Local Government Forum Report:

Building Capacity Through Collaboration

Thursday November 30th, 2023

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FORUM OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Current federal funding levels represent a unique and unprecedented opportunity to secure resources for watershed restoration and conservation. But accessing these funds can be difficult for small and under-resourced local governments, who lack the in-house capacity to apply for and manage federal grants. Regional and/or cross-sector collaborations can help address these capacity gaps, but there are multiple barriers that prevent local governments from participating in these types of collaborations. Addressing these barriers has the potential to drive resources to local governments that are currently being shut out of federal funding.

Background

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have created a flood of federal funding for watershed restoration and conservation projects. For larger local governments with staff capacity to apply for and manage these funds, this funding is a windfall that drives forward projects at an unprecedented scale. But for many small local governments, the requirements to apply for and manage these grants, including reporting, auditing, permitting, procurement and more, create significant barriers. Staff at the smallest local governments typically do not have the time or expertise to meet these requirements.

Justice40 is a whole-of-government initiative to ensure that 40% of the benefits of federal investments go to disadvantaged communities. Removing the barriers that prevent small local governments from accessing federal funding is one important step toward meeting the Justice40 goal.

Collaboration is one way to address capacity gaps and help drive funding to smaller, underserved communities. As an umbrella term, collaboration can mean public-private partnerships, regional intergovernmental organizations, or an informal collection of cross-sector partners working on a common issue. As outlined in the *2021 Local Government Forum Report: Developing Collaborative Watershed Partnerships*, collaboration is a proven social science strategy for building capacity and

> **What is a Network or Collaboration*?**
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> A collaboration consists of organizations and people that are largely autonomous, geographically distributed, and heterogeneous in terms of their operating environment, culture, social capital and goals, but that come together to better achieve common or compatible goals.
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> *Note: Collaboration is shorthand for structures that include coalitions, collective action entities, networks and other types of similar groupings

accelerating implementation. However, participating in collaborative efforts, especially in the start-up phase is time-consuming and there are significant barriers that prevent local government participation.

Building Capacity Through Collaboration

The Local Government Forum is a yearly problem-solving meeting hosted by the Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC) in collaboration with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Through facilitated group discussion, participants identify issues that hinder or help advance local implementation of watershed protection and restoration initiatives. Findings and recommendations, developed during the forum, are documented and next steps are identified.

The 2023 Forum on *Building Capacity Through Collaboration* was a day of learning, discussion, and brainstorming around collaborative efforts. The meeting agenda was designed to explore opportunities and obstacles related to building successful collaborations, with a specific eye towards accessing federal funding. Based on the discussions and findings from the Forum, this report includes a series of preliminary recommended actions local governments and state/federal/private funders can take to support connection, collaboration, and capacity building that enables the smallest, lowest capacity local governments in the Chesapeake region to access much needed federal dollars.

PRE-FORUM PLANNING

Extensive planning went into developing materials for the Forum that helped structure the discussion and input requested from participants. LGAC staff enlisted the support of a contractor, Joy Jackson from the Institute for Conservation Leadership, for her expertise in collaboration and facilitation. With input from an informal planning team, staff drafted a pre-Forum survey, a problem statement, and a Forum agenda.

Communication via email was used throughout the planning process to provide extensive input on pre-Forum materials, and to determine who should be invited to attend to bring a comprehensive group of experts to the discussion. LGAC staff also held many individual phone conversations with subject matter experts who have led local government collaborative efforts that have successfully leveraged funding.

Information gathering and survey results

In order to gather a broad range of information, staff created an electronic survey and distributed it to invited Forum participants, Chesapeake Bay Program staff, and other pertinent stakeholders. Survey questions asked about common barriers to

engaging in collaborative efforts, interest in federal funding opportunities, and case studies of successful collaborative efforts.[1]

Survey respondents included local government officials (n = 6), federal partners (n = 3), state partners (n = 4), nonprofits (n = 9), funders (n = 3) and regional intergovernmental organizations (n = 8). All of the respondents indicated that they 'regularly collaborate with other groups' and the vast majority were interested in new federal funding opportunities. Twenty-four respondents (72%) identified 'lack of staff' as a key barrier to collaboration and thirteen respondents (39%) indicated 'not sure where to start' as another key barrier. Eighteen respondents (54%) listed 'other' barriers. Full results available in *Appendix A: Survey Results*.

