

The Benefits of Regionalization

Local governments are pooling resources to ensure key municipal services are provided.

By Janine Pineo

Local, county, and regional officials are finding ways to regionalize various municipal roles as municipalities seek solutions to staffing issues.

Long before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic started, Maine already had the oldest median age in the nation. Coupling the inevitable retirements with today's tight job market means it can be difficult to find people to fill municipal positions.

Other hurdles are that municipalities often cannot afford to compete with wages or benefits that private businesses can offer, and that the role might be only a few hours per week but is state-mandated to be filled. It also may be a job that requires formal training and licensing.

Regionalization has long been a way for municipalities to share costs; regional transfer stations, for example, are a staple across the state. *Maine Town & City* looks at three new regionalization efforts—from police chief to animal control officer to code enforcement officers—and how they came about.

Two Towns, One Police Chief

Monmouth and Winthrop both fund police departments, and as of July 1 of last year, the two towns share a police chief, longtime law enforcement officer, Paul Ferland.

"The key to all this was having the right person step into this role," said Anthony Wilson, Winthrop town manager. "There's no doubt he was the right person at the right time."

Ferland has been in law enforcement since the early 1980s, starting his career in Winslow before moving to the Kennebec County Sheriff's Office and "kind of worked my way up through the ranks," Ferland said. He left for a private industry job for six years, but in 2007 he joined the Winthrop police force, leaving as sergeant in 2021 to



Justin Poirier



Paul Ferland

become Monmouth's police chief.

"When Winthrop's chief retired, Chief Ferland served as the interim chief in Winthrop and then the conversation naturally occurred that we might share a chief," said Justin Poirier, Monmouth town manager.

The groundwork for the collaboration was laid over years, particularly between Ferland and Winthrop's former police chief, Ryan Frost, who did a lot of the leg work, according to Wilson.

In the first few months of his employment in Monmouth, Ferland tackled changing the radio and records management systems, which were entirely different from Winthrop's and "one of my pet peeves," Ferland said.

Having neighboring towns on different systems made it difficult for dispatchers who had to be trained on two systems, Ferland said, calling it "problematic and cumbersome to say the least."

The switch of the records system was no easy task, Ferland said, but worth it. "It makes the dispatch system so much easier," he said.

Poirier said Monmouth still would have considered the collaboration but having the software, systems and equipment compatible helped. Ferland, he said, "has been a steadfast advocate for upgrading equipment and standardizing the town's cruisers and police equipment to ensure officer safety."

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The negotiations for the formal arrangement last summer were “very straightforward,” Poirier said.

The municipalities settled on a 60-40 split: Winthrop has a population of just over 6,000 while Monmouth’s population is just over 4,000. Ferland’s time and salary were split accordingly.

Poirier said a salary of \$100,000 was decided, which actually saved both communities money. Monmouth and Winthrop had been paying their individual police chiefs’ salaries of more than \$70,000 a year.

Other details include that Ferland is officially an employee of Monmouth and his services are contracted out to Winthrop. He oversees 10 full-time officers in Winthrop and five full-time in Monmouth with a couple of reserves. He has a vehicle in Winthrop, and Monmouth pays on that.

Ferland said he can do the work from one office most of the time and got approval to promote a lieutenant in Monmouth to help with administrative work, something already in place in Winthrop.

“It’s playing out very well,” Ferland said. “I’ve got real good support from my town managers.”

Both Wilson and Poirier agree the plan has worked well.

“Monmouth is very happy with the arrangement,” Poirier said. “We are actively looking for additional ways our two communities can work together.”

“It opens eyes to new possibilities,” Wilson said.

A County Animal Control Officer

Ten Hancock County towns now contract with the county for their animal control officer (ACO), a position

that many municipalities struggle to fill because of its nature and part-time hours.

One of the towns, Lamoine, had its ACO resign, said Stu Marckoon, administrative assistant to the Lamoine Select Board, with “nobody waiting in the wings to take it.”

