

Capitalizing on Consolidation



Tom Lynn photo

Most of Wisconsin is aqua and darker. The darker the blue, the more layers of government.

By Greg Pearson

Thomas Meaux looks over a map in his Port Washington office that shows counties across the United States in shades ranging from white to dark blue.

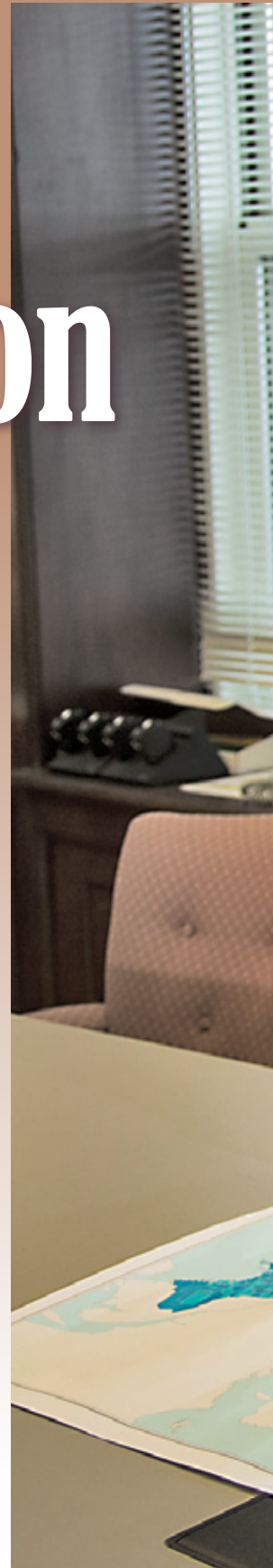
"This was my inspiration," says Meaux, Ozaukee County administrator.

The map charts the layers of government in each county using data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. The darker the blue, the more layers of government.

States such as Texas, Alaska and Nevada have large swaths awash in white. Aside from two northern counties — Florence and Menominee — Wisconsin is swimming in shades of aqua and darker.

Even though his county is one of the lighter shades of blue in the

Local governments are merging services to become more efficient, streamline efforts and save tax dollars





Thomas Meaux, Ozaukee County administrator, looks over a map in his Port Washington office that shows counties across the United States in shades ranging from white to dark blue. The map charts the layers of government in each county using data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Tom Lynn photo



North Shore Fire Chief Robert Whitaker says, "You save money; you get a better service." The North Shore Fire Department was established in 1995 and serves Bayside, Brown Deer, Fox Point, Glendale, River Hills, Shorewood and Whitefish Bay.

state, Meaux's mission these days is to further reduce its layers of government.

Ozaukee County and its neighbor, Washington County, expect to merge their health departments by the end of the year, and Meaux hopes the counties will coordinate on more consolidations.

Wisconsin ranks 20th in population but 10th in layers of local government. With each layer — whether it's the city or town, county or school system — comes the bureaucracy to make things function.

"They have their own this. They have their own that," Meaux says. He believes consolidation can eliminate some of those layers, some of that administration and, of course, some of the cost to taxpayers.

There are 440 school districts in Wisconsin — 11th most in the country, according to U.S. census data. Many of the state's 72 counties have huge boards — none bigger than Marathon County, which has a population of about 135,000 and 38 county board

members. County boards in Wisconsin average 22.4 members, well above the national average of 6.2.

That discrepancy is the result of Wisconsin setting up county boards to be legislative bodies that establish policy and serve as direct representatives of residents, says J. Michael Blaska, chief of staff of the Wisconsin Counties Association. Most states have a commission form of government for their county boards, meaning those bodies serve primarily to oversee the running of county government. Such boards often have five to seven members, Blaska says.

Wisconsin also has towns that have resisted annexation by neighboring cities and villages — some bearing the same community name (think Brookfield, Cedarburg and Grafton). Consolidation could help streamline government.

Why so many layers of government in Wisconsin? Joshua

Schoemann, Washington County administrator, figures the system was brought here by settlers who came from Northeastern states at



Lynn photo

the heart of the nation's founding.

