

SURVEY RESULTS ANALYSIS:

**FUND FOR OUR ECONOMIC FUTURE'S
EFFICIENTGOVNOW (EGN) GRANT PROGRAM**

**Center for Public Administration and Public Policy
Kent State University**

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Overview

During September 2009, the Fund for Our Economic Future (FFEF) administered a survey to government officials who had become involved with its Efficient Government Now (EGN) Grant Program. The survey was designed to gather information on the status collaborations for which grant proposals were proposed to the EGN Program during the Spring of 2009. It also sought information to help guide the FFEF in designing its next round of EGN related activities.

The survey was developed by the FFEF with support from the Center for Public Administration and Public Policy (the Center) at Kent State University (KSU). It was administered electronically by Landau Communications on behalf of the FFEF, and both the KSU Center and Landau Communications made follow up phone calls and email contacts to encourage survey responses. In October 2009, Landau Communications transmitted results from the survey and a spreadsheet of associated data to the Center for use in compiling a summary analysis of the survey findings. The Center is providing this brief report – along with a two page summary of survey highlights and a compilation of narrative comments from survey respondents – to enable the FFEF staff and others to take advantage of these results as they contemplate future initiatives in this area.

The FFEF staff compiled a list of 216 respondents with whom it had contact during the EGN program process. The survey was sent to each of these individuals. After two weeks of phone calls and email follow up, a total of 56 individuals responded to the survey (a response rate of just over 25%). The results reported and conclusions presented in this brief report are based on these 56 responses. While the majority of the respondents completed the full survey, some of them completed only portions of it. Because it is possible that some respondents were partners on the same projects, the results should be viewed as based on the collective *viewpoints of EGN program respondents rather than as an assessment of the status of the actual project proposals* that were submitted.

Drawing upon the information provided by the survey respondents, this brief report presents five broad findings. These findings are summarized in the following subsection. The pages that follow then provide empirical data from the survey to substantiate the findings that are presented.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Communities appear to be continuing work on collaborative proposals submitted to the EGN Program. A number of them have established written collaborative agreements, adopted ordinances, hired staff, and begun implementation.
- The EGN Program has had impacts beyond the grant funds it has awarded. Government officials report that they are beginning to talk with one another, explore new ideas, and move beyond discussion to the implementation of collaborative endeavors.
- Participating communities continue to face significant challenges in their efforts to save money, improve services, and encourage economic development through collaborative endeavors. Finding seed funding and educating themselves on how best to proceed in implementing collaborations appear to be key challenges for officials seeking to re-invent their public service delivery strategies.
- There is an important educational role that the FFEF could help fill. Government officials identified a need for a central depository of success stories, literature, case studies, model legislation, and other resources to assist local governments in developing and implementing effective collaborative endeavors. They also noted the need for training assistance with collaborative strategies and administrative issues. Because many local government officials have limited or no experience in cooperative ventures, providing education on the “how” of collaboration is an area that is likely to foster progress in the months and years to come.
- Respondents also supported some alterations to future EGN grant awards. Many of them liked the idea of awarding grants on the basis of different population size categories to insure that important projects of smaller communities are able to seriously compete for money. They also suggested maintaining funding levels but giving smaller awards to more applicants. In addition, they proposed workshops to help explain the goals of the EGN program and the grant processes involved. Finally, the communities reported on different functional areas that they hoped to address in future EGN award rounds. These functional areas included information technology, public works, public safety, economic development, and education.

FINDINGS AND EVIDENCE

Communities are Continuing Work on Collaborative Proposals Submitted to the EGN Program

Communities that participated in the EGN grant application process have continued with their collaborative efforts. The following results substantiate these continued efforts:

- 64% of the survey respondents (36/56) indicated that their community is proceeding with the collaboration described in the abstract and/or application submitted to the EGN Program.

- The follow up efforts reported by respondents appear to be significant:
 - o 66% (27/41) said that they are continuing to study key issues prior to implementation.
 - o 37% (15/41) said that they have adopted ordinances or resolutions to continue participation in their joint venture. In general, the passage of an ordinance or resolution reflects that written legislation has been prepared by legal counsel, the body has held meetings to solicit public input, the political subdivision has publicly discussed and debated the legislation (frequently at three different readings) and formally adopted the legislation. In the case of a municipality, this typically requires not only agreement by a majority of the legislative body but also the endorsement by the mayor of the community.
 - o 34% (14/41) said that they have staff in place to implement the collaboration or that these staff members are being hired.
 - o 32% (13/41) said that they are holding regular meetings.
 - o 27% (11/41) report that they have cost sharing arrangements in place.
 - o 24% (10/41) report that they are now fully engaged in implementing the collaboration and the necessary financial management systems in place.
 - o 22% (9/41) reported having Memoranda of Understandings in place.
 - o 17% (7/41) said that they have appropriate legal counsel to assist them.
 - o 15% (6/41) reported that they have advertised bids for needed services.

