



SPRINGFIELD SUMMIT HELPS COMMUNITIES AND PRACTITIONERS SHARE REGIONAL COLLABORATION STRATEGIES

By Sarah Buck, Director of Strategic Initiatives & Regional Collaboration at RCAP and Laura Landes, Research Associate at RCAP

Regional collaboration on water and wastewater services is uniquely difficult to achieve. In a poll taken at a recent event focused on regional collaboration on water and wastewater, 80 percent of community leaders said their community already participates in some other form of regional collaboration (for example, with a regional school district, police or fire department, or a regional economic development council). So why is it so hard to collaborate on water and wastewater? Those challenges that are sometimes unique to water and wastewater, or at least present themselves more strongly in this industry, and what community

leaders can do to counteract them were the focus of an October RCAP event in Springfield, Illinois.

More than 60 people gathered across from the Illinois state capitol to talk about how small water and wastewater systems are finding ways to partner, or regionalize, to resolve challenges and make their systems more sustainable. Small and large nearby communities, state and federal government agencies, private funders, and other nongovernmental organizations and technical assistance providers – such as the Great Lakes Community Action Partnership and other members of the RCAP

network – joined together to learn and move the national conversation on regionalization forward. Conversation centered on regionalization benefits, barriers, and strategies to mitigate those barriers. A wide array of voices contributed, and participants were able to engage with people with whom they wouldn't normally get a chance to connect.

Some themes that rose to the top in the discussions were benefits, barriers, and solutions. The most commonly mentioned benefits to regionalization were:

- Economies of scale
- Improved operations and maintenance

- Increased opportunity for economic development and growth
- Lower future costs and consequently affordable rates
- Better access to equipment, personnel, and funding sources

The most frequently mentioned barriers included:

- Local politics
- Lack of trust
- Fear of the unknown
- Fear of a loss of local control or identity
- High upfront costs and potential for increased costs in the future

Some solutions that attendees came up with to combat the issue of local politics were to:

- Ground the case for regionalization in facts and figures

- Work hard to educate the public as well as decision-makers using a variety of mediums – including social media
- Show the cost savings
- Use an unbiased third-party facilitator
- Make sure to find a win-win setup for the partnership
- If needed, try again with new elected decision-makers

To address the lack of trust, solutions included:

- make time to listen to the public including the use of public hearings
- Sharing success stories
- Finding shared experiences and commonalities between communities involved
- Taking care to educate the community on what the different partnership options are and what they all truly mean
- Having patience
- Again, finding win-win scenarios for all parties involved

To combat a fear of the unknown or of high costs, participants suggested:

- Educating the public on the process
- Showing them the cost increases that should have been happening over time but were not
- Providing as much data as possible up front
- Sharing comparable case studies
- Using social media to disseminate information

The RCAP research team also used the summit as an opportunity to gather feedback on research being done at the national level on regionalization in small, rural communities. RCAP has been interviewing community leaders and technical assistance providers with experience working on regionalization initiatives, both successful and unsuccessful. The goal is to publish information that local community leaders can use to figure out what type of regional partnership, if any, is right for them, to avoid some common pitfalls,

and implement best practices when working to build a partnership. The team has come up with some initial findings which were presented at the summit, and participants were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each one. Overall, attendees confirmed many of RCAP's findings of what considerations community leaders need to have at the beginning of the process and throughout. RCAP's findings will recommend the appropriate building blocks and guiding principles for community leaders thinking about how to plan for the sustainability of their system by working with others.

These findings will be published in early 2020. They will include sections that can be taken as standalone, in order to maximize its usefulness to busy community leaders in small, rural areas who might be interested in pursuing regional solutions to their water and wastewater issues.

RCAP is able to undertake this research and hold convenings like the one in Springfield because of funding from Spring Point Partners. Next year, RCAP will host two more events focused on regionalization. One will take place in early 2020 in Pennsylvania and will be focused on communities and how they can work towards regional collaboration, similar to the recent event in Springfield. A second event will take place in late 2020 in Washington, DC, and focus on policy recommendations for different levels of government, focused on government, making regional collaboration easier to pursue and complete successfully.

If you are interested in learning more about RCAP's Regionalization work or would like information on either of these upcoming events, please contact Sarah Buck, RCAP's Director of Strategic Initiatives & Regional Collaboration (sbuck@rcap.org).