A MESSAGE FROM THE CENTRE REGION COG EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

years ago, in 1969, a time marked by great political and social divisions in American society, local elected officials from State College Borough and College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris and Patton Townships took the courageous step of agreeing to form a voluntary alliance to collaboratively provide public services to their residents. They believed that by working together there would be cost savings and improved service to the residents.

These Township and Borough officials understood that by working together they could solve common problems and improve the quality of life for their residents. They embraced the idea that people in elected office who are willing to listen to each other, treat each other respectfully, and seek shared solutions to common problems strengthen their municipality and the Centre Region as a whole.

To implement this idea the six area municipalities formed the Centre Region Council of Governments (COG). During the last five decades, the Centre Region COG has become the most effective COG in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in terms of the scope of public services offered and facilities managed. It is also one of the oldest COGs in the United States.

In part, the COG was created to lower the costs of government-provided services by eliminating or reducing duplication and achieving economies of scale. Most Pennsylvania communities fund separate and distinct fire agencies, code departments, emergency management coordinators, and park and recreation agencies, and have individualized plans for dealing with land use issues and guiding future land development. Many of the COG’s programs are models for other Pennsylvania communities and are regarded as best practices by the Commonwealth.

If one considers the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a whole, duplicating local services directly increases the cost of government for the taxpayer, is confusing to the residents, and may lessen the quality of those services. In addition, many of the major problems confronting local governments are truly regional in nature. Land use planning, protection of the natural environment, and emergency preparedness planning typically span across municipal boundaries and can only be meaningfully addressed at the regional level. For other regional programs: fire protection, parks and recreation, refuse/recycling collection, and library services - where expenses are shared among multiple municipalities, the COG is typically able to provide these services at a lower per resident cost than can many other communities.

The six area municipalities are collectively known as the Centre Region and have a combined population of 97,000 residents, and a land area of about 150 square miles. It is one of the fastest-growing areas in Pennsylvania, with the population increasing by about 8-10% each decade over the last 30 years.
The COG is governed by the General Forum, which is comprised of 32 elected officials from the six municipalities. In addition, there is a non-voting representative from Penn State University and a liaison from the local school district. Surprisingly, despite its large size, most General Forum votes are unanimous. In large measure, this consensus flows from the COG’s Committee structure that is characterized by small groups of elected officials from each of the municipalities coming together to prepare recommendations on regional policy issues of shared concern. Each municipality appoints one elected official to each of the COG Standing Committees: Executive, Finance, Human Resources, Parks Capital, Public Safety, Public Services and Environmental, and Transportation and Land Use.

Committees present recommendations to the General Forum in the form of a proposed motion for action. These recommendations provide a starting point for the General Forum’s discussions. If the issue is particularly “politically” charged, then the General Forum may refer the issue to the individual municipal Boards/Councils for comment. The General Forum then considers the municipal responses in deciding how best to proceed.

The position of General Forum Chair rotates annually among the municipalities. COG meetings are cablecast on C-NET, Channel 7, the area’s local government/education access channel. Many COG programs also have a strong social media presence. Members of the local print media are encouraged to attend General Forum meetings. Over the years transparency and openness to the public have remained one of COG’s core values.

The COG offers a menu of services ranging from library operations to park maintenance. Some specific examples of cost savings achieved through COG’s cooperative programs include:

**Fire Suppression and Rescue Services:**
There is a single COG-funded fire company protecting the four largest municipalities (about 87,000 residents) and Penn State University. The company operates from three stations and with a volunteer force of about 100 individuals. Each year the company responds to over 1,300 alarms. The per capita cost in the Centre Region for fire protection services is $21.50 per year; the national average for communities of comparable size is $150.00.

**Regional Refuse/Recycling Services:**
The COG has a contract for providing collection services to over 16,600 residential customers. The service contract is competitively bid every three to five years. Because of regional cooperation, monthly customer rates are 26% less than the typical customer payment was in 1992, the year prior to the implementation of the COG program. Benner Township joined the contract in 2010, which is an exciting step for intergovernmental relations and also reflects the success of the program. While controversial at first, the program is currently strongly supported by the public and has a delinquency rate of less than 1%.

**Code Administration Services:**
The COG’s Code Agency performs inspections on approximately $250 million in new construction annually, and also inspects over 20,000 rental units once every three years. For the last 45 years, the program has been supported entirely through building and rental housing permits; no tax monies fund the program. Beginning in 2019 the Agency’s scope of services, at the request of four municipalities, was expanded to include a Sewage Enforcement Officer (SEO).
The COG also maintains 56 municipal parks, a nature center, two pools, and an active adult center. In 2003, the COG’s parks program received Sports Illustrated’s Sportstown, U.S.A designation as Pennsylvania’s premier sports community.