It fell to him to fill the role.

“There was incentive to do this,” he said with a laugh.

Marckoon then reached out to other municipalities and held Zoom meetings to discuss how to tackle what is a common problem, particularly for smaller communities.

Michael Crooker, Hancock County administrator, said the commissioners had been hearing from selectpersons, town councilors and municipal managers about the difficulties in not only hiring but retaining an ACO. The county’s Unorganized Territory manager, Millard Billings, did the initial leg work on what it would take for the county to develop a regional ACO program, contacting other counties that had developed one, including Penobscot County which had recently started its own program.

After getting the go-ahead from the commissioners, Crooker said he and Billings then reached out to municipalities to gauge the interest, with 13 signaling their interest in a possible contract.

“We collected all call data and reports from them to try to estimate what the yearly call volume might be for a regional ACO,” he said. “We also asked for input on the type of services that each community would like the ACO to offer.”

That work was used to develop the job description.



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Crooker said municipalities were given an opportunity to review the proposed agreements to verify that they reflected the legal basis for the work to be performed.

“We also met as a group to develop a memorandum of understanding that outlined the type of services the ACO would provide, the price for those services and who would be the contact for each municipality,” he said.

Everything came together last spring and the county hired Daniel McKay for the part-time position.

“It happened!” Marckoon said. “It’s going exceedingly well.”

Each of the municipalities pays a base fee of \$2,500. Marckoon likened the amount to a retainer fee, adding that if McKay responds to a call in a town, the town is then billed for time and mileage.

Crooker said the county doesn’t have a limit at the moment for how many municipalities can contract for the regional ACO’s services. Activity is monitored on a monthly basis, with a comprehensive review built in at the end of the year. “This allows us to make changes in the agreements and account for any change in activity,” he said. “He (McKay) could work full time if the activity warranted it. That is a great benefit.”

“I really am thrilled at how this worked out,” Marckoon said.

A Code Enforcement Plan

Six of the state’s nine regional councils have banded together to pursue a grant that would fund a regional code enforcement officer in each of the regions.

“What we really need is some seed money,” said Joel Greenwood, planning director for the Kennebec Valley Council of Governments, which was a driving force in pursuing a FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant that would allow each regional council to hire a full-time code enforcement officer with funds to be distributed over a three-year period.

Greenwood said helping with code enforcement has been the top answer when communities were queried as to what the regional council could do for them. “We’ve

been aware of it for years,” he said.

The sticking point was always the finances, he said, and getting towns to commit to that. “We couldn’t hire someone ... without getting the financials organized.”

If the seed money is there, Greenwood said, it would create a base. Municipalities would still need to pay for the service even though it is technically funded because that would ensure the continuing service and potentially expand it in the future.

Jay Kamm, senior planner at Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC), said that the commission is aware of the situation in its region, with a number of retirements and pending retirements driving the need for a solution to a longtime issue.

NMDC covers a huge area of the state – more than 10,000 square miles and more than 90 municipalities – that will present a challenge for a single officer. Kamm said Washington County would be problematic for coverage and said a possible solution would be to have a person for each county.

“My fear is that it gets too big too quick,” he said. “Our goal isn’t to take a job away from someone.”

Kamm said that means guidelines will need to be set, including using a regional officer in towns needing an interim code enforcement officer as they pursue candidates.

The regional councils won’t know until July if they will receive the BRIC grant, which would be awarded to the grantee, the Maine Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), the official applicant on the grant. MEMA would then distribute the funds, which would be available Aug. 1. “We’ve had nothing but positive feedback from MEMA,” Greenwood said.

Greenwood and Kamm both have ideas for regionalization. Greenwood sees a need for collaboration on assessing, engineering, and IT. Kamm would like to see regional code enforcement offices that employ multiple people.

“Money makes things happen,” Greenwood said. 🏔️

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