Based on information gathered during pre-Forum planning, the facilitator worked with staff to draft a problem statement and agenda, which were shared with attendees in advance of the forum.[2]

Problem Statement

The importance of collaboration and collaborative efforts has gained new relevance and significance in recent years. Current federal funding opportunities, from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), represent a unique and unprecedented opportunity to secure resources for environmental and conservation work throughout the nation. Moreover, many of these grants require, or at minimum encourage, collaboration among entities in order to access funding.

These grant opportunities, with their push for collaboration, reveal the challenges and limitations facing local governments, agencies, non-profits, etc. interested in applying for federal dollars. Enthusiasm for funding has been tempered by concerns related to navigating the application process, capacity to build collaborative efforts and/or design eligible projects, limited experience collaborating regionally, bandwidth to craft compelling grant proposals, etc. These challenges may also disproportionately affect communities of color, highlighting the importance of prioritizing issues related to equity in the design of collaborative efforts.

FORUM PROCEEDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Forum was held on November 30th, 2023 at the Reservoir Center for Water Solutions in Washington, DC. Utilizing a hybrid meeting platform and facilitated discussion, 27 people participated in person and 28 participated virtually[3]. Attendees included local elected officials, local appointed officials, senior staff, planning commission staff, environmental nonprofit professionals, state government

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[1] *Appendix A: Survey Results*
[2] *Appendix B: Problem Statement and Agenda*
[3] *Appendix C: Forum Attendees*

employees, federal government employees and environmental funders. Facilitator Joy Jackson set the stage with some introductory slides about collaboratives and the Forum's goals[4].

Anchors: What's holding collaboration back?

Forum participants identified 'anchors' that are holding collaboration back[5], with a particular focus on barriers that prevent local governments from participating in and/or benefiting from collaboratives. These barriers present obstacles for local governments to overcome. LGAC seeks to develop recommendations that, if implemented, would surmount these barriers and result in increased access for local governments to federal funding opportunities via participation in collaborative initiatives.

- **Funding** - difficulty accessing funding, lack of funding to support collaborations, onerous application/reporting requirements
- **Capacity** - minimal staff capacity to participate in and/or lead collaboratives, limited technical assistance
- **Competition** - competition between potential collaborators and/or for limited resources, less effective uncoordinated actions by individuals
- **Lack of leadership** - competing priorities, collaboration is not always a priority for local governments, lack of local champions, unclear how to start a collaborative or why to join one
- **Turnover** - staff turn over and/or shifting leadership can impact work to build or maintain long-term effective collaborations

Sails: What's propelling collaboration forward?

Forum participants identified 'sails' that are propelling collaboration forward[5], with a particular focus on local government collaboratives. These present opportunities to expand local government involvement in collaboratives and scale up access to new federal funding.

- **Networks** - many local government collaboratives (planning commissions, municipal leagues, county associations, council of governments etc) have existing relationships with local governments, valuable resources
- **Funding** - new federal funding (IRA, IIJA), flexible funding (like ARPA)
- **Alignment** - flooding/climate resilience are top priorities for local governments, synergy with clean water goals
- **Opportunity** - potential to expand capacity, lower costs over the long-term, potential solutions cross jurisdictional boundaries

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[4] *Appendix D: Presentations*
[5] *Appendix E: Breakout Activity Notes*

Innovative Case Studies: Discovering What Others Have Done

During the Forum, examples of collaborative efforts that have helped to leverage funding for local governments were shared. Greening Greater Fulton and Lancaster Clean Water Partners shared some of the challenges and successes they have experienced with collaborative work. Full presentations are available in *Appendix D: Presentations*.

Greening Greater Fulton started with a one-day retreat in 2018 among partners on the East End in Richmond, Virginia but blossomed into the East End Green Infrastructure Collaborative. Partners meet quarterly and since 2019, have been driving forward an Innovate Fulton green street concept, including securing significant funding. Installation of green infrastructure along two target blocks begins in 2024. Major challenges of the collaborative effort include funding, navigating permitting processes, and business owner hesitation. The group has utilized their multiple skill sets to find solutions including: securing multiple grants to cover costs, partnering directly with city staff, and continual community engagement. A key takeaway was to build relationships before you need them[4].

