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Does consolidation have a future?

By **Mary Lynn Merriman and Matthew Riesenweber**, In Focus

Consolidation is a word with history and emotion in this community.

Around it swirls the persistent question of whether our city governments should consolidate to create one larger city rather than the current four smaller entities.

Discussions regarding consolidation often are based on opinions rather than facts - largely because no actual study on the effects of consolidation on our unique community exists.

In March 2007, a community summit was sponsored by the Three Rivers Community Roundtable to explore big ideas for the future of the greater Tri-Cities region. A recurring theme was the notion of "consolidation."

In addition, in February 2007, the Tri-City Herald, along with the Benton-Franklin Dispute Resolution Center, held a two-day Community Conversation addressing the consolidation of cities.

After these events, a task force was chartered by the Roundtable to address the matter in a holistic way. The 13-member Communication, Cooperation, Collaboration, Consolidation (4C) Task Force began meeting in October 2007.

Joining us were Karen Blasdel, Gary Crutchfield, Calvin Dudney, Rufus Friday, Evangelina Galvan-Holt, Bob Gear, Bob Hammond, Ed Revell, Michelle Mann, Jim Toomey and Matt Watkins.

One of our objectives was to disarm the word consolidation and begin a thoughtful dialogue.

Our mission was to explore the various ways government, business and nongovernmental organizations interconnect - formally and informally - to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

We looked at how those existing collaborations affect the greater Tri-Cities, and we brainstormed suggestions for a path forward.

Our report was presented to the Three Rivers Community Roundtable in November 2008.

The task force recognized consolidation often is thought of in either/or terms - the Tri-Cities should either be consolidated or it should not.

However, we came to understand that there is a continuum in the level of commitment when groups work together. This continuum starts with communication, can move to cooperation, on to collaboration and finally consolidation.

We also determined that working together at any level can capture economies of scale, create greater efficiency, enhance services and programs, achieve cost savings and generate a unified voice and vision.

By focusing on these objectives, consolidation is removed as the gold standard. In the continuum, one level is not necessarily superior to another in furthering goals that are difficult or impossible to accomplish alone.

We recognized that in some situations, improved communication between organizations may be adequate while in others complete consolidation may be best.

To get a better understanding of the extent of interconnectedness within the Tri-Cities, a document was created to map activities, programs and services and the organizations involved in each. It also includes an extended section which drills down deeper into the work between the cities.

As a task force we came to appreciate the many and varied efforts to work more efficiently as a region - many of which the community is unaware, as were we.

There are numerous examples of successful and ongoing efforts undertaken to improve efficiency and expand services.

The mapping process also helped pinpoint areas where additional opportunities exist.

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