The country's early settlers, and those who formed early governments in the United States, were "big advocates of local control," he says. "It made good sense until the population exploded and you're dealing with millions of people instead of thousands."

Meaux and Schoemann estimate that the Ozaukee/Washington health department merger could save taxpayers \$300,000 a year. That figure is on target, according to Kirsten Johnson, Ozaukee County's public health officer, who says most of the savings will be from staff reductions. The consolidation will eliminate a now-vacant position similar to hers in Washington County. Overall staff will be reduced from 34 to 28, although four of those positions are vacant.

The consolidation also will blend services of the two departments. For instance, Washington County has a food safety and licensing program. In Ozaukee County, those duties are now provided by the state. **The merger will enable best practices, allowing county boards to set policy, she says.**

The staff cuts concern Pat Hrobosky, a retired nursing instructor and longtime member of the Washington County Board of Health. She says her county already has dealt with staff cuts that have reduced service.

"We're only doing what's mandated — nothing more, nothing," she says. Referring to county officials, she adds, "I think they have relied on their staff to go above and beyond the call of duty for way too long."

The consolidation will eliminate duplicated services, Meaux and Schoemann say. They expect services to continue at current levels or improve, and they see their counties as good matches for future consolidations. The counties are side by side, serving as bedroom communities for commuters to Milwaukee County to the south. Ozaukee and Washington counties have a mix of rural and urban, above-average income levels and politics that lean Republican.

These united feelings between the two counties weren't always so.

When the Territorial Legislature created Washington County in 1836, the territory included what is now Ozaukee County. A power

struggle developed, and in 1853 legislators from Port Washington and West Bend moved to divide Washington County in two, giving themselves control in the newly formed, smaller counties.

The Washington County Board challenged the change, saying the state constitution required counties to be at least 900 square miles; Washington County then was 663 square miles. Attorneys defending the split took a unique approach, arguing that the eastern border of Ozaukee County extends halfway across Lake Michigan, the dividing line between Wisconsin and Michigan. The state Supreme Court accepted this idea, and what was once one county officially became two.

Those old battle scars seem to have healed. Meaux and Schoemann offer praise for one another and their county boards for buying into the health department merger.

"The opportunities are almost endless," Schoemann says of the potential for more consolidations. "You generally don't see this in government. That's what makes it exciting to be a part of this." Schoemann lists several reasons that this is a prime time to consolidate.

He mentions the "silver tsunami" — members of the populous baby boom generation moving into retirement and leaving jobs open. Those vacant positions can be eliminated, an easier step than cutting existing employees.

Also, state-mandated tax limits make it harder for bodies of government to generate the money needed to sustain current levels of staffing. Schoemann says continuing at its current level of staff and services would cost Washington County about \$1 million more each year. "Without new revenue, you can't go very long at that clip," he says.

Meaux sees department consolidations as similar to any corporate merger, and his language resembles that heard in boardrooms across America. "We're trying to squeeze out redundancies," he says.

Dan Elsass, human resources coordinator and risk manager for the Village of Deerfield in Illinois, previously worked for the University of Wisconsin Extension and authored a study in 2003 that made recommendations about how to approach consolidations based on an examination of nine separate mergers of service involving Wisconsin governmental bodies. The study looked at consolidations that ranged from the formation of the North Shore Fire Department in suburban Milwaukee to the construction of a wastewater treatment plant shared by the villages of Mazomanie and Black Earth in Dane County.

During the recession of the early 2000s, Elsass was getting calls from places as far away as California asking about his research. The deeper recession that began in late 2007 kicked up another round of calls. "It's had real legs over the years," he says of consolidation

WISCONSIN BY THE NUMBERS

20th

U.S. rank — Population

10th

U.S. rank — Layers
of local government

11th

U.S. rank — Number
of school districts

22.4

Wisconsin average
county board members

6.2

U.S. average
county board members

38

County board members
Marathon County

“We smaller communities are going to have to look for opportunities to share expenses. I don’t know how we’re going to make it otherwise.” – Michele DeYoe, Delafield mayor

proposals. “Whenever things get tight, people are looking to save.”

