

# Strategic Issue: Unincorporated Services

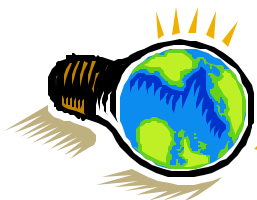


## Trends Impacting Unincorporated Services

Unincorporated residents comprise nearly a third of the County's total population. The current population of unincorporated St. Louis County is 330,000. On that basis, St. Louis County government is the principal local service provider for the second largest "city" in the region and the third largest in Missouri.

St. Louis County government delivers basic services to unincorporated areas, including police protection, street maintenance, snow removal, code enforcement, and zoning. Fluctuations in the unincorporated population due to annexations and incorporations impact the revenue available to deliver quality services to residents. In some unincorporated neighborhoods, residents want increased services, such as improved trash collection and curb-side recycling.

Over the years, municipalities have annexed areas of unincorporated St. Louis County. A majority of the annexed areas have included commercial and industrial development, while excluding older residential subdivisions. Consequently, unincorporated areas have a high ratio of older housing, with more than half constructed prior to 1970. Aging neighborhoods often require higher levels of service, including property maintenance programs and increased code enforcement.



## Perspectives on Unincorporated Services

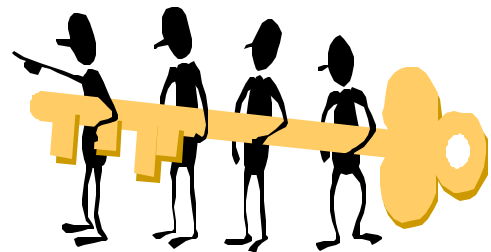
County officials tend to look at the issue of unincorporated services from a fiscal standpoint. The ability to fund and deliver quality services is threatened by annexations and incorporations.

According to a telephone survey, only 36% of unincorporated residents want all of unincorporated St. Louis County to become part of a municipality compared to half of incorporated residents.

In an evaluation of public services, unincorporated residents indicated in the opinion poll that they were least satisfied with curbside recycling.

The publication of a County newsletter was favored by 72% of unincorporated residents surveyed.

## Key Themes from Unincorporated Services



- Unincorporated residents are generally satisfied with the services they receive from St. Louis County government. However, the ways the County tracks its performance can be enhanced to determine the effectiveness of services delivered and to make improvements as needed.
- The dynamic nature of funding sources creates a greater need for St. Louis County government to look beyond traditional finance measures. A new budgeting practice can also gauge the quality of services delivered to residents.
- Communication between St. Louis County government and its residents can be improved. St. Louis County government can maximize its use of media and technology to not only inform citizens, but

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# Introduction: The Case for Delivering Unincorporated Services

Providing services for the common good is one of the core reasons for government to exist. People rightfully have needs and expectations to which government should be sensitive. St. Louis County must pro-actively deal with the service delivery issues, so that problems can be alleviated before they become too difficult to change efficiently and effectively.

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The responsibility for providing local government services in St. Louis County is divided among an excess of 150 political jurisdictions. Service delivery requires coordination with more than 90 municipalities, numerous special districts, and many other government entities on the state and federal level.

St. Louis County simultaneously performs like two separate governments. First, St. Louis County must provide a certain minimum level of service based upon state mandates of all counties. Second, St. Louis County's first-class home-rule charter status adds a greater degree of services needing to be delivered, especially to citizens of unincorporated areas. For example, St. Louis County government provides countywide services such as property assessment and voter registration, and provides municipal services, such as zoning and police protection, to its unincorporated areas.

The St. Louis County five-year strategic plan from 1990-1995 mentioned this "dual role" of St. Louis County government. It stated "how best to ensure consistent services among the County's many communities is a highly charged question without easy answers.... The dual role of St. Louis County government as a provider of municipal-type services, as well as provider of countywide and specialized services is another issue that continues to be studied." Now in 1999, it remains a central issue in St. Louis County government.