Lancaster Clean Water Partners (LCWPs) began when a multi-sector group of local leaders saw the need for a strong backbone organization to advance a community-led Common Agenda toward the goal of clean water in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania[5]. The organization was formed in 2016 and hired its first staff in 2018. LCWPs is focused on four pillars of work: 1) mobilize collaborative partnerships 2) deploy a countywide strategy for clean water 3) acquire adequate sustained funding and 4) share and promote countywide process and success. Collectively, the partners include more than 50 member organizations/local governments that have leveraged more than $25 million for clean water projects. Their keys to success include strong local leadership that can build working relationships with a diverse group of partners, an organizational focus on reducing duplication and having a bias toward action, and a coordinated communications plan that builds a megaphone for clean water.

Empathy Mapping Insights

To gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the various stakeholders in the room, the group embarked on an exercise to chart what each group thought, felt, said, and did in response to federal funding opportunities that require collaboration. This exercise, called "empathy mapping", helps participants consider goals and challenges from the various perspectives of stakeholders and/or potential collaborators. Key takeaways from each stakeholder group are listed in the table below.

Stakeholder Group	Says	Thinks	Does	Feels
Federal Government & Funders	Love the enthusiasm, let's make sure there's enough capacity	Who will manage this? Leverage	Provides technical assistance Paperwork	Pressure to deliver Excited
Local Elected Officials	What value could this bring to my community?	What a hassle! Is this worth the effort?	Asks staff for their input Meets with potential partners	Hesitant Frustrated by short turnaround of application process
Local Government Staff	This is a great opportunity!	Do we have shovel ready projects? Are our local officials willing? Another item on the to do list	Engages partners Implements project	Anxiety with the funding process Concerned about engaging the community
Environmental Non-profits	Can this project help to meet the community's needs?	Is everyone here that needs to be?	Explains the opportunity Meets with partners	Afraid that the project won't meet the community's needs

Full results from empathy mapping are available in *Appendix E: Breakout Activity Notes.*

Workshop - How to address the factors or 'anchors' limiting collaboration

To conclude the day, attendees honed in on the 'anchors' that are limiting local government collaboration by answering the following questions:

1. What are the <u>long-term implications</u> of this problem if left unresolved?
2. What <u>resources or expertise</u> do we need to solve this problem?
3. What are your <u>recommendations</u> to address this anchor?

The 'anchors' discussed are listed below and numbers correspond with the questions above; full results of the discussion are available in *Appendix E: Breakout Activity Notes.*

Funding - In response to the anchors of difficulty accessing funding, lack of funding to support collaborations, and onerous application/reporting requirements, attendees responded with the following:

1. <u>Long-term Implications:</u> Long-term, funding will go to larger, more well resourced local governments.
2. <u>Necessary Resources or Expertise:</u> Expanded technical assistance that includes planning and grant writing/management, reduced or removed match requirements
3. <u>Recommendations:</u> Hire staff to serve as 'circuit riders' that identify potential projects and write/manage grants for networks of local governments.

Capacity - In response to the anchors of minimal staff capacity to participate in and/or lead collaboratives and limited technical assistance, attendees discussed the following:

1. <u>Long-term Implications:</u> Problems like flooding will get worse as communities miss out on current opportunities.
2. <u>Necessary Resources or Expertise:</u> Regional coordinators of technical and administrative support.
3. <u>Recommendations:</u> Sustainable funding for local coordinators, also known as 'circuit riders.'

Competition - In response to the anchors of competition between potential collaborators and/or for limited resources and less effective uncoordinated actions by individuals, attendees discussed the following:

1. <u>Long-term Implications:</u> Communities could miss out on funding and mutual goals will not be accomplished.
2. <u>Necessary Resources or Expertise:</u> More time to foster trust/understanding with partners.
3. <u>Recommendations:</u> A gathering that incorporates a spirit of accomplishment through cooperation.

Lack of leadership - Facing anchors like competing priorities, lack of local champions, and lack of clarity on how to start a collaborative or why to join one, attendees brainstormed the following:

1. Long-term Implications: Problems get more expensive over time.
2. Necessary Resources or Expertise: Need to foster engaged and informed champions.
3. Recommendations: Focus on bringing tangible benefits to a community and recognizing leaders.