Sometimes, consolidation proposals don’t work. Ozaukee and Washington counties recently considered merging veterans services departments. When veterans groups raised concerns about possible cuts in service, the idea was dropped, especially since the savings would have been minimal.

“Do we really want to risk hard feelings for a small gain?” Meaux says. “It was not a big bang for our buck.”

Schoemann says there are three primary factors to consider in a consolidation: saving money, which is the primary goal; maintaining or improving service; and acceptance by the public. Two of those three factors have to be positive for a consolidation to work, he says.

Consolidation proposals can be difficult because affected departments fear loss of control or identity. Other factors as simple as a disgruntled employee or a board member whose spouse works in an affected department can hinder plans, Meaux says.

“It doesn’t take much for it to get derailed. You have to be sensitive to how you treat people,” he says. “Things can happen if we get leadership that can make it work. This isn’t rocket science.” Sometimes the grudges that get in the way of consolidation aren’t even political, Elsass says. “It can be, ‘Our football team lost to you for 10 years straight, so we don’t talk to you about anything.’”

Milwaukee’s North Shore communities have worked at consolidation for years, combining departments such as health and water. The North Shore Fire Department, which serves the communities of Bayside, Brown Deer, Fox Point, Glendale, River Hills, Shorewood and Whitefish Bay, was established in 1995.

With one department now where there once were seven, there is a more efficient distribution of personnel and equipment across the communities, says Carl Krueger, Brown Deer’s village president. All personnel also now receive the same training. “There’s been a lot of benefit over the 20 years,” he says.

North Shore Fire Chief Robert Whitaker, who started as a firefighter in Fox Point shortly before the 1995 consolidation, says the merged department has led to savings in capital expenses and equipment purchases. At the time of the consolidation, the seven communities had 13 pumper trucks; now there are six. Today’s price tag for such a truck is \$450,000. Where there once were four ladder trucks, there now are two. Those cost \$1 million each. Staffing has been reduced from 121 to 106, Whitaker says.

The consolidation has saved the seven communities millions of



Tom Lynn photo

At the time of the 1995 consolidation, the seven North Shore communities had 13 pumper trucks; now there are six. They had four ladder trucks; now there are two.

dollars, according to an October Public Policy Forum report. The communities would have paid a total of \$2.8 million more in operating costs in 2014 had they not combined, the analysis says.

Communities have had to learn to compromise in the operation of the Fire Department. “You save money; you get a better service,” Whitaker says. “On the other hand, the Brown Deer Village Board doesn’t have complete control of the Fire Department.”

Steve Tippel, president of the North Shore Firefighters Union,

says the department was created with limits placed on salaries and other expenses pegged to the Consumer Price Index. State tax limits now added into the mix have further restricted revenue for the department, he says. But reduction in the number of firefighters over the years has been handled through attrition, although the union had to negotiate to avoid a couple of layoffs a few years ago.

Overall, Tippel sees the efficiency of the merged service. “I think by and large the consolidation has been a good thing,” he says.

Lake Country Fire and Rescue was established in 2010, creating one department to serve Delafield and the villages of Chenequa and Nashotah.

Delafield Mayor Michele DeYoe points to a concrete example of savings through merged services. Before the consolidation, Delafield was considering building a fire substation to serve the northeast corner of the city. To reach that area, firefighters from Delafield’s existing station had to drive around the south end of Nagawicka Lake, a route that slowed response time.

With the consolidation, that part of Delafield is served by the nearby fire station in Nashotah. The saving to taxpayers? The cost of constructing one fire substation.

“My personal philosophy is it’s the way to go in the future,” DeYoe says of consolidation. “We smaller communities are going to have to look for opportunities to share expenses. I don’t know how we’re going to make it otherwise.”

DeYoe estimates the fire and rescue consolidation saves a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year. Each community maintains its existing fire station, but savings are found in reduced administrative and equipment expenses.

“Not every community needs a 150-foot ladder truck,” she says.

Greg Pearson is a freelance writer and former Milwaukee Journal Sentinel copy editor.