

Agenda Item 6 a – Member Generated Agenda Items

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MUNICIPAL-NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS: THE FUTURE IS NOW

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Contemplating entering into partnership with a government body is something that can send shivers down the spines of executive-level staff at nonprofits and charities. Fear of being controlled by bureaucrats, losing your organization’s sense of mission, and being beholden to those less able to comprehend the realities of a particular client base being served are all potential pitfalls.

But sometimes appearances can be deceiving and approaching a government – municipalities for the purpose of this article – can result in pleasant surprises, if you do it right, that is.

“Y” you should consider it

The [National Capital YMCA-YWCA](#) in Ottawa is a case in point. Though Y’s across the country have the advantage of a long history of serving communities with proven results, the fact remains they too have to rely on essential partnering with their municipalities to expand and improve on their operations.

Tony Pacheco, president and CEO of the [Metro Central Y](#), told **CharityVillage** that it’s crucial for sector organizations to understand there are tangible benefits to engaging with municipalities. For his organization, the advantages come in two main areas: first, on a programmatic level and second, with respect to facilities.

“It’s a mutual benefit. First and foremost, we’re able to take our mission into new communities where it would not be possible without the partnership of the municipality because of the cost of delivering the facilities,” he said. “From programmatic and capital points of view [the city’s] investment in us also allows us to develop programs in order to drive the mission. [In one municipality] we were able to build about a \$12 to \$14-million facility. Our part in that is we equip that facility and operate it. The benefit to the city is that it gets a proven, effective operator in that community. Our benefits are numerous: we get into the community and expand on our mission, which is what we’re really all about as a charity. It’s more about mission than financial bottom line.”

Over in Toronto, **Christopher Hilkene**, president of Ontario’s [Clean Water Foundation](#), concurs with Pacheco on the benefits of hooking up with a city and all it can provide. With respect to the [City of Toronto](#)’s funding of his foundation’s environmental publication, *Water Smart*, Hilkene guesses that

without the money from the city, his message would have much less reach. “Toronto’s financial contribution to our work is modest in terms of our overall budget, but their contribution to our actual publishing budget is significant. I think it would be terribly unlikely that we would produce the publications we do without their support,” Hilkene said. “We certainly would not have the reach or impact that we do without their involvement. The city has been willing to give us money for things that are often more difficult to get due to competition. As a result we’ve been able to reach mass audiences well beyond the city of Toronto because of that budget. A lot of other municipalities will make use of our publications and we can provide them for free. So the City of Toronto may pay us, but other regions like Peel and Durham will ask us for thousands of copies. We had a call from Medicine Hat, Alberta, not too long ago, wondering if we could rebrand the publication for them.”

For their part, municipalities increasingly view these partnerships as a winning formula as well.

The city view

Though the [Association of Municipalities of Ontario \(AMO\)](#) was unable to answer specifically about how its members viewed municipal-nonprofit scenarios – the subject falls outside the AMO’s mandate and is not an area it “has expertise in,” according to an association spokesperson – it’s clear from the above examples that cities in the province, and indeed across the country, have a stake in fostering these relationships as well.

Andrew Pask, social policy analyst with the [City of Vancouver’s Social Policy and Research Department](#), said that his municipality takes municipal-nonprofit initiatives very seriously. While Vancouver maintains a number of granting mechanisms for nonprofits and charities to access, it also wants to ensure a continuity of coverage for its citizens.

“In addition to grants, the city regularly partners with nonprofits in the course of dealing with priority social issues, sometimes through ‘policy tables’ (e.g. seniors’ issues), sometimes through collaborative events (e.g. National Aboriginal Day), sometimes through project-specific RFPs (e.g. city hall’s community garden is managed by an NPO), sometimes through advisory committees (the city has a number of arms-length advisory bodies and members of these often have organizational affiliations), and so on. The city also supports some social enterprise activities, including neighbourhood sanitation projects [and] the provision of space in city buildings for nonprofit use,” among others, Pask said.

Jenny Kain, a policy and research planner with the [City of Edmonton](#), also stressed her municipality’s priority to engage with nonprofits and partner with them on multiple services and projects. “In looking to further the quality of life for our community...we’re sometimes a partner, other times a collaborator,” she said. “We administer funding to nonprofits and in 2008 launched the [Edmonton Social Enterprise Fund](#),” which has a goal of “securing a capital pool” to invest in charities and nonprofits.

Kain added that the City of Edmonton, among other nonprofit topics, is also now updating its policy C187 – last updated in 1981 – about entering into agreements with nonprofits who vie to oversee “the development, operation or maintenance of parkland and recreation facilities.”

But how do sector organizations go about approaching the cities?

You can’t fight city hall, and you needn’t

Pask suggests that nonprofits and charities wanting to schedule a meeting with municipal staff need to understand the lay of the land before making a pass at city hall. And if you're walking in blind, it's likely you won't be meeting anyone in person. He has some advice for executive directors and heads of organizations thinking about this move.

