and board member attitudes positioned one municipal water/wastewater system for success.

Key Questions

- What skills or knowledge do board members already have? What do they need to have?
- Can my community afford to offer stipends to board members or cover travel costs for attendance at board trainings?



Credit: Matthew Osborne

OVERALL GUIDING PRINCIPLES (TO KEEP IN MIND THROUGHOUT)

9

KEEP YOUR GOAL IN SIGHT, BUT BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES

Key Questions

- What is the one thing that my community needs the most from this effort, and do I have buy-in from the right stakeholders that this is the priority?
- Have I clearly communicated that need?
- Have I considered different paths to reach that goal?

Have a defined goal - one that all partners agree on - but be open to different ways of achieving it. Stay open to the broad spectrum of partnerships.

Partnerships can be, and in certain geographies need to be, more than interconnection.

One regionalized system allowed some users to keep using their wells for non-drinking water purposes in addition to connecting to a public system.

Partnerships evolved over time: a willingness to allow for flexibility and evolution was key to success.

10

ENSURE BUILDING AND EARNING TRUST IS PRIORITIZED THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

Key Questions

- What can I do to earn the trust of my community and our neighbors?
- What processes can I establish to ensure trust is maintained?

Trust building is critical, and it takes time. You need trust to go in three directions: between the communities and the third-party facilitator, between the involved communities, and within each community. Basic lessons we learned from talking to community leaders were:

Trust is earned, and it can be quickly lost.

Trust building can be accomplished by thinking ahead - establishing relationships before there is a need to work together.

Possible solutions to address a lack of trust include:

- Holding public meetings that include time to listen to concerned residents
- Sharing success stories
 - Finding shared experiences and commonalities between communities
 - Educating the community on different partnership options
- Practicing patience

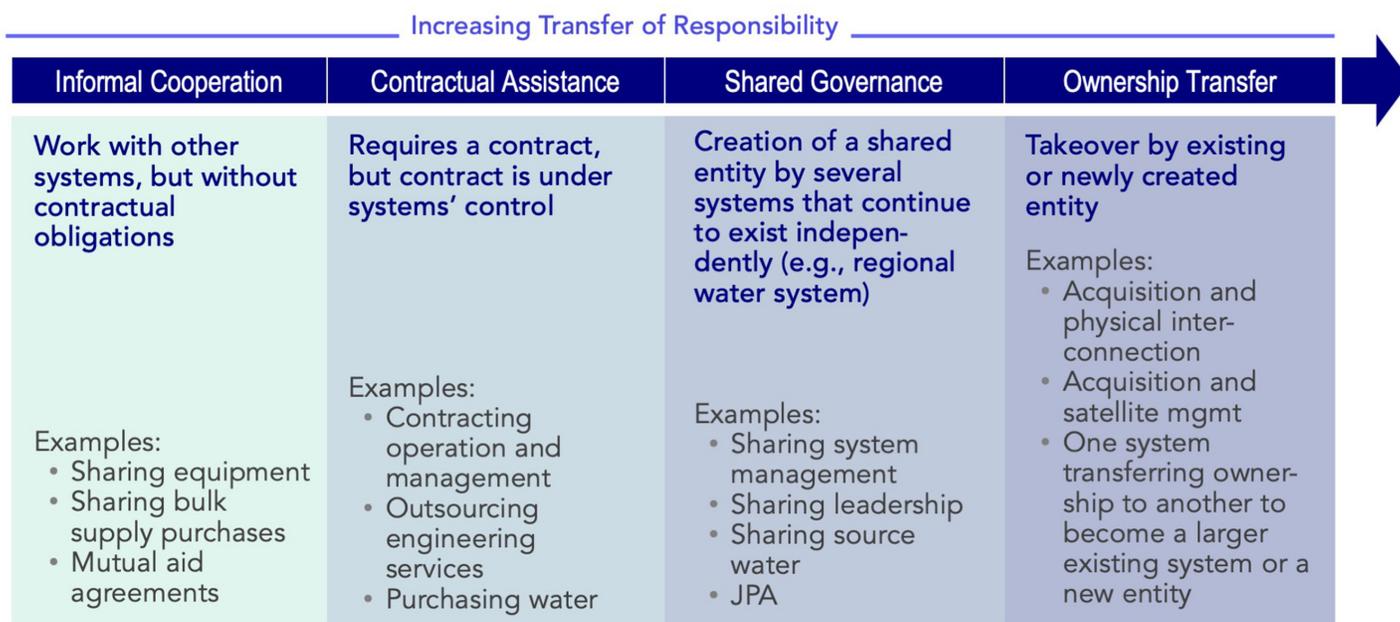


Credit: Joseph Lawrie (Left). Ashley Zuelke (Right).

