

What Is A COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS?

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The term "Council of Government" describes a number of different kinds of organizations. Some councils of government are regional planning commissions (within a county or on a multi-county basis). Some are development associations, some are planning and development groups and some exist for more specific purposes, such as consolidation of law enforcement services or development of joint medical facilities. Whatever its purpose or scope and range of activities, a council of governments (COG) is simply an agreement signed by elected officials of two or more units of government with legislative powers to do something cooperatively. Other units of government, (those without legislative powers, such as soil conservation districts), may also be included.

There are about 560 regional councils of government in the United States. These councils involve about 80 percent of the population and 55 percent of the land area. About 55 percent are in metropolitan areas and 45 percent in non-metropolitan or rural areas.

Only 10 percent of the existing COGs were formed before 1960 and 60 percent have been created since 1966. The typical budget of a COG, once it is organized and funded, is between \$50,000 and \$200,000. The money is generally spent for planning and development in the area encompassed by the agreement. County commissioners, city councils, soil conservation districts, junior college districts, road districts, school districts and other geo-political subdivisions are the members of these COGs.

WHAT DOES A COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS DO?

A basic COG program falls into the following framework:

—Provides regional programs to better meet the needs of people at the local level.

—Provides regional planning and management in specific functional areas, such as air pollution control, solid waste disposal, transportation, law enforcement, water quality, land use, manpower and economic development.

—Relates functional planning in these areas to each other and to overall planning for the multi-county area or region.

—Establishes goals and priorities for the region on matters of concern to more than one locality.

—Serves as a forum for communication among local governments.

—Gives technical assistance and joint services for local governments, providing economies of scale (broadening

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the base of support) when carried out on a regional basis. Cooperative purchasing, regional training programs, regional jails, and area-wide solid waste disposal systems are all projects to save the taxpayers money when performed on a larger scale.

—Coordinates and reviews local government activities within the region to avoid duplication and overlap. It is poor economy for two adjacent jurisdictions to build new facilities when they can pool their resources and have a better facility at a lower cost to each.

CAN WE HAVE THESE IN IDAHO?

Titles 50 and 67 of the Idaho Code contain provisions for establishment and operation of COGs in the State of Idaho. In fact, we have two COGs now and three more are in various stages of formation.

The Clearwater Economic Development District, encompassing Latah, Idaho, Clearwater, Lewis and Nez Perce Counties, is a COG. The North Idaho Resource Conservation and Development Project, encompassing Latah, Benewah and Kootenai Counties, is a COG. The Southern Idaho Planning and Development Association is in advanced stages of organization and includes Twin Falls, Jerome, Cassia and Minidoka Counties and the incorporated municipalities within them. The Wood River Resources Area Association has developed legal capacity by converting from an informal organization to a COG. The Ida-Ore Economic Development District, including six counties in southwestern Idaho, Malheur County, Oregon, and the city of Burns, Oregon, is in an advanced stage of organization and has been funded by the Economic Development Administration.

WHO ORGANIZES THEM?

COGs are organized by local citizens who are interested in economy in government and provision of adequate community services, and who believe that these are things local people should do for themselves. Guidance and some technical assistance in organizing are available through the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Idaho or the State Planning and Community Affairs Agency. This assistance can be obtained by contacting the local office of the Cooperative Extension Service (county agent) or by writing to: State Planning and Community Affairs, Statehouse, Boise, Idaho 83701.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST AND WHO PAYS?

A COG can be organized and serviced strictly by volunteers, with the only cash cost for such things as

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postage and travel to meetings, which would have to be borne by the members. Once a COG is formed, the possibilities for what it can do for the member governments is usually recognized in very short time.

It is usually advisable for member governments to employ some technical assistance and/or a director for the COG. There are federal grants to assist in support of the COG for a limited period. After this period, the local governments will have to support the COG if it is deemed desirable to continue.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a grant program for comprehensive planning, which can be used by a COG; this program in Idaho is administered by State Planning and Community Affairs. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has some grant programs. The Farmers Home Administration (FHA) through the Idaho Water Resources Board, has grants available for sewer and water planning. FHA also has some funds available for construction of community facilities and housing, after plans are made. The Economic Development Administration has a grant program for areas that qualify for the designation, "economic development district". The Soil Conservation Service, USDA, has a resource conservation and development program for areas that qualify. For information about these and other sources of federal grants, contact State Planning and Community Affairs.

WHO SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A MULTI-COUNTY COG?

The geographical area in a multi-county COG should be one in which the residents are economically and socially related. They might also have a common natural resource base (such as a river drainage). The relationships between where people live and where they work, where they shop and where they play, where they consider their political friends and their political enemies to be, and where the young go first to find a job when they leave home, and what creates wealth in the community are indicators of the geographical limits of a viable multi-county area that could form an effective COG.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF A COG?

Council of Governments is advisory in nature and does not have powers of taxation, regulation or direct operation of public facilities. Its purpose is to provide a forum for dialogue and joint decision-making within a regional or multi-county context. COGs have no power to implement these decisions. The elected representatives of member local governments must make the decisions. Only the member governments can implement what the COG plans. The COG can provide technical assistance to show local elected representatives how to implement the decisions that the members of the COG make.

WHO REPRESENTS LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ON THE COG?

The members of the Council of Governments are elected public officials from the member local governments, plus any others the members wish to include. In order to meet organizational requirements for most federal programs, at least 60 percent of the people on the governing body for the COG must be elected public

officials.

We also must remember that a COG has no resources or powers to implement the multi-county plans it develops. Therefore, if these plans are to be implemented, the local governments will have to do it and they must be in on the decision-making process. It is probable, therefore, that a COG will not function effectively unless elected public officials (county commissioners, city councilmen and mayors), who must finally take action to implement plans, are the ones who are involved in making the decisions. They must form the membership of the COG.

WHY SHOULD WE BE INTERESTED IN COGS?

The average person doesn't care when he turns on his water faucet whether the water comes from a water district, a city, a private company, or whatever; he wants water efficiently and at low cost. He doesn't care, if he lives in town, where the garbage truck takes his solid waste for disposal; he wants garbage picked up regularly, efficiently and at low cost and he wants it disposed of without excessive pollution of his environment. He doesn't usually care when he needs assistance from law enforcement officers whether they are in the uniform of the sheriff's office or the city police department; he wants assistance fast, efficiently and at low cost. The average person who needs hospitalization doesn't care who owns the hospital; he wants the best possible service at the least possible cost. He doesn't care who assesses his property so long as assessment is fair and equitable.

We're in a period that requires change and innovation. The size of the community in which we operate has changed. We no longer are confined to the city limits of the town we live in—we live in one town and work in another, play in yet another and seek goods and services in possibly a fourth. We use the facilities of several towns or cities without regard as to whether or not the city where we shop or work is under the same jurisdiction as the city or county where we live.

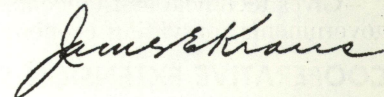
We support much duplication of community facilities and services. Taxes are going up and up. Yet there is a tendency for each governmental unit to wish to retain each of its traditional functions, no matter how duplicative or expensive.

We must come up with recommendations and workable plans for change, consolidation, and improvement in efficiency, if at all possible. This is possible only by considering the total community—the several towns and counties we use—and by making this total community serve the total needs of its residents and taxpayers.

A COG is not a supergovernment. Rather than a supergovernment, it is a rational and earnest attempt on the part of existing local governments to solve the problems brought about by technological change.

COGs are for people who must bear the burden of government. Is your government in a COG? Should it be?

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