These survey results demonstrate that the EGN Program is timely and is contributing to an environment in which the roles of local governments in northeast Ohio are being re-assessed. Many local governments appear to be responding to the EGN Program and the environment in which it is operating in a positive fashion. Political subdivisions that sought FFEF resources and were unsuccessful in winning the grant competition have nevertheless seen the advantages of collaboration and have taken significant steps towards implementation of their respective ventures. It appears that many communities did not abandon their joint efforts, but rather they appear to be proceeding forward to formalize arrangements via Memoranda of Understandings, ordinances, employment of personnel, and other means.

The EGN Program Appears to Have Had Impacts Beyond the Grant Funds it is Providing

More than 40% (19/47) of the responding officials -- including those whose communities have not moved forward with their collaborations -- believe that the collaboration they proposed to the EGN Program has already yielded benefits to their communities. Another 23% (11/47) of the reporting officials indicated that they are unsure of whether or not their community has experienced benefits. Of those reporting benefits, a range of positive effects were identified:

- 79% (15/19) said that their collaborations are yielding good new ideas for their communities. It is significant that almost 4 of 5 political subdivisions believe that ideas which were not previously considered are now being actively discussed.
- 44% (21/48) indicated that the EGN Program helped clarify potential rewards from collaboration.
- 40% (19/48) reported that the EGN Program has helped foster an environment of cooperation.
- 40% (19/48) suggested that the EGN Program provided an incentive to move past discussion toward the development of concrete proposals for collaboration.
- 33% (16/48) reported that the EGN program got governments talking to one another.
- 25% (12/48) said that the EGN Program encouraged parties to move forward and beyond past conflicts.
- 21% (4/15) indicated that their collaboration has already improved economic opportunities in their communities.
- 21% (4/15) reported that their collaboration has already improved services to their citizens.
- 10% (2/15) reported that their communities have already saved money as a result of their collaboration.

These positive responses regarding the impact of the EGN Program contrast with the relatively small number of respondents who indicated that the program had little or no effect on their communities to date. The EGN Program, it appears, can help foster discussions that can serve as a base from which other collaborative ideas can emerge. A success story with new ideas and cooperation is a potential breeding ground for other cooperative ventures.

Participating Communities Continue to Face Significant Challenges

Not all communities have moved forward with their collaborative projects, and those that are moving forward continue to face significant challenges.

Challenges Noted by Officials Who Are Not Moving Forward

Of the 21 officials who indicated that their communities are not proceeding with their proposed collaborations, 15 (more than 71%) noted that the major reason they are

not moving forward is the lack of funds available to implement their idea. This concern about a lack of funding can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, one can anticipate that some individuals may respond in such a fashion since the survey is being done by the FFEF that just administered a grant program. There may be a motivation to overstate the need for additional financial resources. Second, some communities may have found that during these difficult financial times even limited financial resources are not available. A number of governments are reducing their workforces including police and fire, have suspended capital improvements, frozen or reduced wages, and taken other actions to deal with immediate financial problems. In this environment it may be politically difficult for a government to announce that it is expending any money for a venture that promises to be financially sound in the long run. The immediate problems get the limited resources available.

The negligible response among this group of respondents to certain items in the survey is also noteworthy. None of the group of officials who stated that they are not continuing their collaborations said that their partner communities are no longer interested. Further, they reported no opposition within the government itself, nor did they report a lack of support within their communities.

Challenges Faced by the Entire Pool of Respondents

When one considers all responding officials (including those who appear to be moving forward with their collaborations), lack of outside funding was again a major consideration. 51% (23/45) of the responding officials reported that the lack of outside funding is a challenge that is slowing their progress. One can anticipate that some of the same arguments noted above for non-proceeding governments are true for all governments, as well as those who have discontinued their collaborative efforts. However, in the case of implementing governments, the lack of outside money may not terminate the effort altogether but rather it can act to slow progress.

This larger group of officials also pointed to a need to learn more about how to do what they are trying to do because they are undertaking new activities for the first time. More than one-quarter of those responding (12/45) indicated that a lack of knowledge was slowing the progress of their collaboration.