Turnover - Attendees discussed the anchors of staff turnover and/or shifting leadership. Key highlights from the discussion include:

1. Long-term Implications: Reinventing the wheel is time consuming and leads to project failure.
2. Necessary Resources or Expertise: Relationships between organizations and open communication between them.
3. Recommendations: Partnerships between nonprofits and local government associations to provide training and technical assistance.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

After the Forum, the meeting facilitator and LGAC staff utilized an iterative process to refine the brainstormed recommendations. With input from LGAC members, the following key recommendations were identified for removing barriers to local government participation in regional collaboration, with the goal of unlocking federal funding opportunities:

1. ***LGAC recommends that funders tailor funding opportunities to the specific needs of local governments and include funding for the significant staff time that collaboration requires.***

Many funders, including public and private, do not understand the unique challenges of local governments. Listening sessions with local officials could provide valuable insights into how funding opportunities, requests for applications, reporting requirements and more could be tailored to more closely align with local government priorities and needs. A clear example is the short timeline required to apply for grants and the lack of alignment with local government fiscal years, both of which significantly complicate efforts to apply for, manage, and report on grant funds. Regional collaboration among local governments and/or with other partners could address some of these concerns, but a lack of funding to support the significant staff time required for collaboration limits local governments' ability to participate in collaboratives.

2. *LGAC recommends leveraging existing hubs of collaboration to expand watershed technical assistance and address capacity gaps among local governments.*

Local governments often collaborate through municipal leagues, county associations, council of governments, and planning commissions. These state-wide or regional entities have trusted relationships with the vast majority of the local governments in the watershed. Leveraging these existing hubs of collaboration could allow for a significant expansion of watershed technical assistance, via a shared services model.

Technical Assistance Provider for Local Governments (Circuit Rider): An individual who possesses a wide range of knowledge and skills related to water resources planning and management, including some capacity related to technical assistance, finance, planning, project management, grant writing, etc. They facilitate implementation through the engagement of local governments and stakeholders and provide credible, consistent, convenient and cost-effective technical assistance

LGAC has long supported the need for local government technical assistance providers, sometimes called circuit riders[6]. Such individuals can serve multiple municipalities and counties by identifying potential projects, seeking out grant funding, and managing grant funds on their behalf. Partnering with existing regional hubs of connection creates the potential for a systemic, equitable, efficient, and strategic technical assistance program that fosters long-term collaboration and resource sharing.

Successful models already exist around the watershed and need to be replicated and/or expanded to meet the high demand for these services[7].

3. *LGAC recommends increasing opportunities for local officials to gather, foster relationships, and celebrate accomplishments through collaboration.*

Successful collaboration requires strong, trusted relationships; but many local officials have too few opportunities to gather across municipal and county lines to foster those relationships. Creating more opportunities for local officials to gather could encourage participation in new or existing collaborations. However, gatherings would need to be thoughtfully planned to reduce the time required to participate. Local governments continue to have limited resources for building relationships with potential partners and the most successful events will reduce these barriers.

One element of gatherings that could attract local officials to attend is celebrations of accomplishments through collaboration (for example: awards to local officials for completed projects). In this way, gatherings also have the potential to increase

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[6] 2018 Local Government Forum: Filling Gaps to Advance WIP Implementation
[7] 2023 LGAC Annual Recommendations

leadership commitment to collaboration by demonstrating the value that partnership can bring to a community.

4. ***LGAC recommends fostering collaboration champions within local government by focusing on bringing tangible benefits to a community.***

A proven strategy for fostering local government buy-in for collaboration is to demonstrate the tangible benefits it can bring to a community. Collaborations that align closely with local government priorities, like public health and safety, infrastructure maintenance and finance, education and economic development, are more likely to gain traction with local leaders. This approach requires a deep understanding of the key issues in each community and a commitment to consistently evaluate and assess progress.

Using watershed conservation and restoration projects to increase benefits to community residents can be a powerful tool for fostering local government champions for collaboration and increasing long-term commitment to watershed protection and restoration.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Collaborations have the potential to build local government capacity and unlock new federal funding opportunities. However, local governments face significant barriers to participating in collaborative efforts, including limited funding, limited capacity, competition between potential partners, lack of leadership, and frequent local official turnover. LGAC recommends overcoming these barriers by 1) tailoring funding opportunities to meet local government needs, 2) leveraging existing local government collaborations to expand technical assistance, 3) increasing opportunities for local officials to foster relationships, and 4) cultivating collaboration champions by bringing tangible benefits to local governments.

Based on the findings and recommendations from this Forum, potential next steps include sharing this report with state and federal decision-makers, convening targeted funders to better understand local government needs and priorities, and exploring opportunities to provide systematic technical assistance in partnership with existing local government collaborations.