

## Multi-town collaboration is now an imperative



By [Dominic Tocci](#) November 22, 2011 [Post a comment](#)

Almost five years ago, when MPC first started exploring [interjurisdictional approaches](#) to housing issues, the work was driven by common sense. Why should every town in our region try to tackle its housing challenges individually, especially when the issues – not to mention housing markets – so often cross municipal borders? Indeed, collaborating made economic sense, too, giving participating communities more bang for their collective buck. Today, multi-town approaches are more and more an economic imperative, as communities grapple with deep budget cuts and fewer staff. A number of forward-thinking municipalities are flipping the script on this challenging economic reality and innovating by working together rather than going it alone.

On Monday, Nov. 7, 2011, MPC and our partners – the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus (MMC), Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), and Illinois Housing Council – held a 5th Mayor-Developer Forum devoted to the promising interjurisdictional strategies that have been piloted in our region over the past several years. The event, [A Fresh Approach: Collaborating Toward Residential Market Recovery](#), was hosted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, which released a [report](#) that day detailing the history of housing collaboration in metropolitan Chicago and highlighting the accomplishments and challenges of four clusters of communities. MPC, MMC and CMAP co-authored a [foreword](#) to the Fed's paper, which provides important context and begins to highlight the needed reforms to make interjurisdictional collaboration easier, more effective, and more replicable.

The forum brought together more than 100 municipal representatives, developers, and housing and community development practitioners to hear about the collaborative activities in south, west, north and northwest suburbs. More importantly, though, it was an opportunity to solicit feedback on this new approach to housing and community development and brainstorm ways to foster more multi-town efforts. Collaboration's potential is now clear. For example, an initial investment of less than \$500,000 from the philanthropic community has allowed the south and west collaboratives to hire housing coordinators, who in turn have helped attract more than \$25 million in federal funding to support their efforts over the last two years. Despite this impressive return on investment, philanthropy is not a sustainable funding source. So forum organizers presented attendees with two over-arching challenges: How would this interjurisdictional model be adaptable and helpful to them, and how ought we best engage both the public and private sectors in supporting and growing these collaborative models.

The good news is that the public sector is already coming to the table; federal, state and county governments have stepped up in support of interjurisdictional approaches. The Illinois Dept. of Commerce and Economic Opportunity was an early proponent of the south and west collaboratives. Antonio Riley, the midwest regional administrator for the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), delivered [taped remarks](#) at the forum, pledging to dedicate HUD resources to help build capacity in suburban areas.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle attended the forum and acknowledged that

while the county's historic role has not been constructive, she and her staff are working hard to reverse that trend. She emphasized the importance of partnerships in this era of scarce resources, and described how the county is refocusing its own resources – such as CDBG and HOME funding – and looking to sub-regional intermediaries like the collaboratives to act as bridges between the county and its many municipalities. Notably, Preckwinkle indicated that Cook County soon would provide financial support to the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association and its collaborative efforts via CDBG funding to bolster their capacity.

This initial support from various levels of government is laudable, yet still needs to be institutionalized by specific policies and reforms that encourage collaboration at a greater scale. The facts remain that collaborating is difficult, it does not come naturally to municipalities, and it is even harder to sustain over the long term – all this in spite of its many benefits, as representatives from each cluster explained during the morning panel discussion:

- David Mekarski, village administrator for Olympia Fields, a member of the [Chicago Southland Housing and Community Development Collaborative](#), spoke about the difficult hurdles he and his cohorts had to clear in pursuit of joint funding. “We need new rules,” Mekarski noted, “because the current rules almost destroyed the collaborative.”
- Stacie Young, director of the [Preservation Compact](#), described how the work of the Northwest Suburban Housing Collaborative to preserve multi-family apartment buildings can become much more efficient and effective now that the collaborative has hired a [new housing coordinator](#). This person will serve as a “one-stop shop” for a range of partners, helping member communities navigate complex regulations and the web of available resources, while simultaneously making it easier for property owners and developers to invest in the collaborative’s targeted areas.
- One of the founders of the West Cook County Housing Collaborative, Oak Park’s Village President David Pope described how collaboration is vital not only to individual clusters, but to the entire region. CMAP’s [GO TO 2040](#) comprehensive regional plan provides an excellent roadmap for sustainable prosperity; local activity is vital to realize the plan’s goals. With so many jurisdictions in northeastern Illinois, interjurisdictional approaches are well-positioned to move the needle further on key regional priorities. Incentives for communities to collaborate are critically important because it is the norm for a municipality to go it alone – even, as Pope noted, when “going it alone often means getting nothing done.”
- David Brint, CEO of Brinshore Development and a member of the [Illinois Housing Council’s Executive Committee](#), discussed the evolving capacity and leadership in north shore communities on housing issues, particularly the shortage of workforce housing. The recent expansion of the nonprofit [Community Partners for Affordable Housing \(CPAH\)](#) to serve this sub-region is one reason momentum is growing. A dedicated entity like CPAH provides consistent expertise to the communities and helps bring workforce housing discussions into constructive public discourse.

Two major themes emerged from the day’s many conversations: 1. Vision is important, but so is execution – and frequently successful execution starts with building relationships and working together. 2. The private sector must be engaged early on in municipal initiatives -- and closing speaker Carl Guardino was the perfect person to address this theme.

As President and CEO of the [Silicon Valley Leadership Group](#), Guardino has helped build a variety of public-private coalitions across jurisdictions and interests. In fact, he was instrumental in starting the [Housing Trust of Santa Clara County](#), one of MPC’s interjurisdictional inspirations. This unique housing trust model has attracted over \$40 million in voluntary contributions – two-thirds from the private sector – which has leveraged almost \$2 billion to create more than 9,000 housing opportunities. This record of achievement should motivate metropolitan Chicago’s business leaders and the organizations already working to engage the region’s employers. Initiatives like [employer-assisted housing](#) and the [Commute Options pilot](#) are making great progress. Yet Guardino’s experience shows much work remains.

The forum was encouraging in that it introduced the collaborative model to many municipal and private sector leaders, who could see its potential and were excited to adapt the model to their own community development initiatives. Drawing on the experience of the last few years and feedback from the forum, MPC, MMC and CMAP are now crafting specific policy recommendations to remove barriers to interjurisdictional strategies and reward municipalities for taking a more efficient, effective approach to revitalizing the region. The goal is to establish more clusters of communities working across borders and foster a regional culture where collaboration is the norm because by working together, communities can take a faster track to

stability and sustainable economic growth.