Transforming the Role of Government: Navigating the New Frontier

Don Bohn, Assistant County Administrator
Sia Lindstrom, Senior Deputy County Administrator
Washington County, Oregon
155 N First Ave, Suite 300, MS 21
Hillsboro, OR 97124
(503) 846-8685
Contact: sia_lindstrom@co.washington.or.us

Abstract
Washington County forms the western portion of the Portland metropolitan area. Its developed regions are home to traditional suburban and new mixed-use neighborhoods, electronic leaders such as Intel and Tektronix, and the world headquarters for both Nike and Columbia Sportswear. Outside the nationally acclaimed urban growth boundary, the county transitions to nurseries, wineries, farmland, and miles of evergreen forest that blanket the eastern flank of the Coast Range Mountains.

Three decades of explosive population and employment growth has prompted various sectors of the community to focus much of their energy and resources on meeting physical infrastructure needs. New and expanded roads, bridges, schools, churches, high-tech manufacturing facilities, hospitals, and other “brick-and-mortar” projects have helped define this increasingly urban community. At the same time, organizations in the community – local governments, nonprofits, and civic and religious organizations – have all strived to cultivate the civic infrastructure necessary to keep pace with the challenges of an infant urban area.

The County’s response to this explosive growth provides a multi-faceted case study of a mission-driven local government, an innovative community planning process, and an evolving commitment to “do what would otherwise not get done” through practical and outcome-oriented partnerships across sectors. The transformation of the County is reflected in three distinct stages:

- Stage 1 (1980s and 1990s): The County Strategic Plan – becoming a mission-driven organization
- Stage 2 (2000-2002): The VisionWest Project – community planning and issue identification
- Stage 3 (2002-present): The Vision Action Network – creating a permanent nonprofit table for collaborative, community-based solutions

The evolving role of the County has been gradual and spurred by the following recognition over time:

1. Local government must be mission-driven and focused on efficient and effective provision of services. We must maintain constant vigilance to remain relevant and credible to our communities.
2. Our mission provides clear boundaries on the role we can play in the community. We acknowledge that community needs exceed our organizational capacity to respond. As a result, there are issues and needs that fall outside our purview. This creates a void in the service continuum.
3. However, our commitment to our community compels us to navigate the service voids and participate in community planning, problem-solving, and shared leadership. We refer to this as the “new frontier.”

4. In navigating the new frontier, we value relationships among sector leaders and the creation of a collaborative table to prioritize and address community needs together.

5. “Status quo” is not good enough. We must work differently, through shared leadership across sectors, in order to navigate the new frontier effectively.

This paper outlines all three stages of the County’s transformation, and ends with a few thoughts about what could (and perhaps must) come next.

**Stage 1 (1980s and 1990s): County 2000 Strategic Plan**

In 1983, the Board of Commissioners recognized that Washington County government was facing a number of serious challenges. The overarching challenge was to preserve and build upon the County’s quality of life while responding to phenomenal population growth and increasing demand for County services.

Rapid population growth led to an accelerated demand for County services at a level that would be more typically provided by and expected from cities—not a “traditional” county government. At the same time, due to restrictions placed on traditional county funding sources, it was apparent that limited resources would be available to meet this increased demand.

The County Strategic Plan clarified the County’s role as primarily a countywide service provider. In addition, it specified how local government services would be funded and introduced the notion that local discretionary resources would not be used to augment state, federal, or other special fund programs. For the first time, it created clear and concise service and financing boundaries.

The Strategic Plan also stated that the County must rely on the participation of other governments, nonprofits, businesses, civic and religious organizations, individuals and families to provide the range of services required in a healthy community. The Strategic Plan recognized that no single institution would be able to handle any of these on its own, and that the community’s challenges were surmountable only through strategic partnerships that involve all sectors of the community. The County became an efficient and outcome-driven service provider that was ready to navigate the new frontier of community needs, but it could only navigate that new frontier effectively in partnership with others.

Recognizing this web of community services and resources, the Strategic Plan defined the County’s role, as appropriate, as provider, partner, or supporter:

- **Provider** – Certain countywide programs and services are determined to be most appropriately provided by the County or by contractors who provide those services via decisions made by the Board of Commissioners.
- **Partner** – Certain key functions, while not found to be a core function of County government, may by virtue of their proximity to the mission of the County, be performed in partnership with other organizations. Washington County’s collaborative role would be performed via financial support, technical assistance, coordination, or the creation of a new organization. Two criteria that would be applied in the decision to provide support are: 1) the effort would
complement the County’s mission; and 2) there would be a significant rate of return on the investment to the target group.

♦ Supporter – Absent the assumption of either a direct service or partnership role, a major function the County can perform is that of supporting activities consistent with the development of the County’s vision and mission statements. As the Board of Commissioners is the only general-purpose political body with geographic perspective over the entire County, it has addressed, and will continue to elevate, critical issues that require resolution before the County’s vision can be achieved. This role does not assume the County has the final word in setting a community-wide agenda. However, the organization, via broad perspective, does have the capacity to assist in that effort.