The COG also incorporates coordinated planning efforts which include:

**Regional Comprehensive Plan:**
The Centre Region municipalities have been working cooperatively on regional land use planning for over 50 years. The Regional Comprehensive Plan establishes a blueprint for how the Centre Region should look in the future. The Plan includes a Regional Growth Boundary (RGB), which identifies the area where most of the region’s growth should occur in the next 30 years. Areas within the RGB are zoned for growth and are provided with public utilities and services. Locations outside of the RGB are targeted for open space, and for agricultural and rural preservation efforts.

**Regional Sewage Facilities Plan:**
This document outlines a plan to prepare the Region’s sewage facilities for the future. The Region’s six municipalities work cooperatively to prepare this document, and the plan is adopted in a regionally consistent manner. The Plan identifies a Sewer Service Area (SSA), which closely follow the Regional Growth Boundary contained in the Comprehensive Plan. In addition, the Plan monitors and provides recommendations for areas of the community served by on-lot sewage disposal systems. As an example, the regions sewage facility planning has resulted in the implementation of an on-lot system preventive maintenance program administered by the Centre Region Code Administration. This sewage management program is considered a model for other communities in the Commonwealth.

**Regional Emergency Management Plan:**
Pennsylvania State law requires each municipality to have an emergency management coordinator, an emergency operations center, and an emergency operations plan. For over 30 years, the six municipalities have opted to fulfill these requirements through a regional COG program. In the event of a declared disaster, this allows the six municipalities to respond to the crisis in a coordinated manner instead of pulling in separate or conflicting directions. The Centre Region’s program is closely coordinated with the emergency management planning at Penn State University and the COG and the University share a joint emergency operations center. The close relationship between the COG and the University in the area of emergency response is the best national practice.

**Long-Range Transportation Plan:**
The Centre County Metropolitan Planning Organization (CCMPO) is operated and funded jointly by the Centre Region COG and Centre County. The CCMPO is comprised of federal, state, county and municipal elected and appointed officials who work in close partnership with PennDOT, CATA, and the Centre County Office of Transportation Services to complete long-range transportation plans and approve federal and state funds for road, bridge, public transit, and pedestrian/bicycle projects. In 2018, the CCMPO helped lead efforts to demonstrate strong community support for PennDOT’s application for discretionary federal funding to construct the I-99/I-80 Interchanges project, which will replace the functionally obsolete I-80 Exit 161 (Bellefonte) Interchange. In 2019, the CCMPO worked with PennDOT to begin the identification and evaluation of alternative improvements in the Route 322/144/45 corridors of Centre County. Both projects will significantly improve safety and reduce congestion for the traveling public.
**Centre Region Bike Plan:**
In response to a growing demand for bicycle travel, the Centre Region has been actively engaged in bicycle planning activities since the late 1970s. Over the past 40 years, the region’s system of bike routes, bike lanes, and shared-use paths has grown to over 45 miles in length, along with an additional 16 miles of PennDOT-designated Statewide Bicycle PA Routes. In recognition of the growth and importance of bicycling, the Centre Region was designated a Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly Community (BFC) by the National League of American Bicyclists in 2012, making it one of only a handful of Pennsylvania communities designated at that time, and the only multi-municipal entity with the designation. Elected officials from all six municipalities subsequently developed and adopted the Centre Region Bike Plan in 2015. In 2016, the region’s designation as a Bronze Level BFC was renewed, and since that time COG has been working toward raising the designation to a Silver Level in 2020.

In addition, to providing public services the COG also operates regional facilities that are significantly used by the public:

**Schlow Centre Region Library:**
Cooperating through COG, the municipalities contributed $4 million to the construction of a new regional library. Because of the COG’s contribution, the Library Board was able to leverage an additional $7 million in public donations and state and federal grants. The result is a beautiful and functional 38,000 sq. ft. library that is located at a gateway intersection in the Region. An average of almost 800 patrons a day visit the library. It is one of the most well-loved public places in our valley.

**Regional Parks:**
In twelve unanimous votes beginning in 2006 the General Forum authorized the acquisition, planning, and development of almost 200 acres of land to develop as three regional parks. Oak Hall Regional Park was opened in 2014 and the John Hess softball field complex the following year. On the horizon is the third regional park, Whitehall Road Regional Park, that will partially consist of rectangular playing fields for soccer, field hockey, flag football, and lacrosse. In addition, the park will include the Centre Region’s largest all-abilities playground and a trail connection to Musser Gap, the entry point to Rothrock State Forest. The municipalities authorized a $7.6 million loan to fund these three park projects.

**Park Forest and Welch Swimming Pools:**
In 2009, the COG, on behalf of the participating municipalities, secured over $7.2 million to fund the reconstruction and expansion of the Centre Region’s two public swimming pools. Both facilities doubled the size of the old swimming areas, offer zero-entry points to access the pools, and are equipped with slides, climbing walls, and other fun water features. All of the pools’ operational costs are funded by revenues generated from seasonal passes and daily admissions. No local tax funds are used.