Once again, the negligible response from all governments on certain items is noteworthy. Frequently it is assumed that “political” issues are the main impediment to collaboration. This commonly held assumption that politics is the roadblock to cooperation did not surface in a large way in the responses of the survey respondents. Only 3 of 45 governments report past or personal conflicts as a problem. Furthermore, only 4 of the 45 responding governments report “turf issues” as important. Existing employees were also not reported as a major problem, as only one of forty-five respondents suggested that this was a concern. None of the respondents reported that department heads were resistant to collaboration, and only one respondent noted resistance by organized labor.

There is an Important Educational Role to Be Addressed

As is noted above, the survey respondents indicated that the EGN grant program has encouraged governments to talk with one another about new ideas and collaborative ventures. While this educational function of the existing program is valuable, the survey respondents identified a number of ways in which the FFEF could provide additional assistance to encourage communities to implement productive collaborations:

- 71% (32/45) of the survey respondents reported a need for literature on collaboration, including write ups on successful case studies.
- 63% (30/48) indicated that a forum for problem-solving and sharing opportunities with other collaborating communities would be valuable or very valuable.
- 62% (28/45) noted a need for a central depository with models of state and national successes.
- 60% (27/45) expressed a need for model ordinances, resolutions, contracts, et cetera.
- 49% (22/45) indicated that training on the “how to” of collaboration and potential solutions to problems of collaboration would be of assistance to them.
- 49% (22/45) said that technical and legal assistance would be of help.
- 44% (20/45) indicated a need for studies and reporting on state laws which could impede collaboration.

The FFEF can play a critical role in fostering collaboration by providing for research and educational needs associated with intergovernmental collaboration. Many governments have little or no history of regional thinking, and this requires new approaches to understanding government services and administrative systems. Many governments therefore need help in the optimal design of collaborations and in their administration. What kinds of collaborations are most likely to yield financial savings? What about service Improvements, or successful economic development? How will payrolls be addressed in collaborative governance arrangements? How does the group designate a financial depository for funds? What personnel policies should be established? What is the role of civil service law? In short, a multitude of substantive and administrative questions must be answered for successful collaborations to occur on a widespread basis.

There is a role for the FFEF to aid in the provision of this kind of assistance. To fulfill this role, it could commission needed research, create a depository of success stories, offer needed training, provide model ordinances, and offer technical assistance in the formulation and execution of collaborative endeavors and in their administration.

Ideas for the Future of the EGN Grant Program

The surveyed government officials also recommended several changes to the EGN Grant Program. The most common recommendation is that grants be awarded based on different population tiers. For example, a certain amount of the grant money would be awarded to smaller, medium, and larger communities. This would insure that

an important project or program that only involves a service area of 50,000 people not be required to compete against a second proposal that serves 300,000 people. Over 64% (30/47) of the responding officials suggested this kind of restructuring for the grant program.

Positive responses to three other ideas were apparent from the survey results. First, more than 36% (17/47) reported a need for a series of workshops to explain the goals of the EGN grant program. This first EGN program brought local governments to the FFEF domain, but there remains some uncertainty about the grant program and its purpose(s). As noted earlier, governments appear to be excited about the EGN program. However, the FFEF is a relatively new actor to a number of communities and the respondents may be seeking clarity about the EGN's short term and long term goals.

Second, almost 30% (14/47) believe that the existing funding levels should be maintained but smaller awards should be made to more communities. For example, rather than \$300,000 to three communities, the policy could be changed to allocate \$300,000 to six or more governments.

Finally, the respondents suggested functional areas that they would be likely to seek funding for in future applications. Interestingly, 50% (23/46) mentioned information technology. It may be that information technology, as a relatively new field for some local governments, is an important need that is conducive to collaborative integration. The other areas that were frequently mentioned were public safety (46%), public works (44%), economic development (44%), and education (30%).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The FFEF can be proud of its efforts to date. Through the EGN Program, it has played an important role in bringing governments together to work toward greater use of collaborative efforts. While the survey results suggest that the grant program has value and should be repeated (perhaps with some adjustments), they also suggest that the FFEF can play an important role by addressing the needs of collaborating communities and enabling the provision of needed educational services to foster effective collaborations.

The FFEF, in conjunction with progressive local governments, can become a vehicle for change in the thinking and doing of public administration and public policy in Ohio and beyond. The environment for change is ripe. The attitudes of local officials appear to be positive. The EGN program has helped fuel the fires for change. The quality of life for many citizens depends on continuing to encourage and foster productive local government collaborations.