

10 Lessons *from* Community Leaders

Rural community leaders, operators and managers of small water and wastewater systems balance a variety of tasks and challenges on a daily basis. For more than 46 years, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP)[®] Network’s technical assistance providers (TAPs) have been on the ground, working directly with small, rural and tribal community leaders and observing those challenges first-hand. Common challenges include:

- Overbuilt or underbuilt systems,
- Insufficient rates that are already too high for customers,
- Operator retirements,
- Changing federal and state regulations that a community cannot meet, and
- Economic transitions.

Depending on the nature of the challenges a community faces, partnering with others - or regionalizing - may be a solution.

RCAP spoke with community leaders and/or water and wastewater system operators and managers as well as TAPs from across the country to learn what they think other community leaders and members should know about the process of partnering. Many interviews revealed ways leaders can take a role in the regionalization process personally, starting with commitments they should make to both themselves and to the communities they serve. RCAP synthesized these observations into ten lessons. A full report on www.rcap.org features the ten lessons summarized here.

Regionalization simply means any type of partnership between multiple utilities, from informal partnerships such as mutual aid agreements in case of an emergency or sharing of heavy equipment, to more formal partnerships such as the formation of a Joint Powers Authority to develop a new water source or a full physical and/or managerial consolidation.

Some systems are using regionalization as a solution to build capacity and become more resilient, enabling them to successfully sustain their systems not only financially, but technically and managerially, for years to come.

10 LESSONS ON WATER/WASTEWATER SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS

1	DETERMINE WHETHER A PARTNERSHIP MAY BE RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY	6	KEEP A PATIENT MINDSET, AND KNOW THAT THIS IS A LONG-TERM DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY
2	FIND OUT WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE AND BUILD YOUR TEAM	7	BE REALISTIC ABOUT LONG-TERM COSTS AND CAPACITY TO KEEP UP ANY NEW INFRASTRUCTURE
3	COMMIT TO TRANSPARENCY FROM THE START	8	HELP SYSTEM LEADERSHIP AND BOARDS DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
4	COMMIT TO A WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN, BE RESPECTFUL AND FIND MUTUAL BENEFIT	9	KEEP YOUR GOAL IN SIGHT, BUT BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES
5	RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING THROUGH, AND REACHING AGREEMENT ON, GOVERNANCE	10	ENSURE BUILDING AND EARNING TRUST IS PRIORITIZED THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS



RCAP is a national network of non-profit organizations working to ensure small, rural and tribal communities throughout the country have access to resources, tools, and technical assistance (TA) – creating capacity and opportunity for economic prosperity. The RCAP Network—consisting of the RCAP national office and six regional partners who employ more than 200 TA providers located in every state, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands—uses a locally-driven approach to address various needs.



Resiliency through Water and Wastewater System Partnerships: 10 Lessons from Community Leaders

BEGINNING OF COLLABORATION PROCESS / BUILDING BLOCKS

1 DETERMINE WHETHER A PARTNERSHIP MAY BE RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY *Remember there is a wide spectrum of types of partnerships*

Consider all your options, educate yourself and your community.
Is a partnership right for your community? If so, what kind of partnership?

2 FIND OUT WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE AND BUILD YOUR TEAM *Look for your internal champions and external assets*

Resources include current and potential financial, physical, and human capital. Local champions and outside experts can help in different ways.

3 COMMIT TO TRANSPARENCY FROM THE START *Honesty and straightforwardness will work out better in the long run*

Transparency and trust go hand-in-hand and are key to building a successful partnership. Don't leave your community members out of the process.

4 COMMIT TO A WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN, BE RESPECTFUL, FIND MUTUAL BENEFIT *Compromise is important, and so is meeting needs for all involved*

Successful partnership building requires respect, plus a willingness to listen and compromise. Set these as ground rules at the beginning.

5 RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING THROUGH, AND REACHING AGREEMENT ON, GOVERNANCE *There is no one-size-fits-all governance model*

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to picking the right governance structure for your community/regional partnership; it requires careful thought. RCAP can help communities consider different governance structures.

6 KEEP A PATIENT MINDSET, AND KNOW THAT THIS IS A LONG-TERM DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY *Take the time to do it right*

Be patient and realistic. Good things are worth waiting for! Rushing a partnership could create an unsustainable foundation that could falter.

ONCE IN THE COLLABORATION PROCESS

7 BE REALISTIC ABOUT LONG-TERM COSTS AND CAPACITY TO MAINTAIN NEW INFRASTRUCTURE *Don't take on more than you can handle*

Before taking on new infrastructure loans and grants – however tempting they may be – think about your community's long-term ability to operate and keep up what you build.

8 HELP SYSTEM LEADERSHIP AND BOARDS DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES *Inform leaders' decisions*

Boards and other leaders play a huge role in determining the success of the system and potential partnerships. Provide trainings when possible or try to ensure board members and others can build expertise.

KEEP IN MIND THROUGHOUT

9 KEEP YOUR GOAL IN SIGHT, BUT BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES *Collaborative solutions might not always look as first envisioned; they might evolve*

Make sure everyone is on the same page about the end goal but keep an open mind about how to get there.

Consider the broad spectrum of partnership types, from informal to formal.

10 ENSURE BUILDING AND EARNING TRUST IS PRIORITIZED THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS *No partnership can achieve true success without trust*

Trust building is critical, and it takes time.

Trust should be fostered in three ways:

- between partnering communities and the third-party facilitator,
- between the involved/partnering communities, and
- within each community.

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Small, rural and tribal system needs guided this research. Community leaders interviewed for these lessons reside in California, Florida, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota and represent different experiences. The breadth and depth of their knowledge was invaluable to this research. RCAP thanks them for the time they spent speaking with us and for the hard work they do every day to benefit their communities.