**Millbrook Marsh Nature Center (MMNC):**
Since 1997, the Nature Center has been a regional recreation and education destination for the community. The center is in College Township and consists of a 12-acre farmstead plus a 50-acre wetland. The grounds include a calcareous fen, a relatively rare type of freshwater marsh. The farmstead includes a historic, restored barn and a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certified facility, the Spring Creek Education Building. The ability to maintain such a large wetland in the midst of a growing urban environment is a broad-based effort and includes the COG, Penn State University, ClearWater Conservancy, and the Centre Region Parks and Recreation Authority. Over 16,000 people per year attend programs at the MMNC.
Active Adult Center (ACC):
In early 2017, the COG opened a new and larger Active Adult Center at the Nittany Mall. The 7,075 sq. foot space provides for a diverse menu of activities, events, and resources for active adults 55 and over. The ACC is operated in partnership with the Centre County Office of Aging which contributes funding and provides transportation services to the participants.

COG Building:
In 2003, after many years of discussion, the COG opened a new 16,000 sq. ft. building. The building is owned by the municipalities through a condominium agreement. The rent each COG agencies pays to municipalities for their office space is based on the percentage of building ownership. This business arrangement enables the municipalities to receive a return on their investment in the construction of the $2.5 million building.

The essential strategies for COGs winning record are:

Involvement of the Municipal Officials:
All of the elected officials participate in the COG. In the Centre Region, typically each elected municipal official attends two COG meetings per month: a session of the General Forum and his/her assigned COG Committee. Unlike those in many other COGs, all elected officials are actively engaged in the organization and have ownership of its projects and services. Over the last five decades, municipal officials have been steadfast in the belief that municipalities are stronger individually and as a region because they work together through the COG to do the public good. They have created an atmosphere for General Forum and Committee meetings that have been characterized by collaboration, openness, and trust. During difficult and important discussions, they have remained at the table and engaged in the dialogue until they identified solutions that everyone could live with.

Patient Persistence:
Consensus-building is hard work, and it may take years to achieve an agreement on a major topic. For example, the funding agreement for the COG’s regional library took place over nine years as municipal officials wrestled with questions relating to the allocation of costs and building location. The agreement establishing the COG requires unanimous consent of all the municipalities in matters relating to real estate. A tremendous amount of effort was invested in obtaining each municipality’s approval of a single building site. The process was possible because the elected officials openly identified their concerns, carefully listened to their peers from other municipal Boards/Councils and were willing to explore and analyze all options.

Multiple Partnerships:
The COG not only consists of partnerships among the municipalities, but it also has relationships with the local water, sewer and transit authorities, the school district, the County government, and Penn State University. These relationships increase COG’s capacity to provide services and coordinate land use plans. For instance, the COG maintains five school district playing fields in exchange for the community having access to those fields when school is not in session. This joint COG/school district approach has expanded the number of playable ball fields available to residents, while at the same time avoiding the need to purchase additional property.

Open and Regular Exchange of Information:
Transparency in decision making and open communication are defining qualities of the COG. Regional cooperation requires funding for staff support to prepare minutes, agendas, reports, and communications, and to schedule meetings. It is essential that all the elected officials be kept informed of COG activities; elected officials will not support what they don’t know about. Keeping people informed costs money.
Great Staff:

Municipal officials have created a work environment at the COG that attracts and is able to retain a staff that is professional, knowledgeable, caring about the residents, and hard-working. The COG believes in investing in the professional development of its staff and many employees are recognized leaders in their fields.

The COG has been a grand experiment in the great things people can accomplish by working together. In some ways, the COG is like an old-fashioned Central Pennsylvania barn-raising where neighbors help each other to do great things. Instead of constructing a barn, we have built a fire protection department (mostly volunteer), financially self-supporting code administration agency, joint emergency management system with Penn State University, and a highly economical refuse and recycling collection program. All these services are national best practices. We have acquired almost 200 acres of regional park land and another 62 acres for a regional nature center. We have reconstructed the library and two pools that are loved and well used by the community. We have created a bikeway/trail system that is among the best in Pennsylvania. We have also built cooperative working relationships with nearby communities – Benner Township and Bellefonte Borough as well as with The Pennsylvania State University. In addition, through the regional comprehensive plan, Act 537 Sewage facilities plan, and regional growth boundary we created a shared vision of the future that balances growth and development with the preservation of our farmlands, open spaces and the natural environment.

During the last 50 years, we have realized many of the aspirations of the municipal officials who once pioneered the concept of governments working together to serve their residents. These accomplishments would not have been possible without the support of the many municipal officials who have held public office and supported the joint partnerships that have allowed the COG to flourish.

Jim Steff

COG Executive Director