"Since there are often a number of organizations working on a particular issue, it's always helpful for newer nonprofits to do an environmental scan to determine whether or not there are any other projects of a similar nature currently being undertaken. In this regard, the city encourages collaboration between different agencies," Pask said. "Because of limited resources, it's often difficult for the city to assist with pre-planning work on projects. So if a nonprofit is in the early stages of developing a proposal it should consider formalizing the project first so that it is able to present something that is well thought out, reflective of a good assessment of the issue at hand, key actors and stakeholders, etc."

Which isn't to say that the city can't help with "brainstorming ideas," he said. But nonprofit organization heads should respect that city staff's time for "that sort of thing can be at a premium. Best to do your homework first."

Finally, Pask counsels organizations to review their municipalities' websites to determine which department and/or staff person would be "most relevant" to the project in question. "If that doesn't work, the city's 311 operators should be able to assist."

Both Hilkene and Pacheco view it much the same way and advise their colleagues and readers to make sure they have their ducks in a row before any attempt at enlisting a municipality's financial help is made.

Hilkene lays out a four-point checklist to review before meeting with city officials.

1. Know who you're going to speak with, what they do, and what they're interested in.
2. Go in genuinely wanting to help the city deliver on their objectives through the work that you do. "I don't find going in and telling [municipalities] what you do and what you want to be effective strategy. If you go in and say, 'Our understanding is that this is what you're trying to accomplish and this is where we feel we can make a contribution,' and quantify it – that's a valuable provision."
3. Have some idea of how what you'll be doing is going to impact the municipality.
4. For municipalities and all government levels, it's critical not to go in wearing your typical "environmental hat" of wanting to be critical and tell them how to do it better. "You may still tell them that, but it's about how to deliver that message. Usually [talking about] efficiency and effectiveness is the context I come and talk to people on."

Additionally, he insists patience and hard work go a long way to cementing a successful relationship with a city, especially if there's already synergy between your organization and theirs.

Follow the synergizer bunny

According to Hilkene, the Clean Water Foundation is "about outreach and engagement. We target citizens and consumers – two different people with the same bodies. In going after consumers, we look at them to make choices in terms of smarter product purchases. The City of Toronto, when we first got

together (in 2004), was developing rebates for certain water-efficient products and technologies for the home. So it just made very good sense for us. They were taking a market approach to making efficient technologies comparable in price, and in our consumer engagement that's what we're trying to [advocate], to make the environmentally friendly choice an easier option. So it made a lot of sense to be working with the city, because they were in the same mind-state.

"We took a social marketing approach. And we were talking about a lot of things with the city to try and measure success. But it became quite clear in those early discussions that there was this synergy in terms of 'how do we get to the market and get people to purchase these products?' That's been the core of our relationship."

After a couple of years, Hilkene said the relationship with the city had "fully blossomed" and it's now at the point where his organization and the municipality can "anticipate each other's needs, and I find I don't need to always be there in person and do that 'rapport' stuff anymore."

For his part, Pacheco still likes to make the rounds and maintain a personal touch with staffers in Ottawa, although he said he does delegate this duty to some of his staff, who liaise with different departmental staff than he does in the capital region.

"We've identified the municipality as a strategic partner in our mission going forward," Pacheco said, adding that his advice to nonprofits wanting to approach municipalities begins with one word: research.

"It all starts with research, research and more research at the beginning. That includes knowing [your] partner well, their mission and your mission, and what the overlap is. That's first – understanding that it's a mutual [deal], how you help the municipalities achieve their mission and how they can help you achieve yours," he said. "Once that's done, it's about relationships. It's about meeting with [municipal] staff, first and foremost. Once there's an understanding at that level, it gives you an opportunity to talk to the politicians about your mission, explain how we can better serve communities together, and how we can look at projects that come out of it. It may simply be an alliance around community issues out there, or a programmatic partnership that has tangible benefits for both partners. Or it can be an infrastructure project. There's a variety [of results] and they all have value."

Get informed, get results

Though not an official part of his role or mandate, Pacheco said he is always open to giving advice to colleagues in the sector on how best to get the most out of municipal partnerships.

"Like all charities, we share. So if our partners ask for advice, we provide advice. But we don't package it or solicit it. There are many Y's and charities that have been successful [at partnering with municipalities] and I believe they would share advice. That's the spirit you'll generally find in the sector. That's what makes the third sector so neat, I think," he said. "It behooves a charity to present something [to the municipality] that has mutual benefit in it. Once the municipalities see the benefit, they're wonderful partners."

Just make sure you do a good job once you have the city's ear...or more importantly, its cash, Hilkene advises.

"It does take time to build a relationship and build trust in your capabilities and [prove] you're an honest broker."

Checklist for meeting with city officials

1. Know who you're going to speak with, what they do, and what they're interested in.
2. Go in genuinely wanting to help the city deliver on their objectives through the work that you do.
3. Have some idea of how what you'll be doing is going to impact the municipality.
4. For municipalities and all government levels, it's critical not to go in wearing your typical "environmental hat" of wanting to be critical and tell them how to do it better.

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