Partnerships Take Many Forms

An array of partnerships and cooperation fall under the broad umbrella of regionalization, from informal collaboration to ownership and governance restructuring. See the chart below for a visual explanation of the spectrum of regional approaches.

Types of regional collaboration



Graphic adapted by RCAP and RCAC from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency resources

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- Phil Anderson, City of Piedmont, South Dakota
- Stephen Bordenkircher, Village of West Lafayette, Ohio
- Larry Foster, Jackson County Water Company, Ohio
- Jerry Greiner, Northwestern Water & Sewer District, Ohio
- Billy Hix, Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma (*Mr. Hix also serves on the RCAP, Inc. Board of Directors*)
- George Lloyd, Blossburg Borough, Pennsylvania
- Ramón Lucero, El Valle Water Alliance, New Mexico (*Mr. Lucero started working at the Rural Community Assistance Corporation during the drafting of this report*)
- Eric Moore, West Branch Regional Authority, Pennsylvania
- Michael Prado, Sr., Northern Tulare County Water Alliance, California
- Sheila Watson, Nature Coast Regional Water Authority, Florida
- Christine Weigle, Lycoming County Water and Sewer Authority, Pennsylvania

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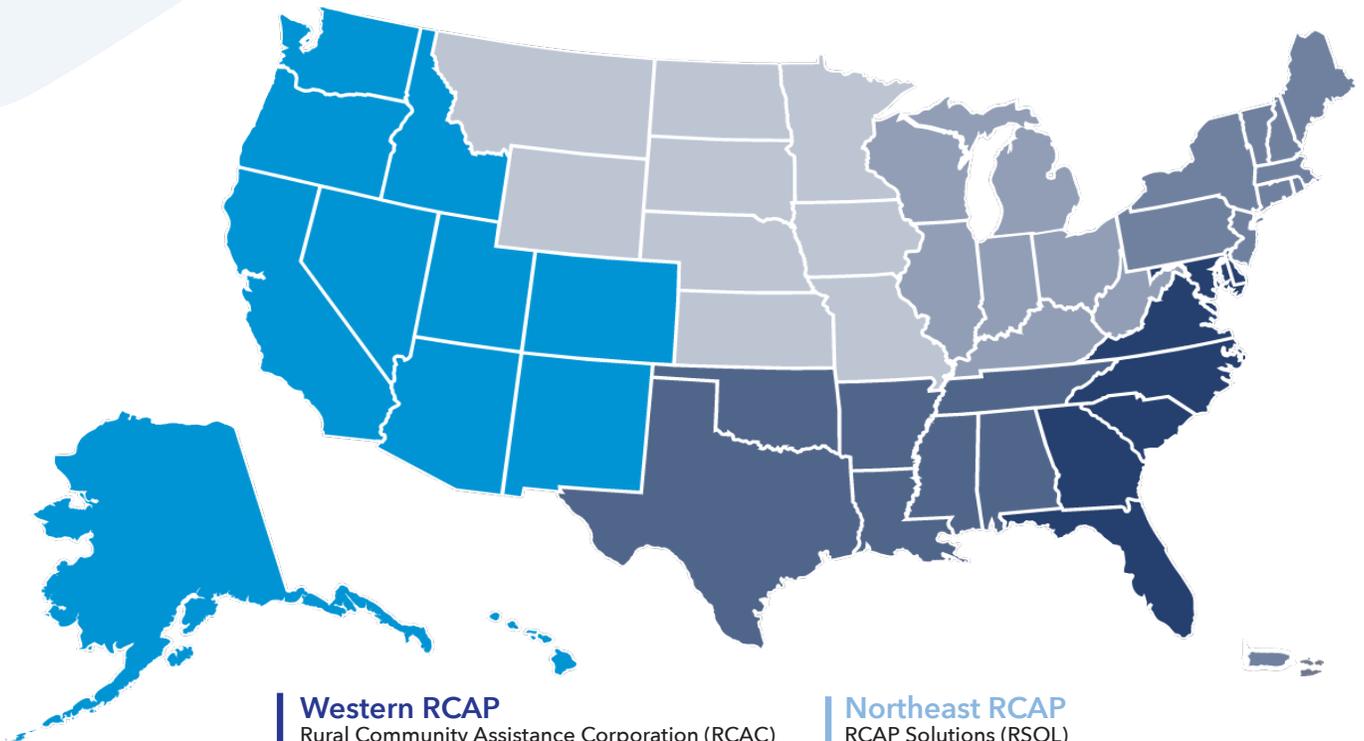
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Rural Community Assistance Partnership

A non-profit network reaching small, rural and tribal communities in all 50 states and territories to improve quality of life by starting at the **tap**.



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