This clarity about the County’s role helped lay the groundwork for a next stage of civic engagement, where County leadership moved its focus from organizational strategic planning to a broad-based community visioning process. For County staff, as discussed by Dr. Herbert Brooks in “Responding to the Public Leadership Challenge” (2008), the task was “…to move beyond new public management and more towards new public leadership (NPL)” that emphasizes the collective nature of such leadership (p. 1-2). It reflects a move from purely vertical leadership within an organization to more horizontal leadership across organizations and sectors.

Stage 2 (2000-2002): The VisionWest Project
Initially developed in the mid-1980s, the Strategic Plan had guided many of the organization’s policy and financial decisions. With the region’s economy and population growing faster than the national average, in 2000 the Washington County Board of Commissioners asked that a different approach be taken in updating the County’s Strategic Plan. Before considering how it should evolve as an organization, the Board reasoned that the County needed to better understand how its community had transformed.

In response, the Board of Commissioners launched the VisionWest project, a countywide effort that sought to identify, better understand, and develop broad-based strategies around community issues.

Community members representing business, non-profit, faith groups, public organizations, and citizen advocate groups participated in the VisionWest issue development process. Beginning with more than 200 small group presentations that involved 1,400 individuals ranging from corporate CEOs to newly-arrived farm workers, the identification phase highlighted eight issues of broad community concern (basic needs, environment, housing, children and families, education, aging and disabilities, behavioral health care, and primary health care). Next, an additional 400 volunteers stepped forward and formed Issue Teams that completed four months of rigorous analysis and strategy development. Their recommendations included strategies that called for greater collaboration among the community’s many well-developed sectors. The Issue Teams asserted that the capacity of these “silos of excellence” could be enhanced dramatically through greater partnership, not just within sectors, but across them as well.

However, the demands felt by Washington County’s many mission-driven organizations, as well as the realities of existing relationships and political dynamics, made it impractical for any one of them to assume the leadership role in the push for more productive partnerships. Enhanced collaboration was critical to Washington County’s future, but it lacked a champion.
Stage 3 (2002-present): Creation of the Vision Action Network

Early in the VisionWest process, leaders recognized the need for a vehicle distinct from the County to carry on the work of VisionWest—a forum for the community to talk across jurisdictions, across sectors, and across issues, to discuss, strategize and mobilize around community priorities. A resonating theme from most of the nearly 2,000 county residents and institutions that participated in VisionWest is that collaborative planning and mobilization should not be a one-time event. Instead, it should be part of a new, on-going way of doing business in Washington County.

Vision Action Network emerged from a sense among key leaders in our community that we need to change our established ways of doing things. There was a growing consensus that collaboration is a critical community resource— that our ability to forge new working relationships between all kinds of organizations and citizens would determine our success with the challenges that lie within the frontier.

In 2002, the Vision Action Network (VAN) was incorporated in response to this need. VAN is a private non-profit organization committed to the promotion and support of collaborative community-based problem solving in Washington County. Its mission is to identify critical issues and support collaborative community-based solutions. Its vision is a united Washington County community where all people live and work in healthy, vibrant, sustainable communities. VAN achieves this vision by engaging in a three-part process:

1. **Listen** – VAN assesses community needs and serves as an information resource for important community issues.
2. **Focus** – VAN prioritizes practical strategies that respond to established community needs.
3. **Act** – VAN is a catalyst for community initiatives that enhance the quality of life in our community.

All projects that the Vision Action Network is involved with—either as an initiator, facilitator, partner, or supporter—are eventually transitioned to a sustainable community solution. Projects are sustained in one of three ways:

1. By supporting the mission of an existing organization
2. Through a formal partnership among several organizations
3. Through the creation of a new organization

Now nine years into its tenure, VAN continues to be a guiding force for concrete problem-focused partnerships.

**Example 1: Creation of the Inter-religious Action Network**

One example of an early VAN initiative is the Inter-religious Action Network (IAN). Created in 2001, IAN builds on the community’s religious diversity to create relationships and provide leadership that improves quality of life across the county.

A guiding premise of the VAN from the beginning was that it should represent the full diversity of Washington County. Finding leaders who were “plugged in” proved relatively easy for the business, non-profit, and public sectors. By contrast, networked faith leaders were elusive. During the VisionWest process, County staff quickly discovered there was no single group that spanned the spiritual breadth of Washington County. “The faith community here was largely
absent from any sustained coordination with the public or non-profit sectors,” explained Charlie Cameron, county administrator at that time. “Although the different groups were doing important work on tough issues, there was no network for them to use to communicate with each other and with the other sectors in the county.”

County staff first reached out individually to faith leaders, then hosted an introductory breakfast to allow these leaders to get acquainted with one another and learn more about the VAN. After discovering much common ground with one another and, surprisingly, with the County, many faith leaders agreed to join a committee to explore the County’s offer to help create an organizing structure.

One year after its first meeting with Washington County staff, the Inter-religious Action Network had become a recognized part of the civic landscape of Washington County. The group tries to stay away from the specifics of their religions, instead focusing on their common goal of promoting cross-faith understanding and bettering their whole community. Over the past decade, IAN initiatives have addressed a wide range of common interests, including homeless, affordable housing, hunger, human rights, aging, and the environment. Through popular annual events such as the cross-sector Faith Forum and the Mayors’ Interfaith Breakfast, IAN continues to build its network and take on community-wide issues that affect overall quality of life.

**Example 2: Health Care Access – Essential Health Clinic and Project Access**

The Essential Health Clinic (EHC) opened in 2001. It was created during the early days of the VisionWest process when a variety of nonprofit, public, private, and faith-based organizations pooled their resources to address a critical community need. EHC was the first-ever free primary care facility for the county’s uninsured working poor. Through the service of volunteer health care providers, together with inkind support for much of its lab services and pharmaceuticals, EHC offers free urgent medical care to low-income uninsured persons and is the point-of-entry to social services and continuing care for those with special or chronic health conditions. EHC’s work is made possible through continued collaboration and support from community, government, faith, and business partners with the goal of providing medical care for those with the fewest resources and greatest barriers to care.

In 2005 and 2006, VAN brought together leaders from public, private, and nonprofit sectors to continue discussions about the difficult issues related to health care access. An extensive planning process led to the creation of Project Access Washington County, which was based on a nationally-replicated model. Originally housed at the Essential Health Clinic as a local program, Project Access is now a regional nonprofit organization that coordinates a network of health care providers, making it easier for providers and health systems to donate care in support of our community’s low-income uninsured. Both EHC and Project Access have become important components of the continuum of health care safety net services for the uninsured in Washington County.

**Example 3: Affordable Housing – Creation of the Community Housing Fund**

One of the eight Issue Teams from the VisionWest process dealt with affordable housing issues. The Team identified the creation of additional financial resources as the single most important strategy in order to increase affordable housing stock. As a direct result of the VisionWest planning process, Washington County established the Community Housing Fund as a nonprofit corporation in 2003. The Fund’s goal is to increase the number of affordable housing units
available to low-income residents by providing early pre-development money to nonprofit developers who are renovating or building affordable housing communities. Through contributions from business, government, nonprofit, foundation, and faith partners, over $1 million has been raised since the Fund’s inception. The Fund extends both grants and loans to help nonprofit groups create or rehabilitate housing. These grants and loans have leveraged, on average, seven to eight times the investments made by the Fund.

With the economic downturn that began in 2008-09 and continues today, cross-sector collaborative solutions have become more difficult to create and sustain. Service organizations face escalating community needs and increasingly scarce resources. They are forced to turn inward as they confront their own survival, which means they have far less capacity to participate in externally-focused collaborative initiatives and partnerships.

In response, VAN began to focus on collaborative responses that met the changing needs of the social service providers and were relevant in today’s context: economic security for the growing number of community members with basic needs, increased revenue generation for service providers who meet those needs, and reduced competition for increasingly scarce resources among service organizations.

Although VAN recently ramped up its response in this area, economic security has been a theme since VAN’s inception – “basic needs” was one of the eight critical issues identified through the original VisionWest process. This means that VAN was not starting from scratch, but instead could build on a foundation of cross-sector collaborative networks. In 2005 and again in 2006, VAN had convened a summit for business leaders to share concrete strategies that support lower-wage workers. One outcome was the creation, in partnership with Community Action, of an Employer Resource Guide that provides a list of public resources on a variety of basic needs. Now updated annually, the current Guide includes a section on ways that employers can help their employees give back to their communities.

Then in 2009, VAN convened a committee of key leaders from across all sectors to develop a community agenda that would more effectively address basic needs and economic security in Washington County. The group identified several strategies to improve the basic needs infrastructure:

- Coordination of workforce development efforts.
- Increased public awareness of 2-1-1 Info, the regional information and referral resource for social services.
- Support of non-profit capacity for the sudden influx of volunteers in the wake of the economic downturn, many of whom were out-of-work people seeking to keep their skills fresh.

In 2011, VAN and Community Action convened an expanded group of community leaders interested in economic security issues. Made up of leadership from non-profit, faith, government, and business sectors, the group recognized the need to improve community support for and valuing of its social service infrastructure. They educated themselves on best-practice communications and marketing efforts at the state and national levels in order to address this need.
Over the past several months, the new group re-convened itself as *Washington County Thrives* and adopted a common mission statement. The group’s early agenda includes a strong focus on local property tax levy support for social services. As one of their first activities, the group is sponsoring a two-day training session on how to implement effective values-based communication in support of community services, and they have invited other community leaders to attend.

As a new initiative, and with a much stronger communications and advocacy role than seen in previous collaborative efforts, the impact of *Washington County Thrives* will prove itself over time.

**Today (2011): What’s Next?**
The economic downturn, with associated community expectation that government become smaller and more efficient, could push us away from a shared public leadership model and back toward a more internally-focused public management model. Yet as public sector leaders, while we must maintain strong public management skills, we must also continue to integrate a shared leadership style that functions effectively in a cross-sector context. Navigating the new frontier can only succeed if leaders from all sectors of the community – government, nonprofit, business, faith, and education – work together toward common goals in support of our community’s future. The work is not quick or easy, but much relies upon our efforts.

**References:**