For the purposes of this issue paper, the following definitions of terms are offered for clarification:

## ! **County**

A "county" is set up by the state on the state's own initiative to serve as a kind of political outpost of state

government, applying state laws and administering state business at the local level (including law and order, public health, record keeping). Counties are not created at the behest of their inhabitants nor are they intended to serve citizens' unique governmental needs. (Lorch, *State and Local Government*, 238)

## ! **Municipality**

A "municipality" or "city" is a municipal corporation that is chartered by the state at the petition of a group of people, much the same way a private corporation is chartered. Municipalities are created for a variety of reasons, but usually it is to exercise some level of control over decision-making important to a cluster of residents. (Lorch, *State and Local Government*, 267)

The major premise of this issue paper is to examine the three most critical future challenges of unincorporated service delivery: fragmentation, communication, and financing in order to ensure quality service provision for the unincorporated residents of St. Louis County in the future. With respect to the County's service delivery systems, do the current processes of service delivery meet the needs of countywide residents, especially in the unincorporated areas of St. Louis County? Are there services that St. Louis county should be providing, or conversely, should not be providing? It is these important questions that will be explored and analyzed in this issue paper.

# Background Data and Trends

Service delivery in St. Louis County has been complicated by the complexity of overlapping jurisdictions and the near-impossibility of system-wide communication. Analyzing the County's ability to finance government services becomes challenging because of the complicated nature of the system. Annexations and incorporations displace populations who would normally receive municipal-type services from the County. Another factor is that municipalities also contract with St. Louis County for services, thereby making tracking service delivery costs on a unit basis even more confusing.

## Service Delivery Fragmentation

Fragmentation has been an issue challenging St. Louis County for many years. St. Louis County is divided among more than 200 political jurisdictions, including St. Louis County, 91 municipalities, 23 schools districts, and 43 municipal fire departments and fire protection districts. To further complicate the situation, there are library districts, police jurisdictions, and special taxing districts.

The 91 municipalities range in population from 11 residents in the Village of Champ to 54,000 residents in the City of Florissant. Nearly 60% of the County's municipalities are small with populations of less than 5,000. Some of the larger municipalities provide a complete line of services to their residents, including police protection, trash removal, street maintenance, parks, and community centers. Many of the smaller municipalities provide minimal services to their residents and rely on other municipalities or St. Louis County for the provision of local services. The system of service delivery in a fragmented jurisdiction makes both budgeting and communication about county services challenging.

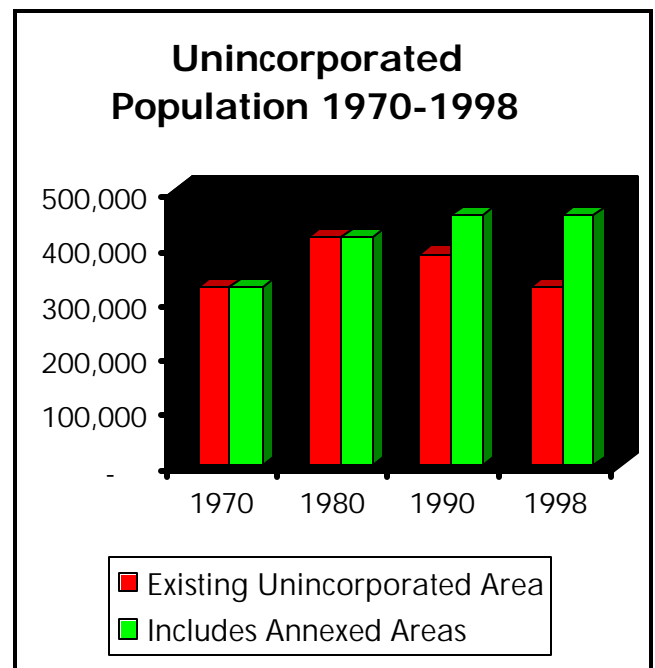
## The Impact of Annexations and Incorporations

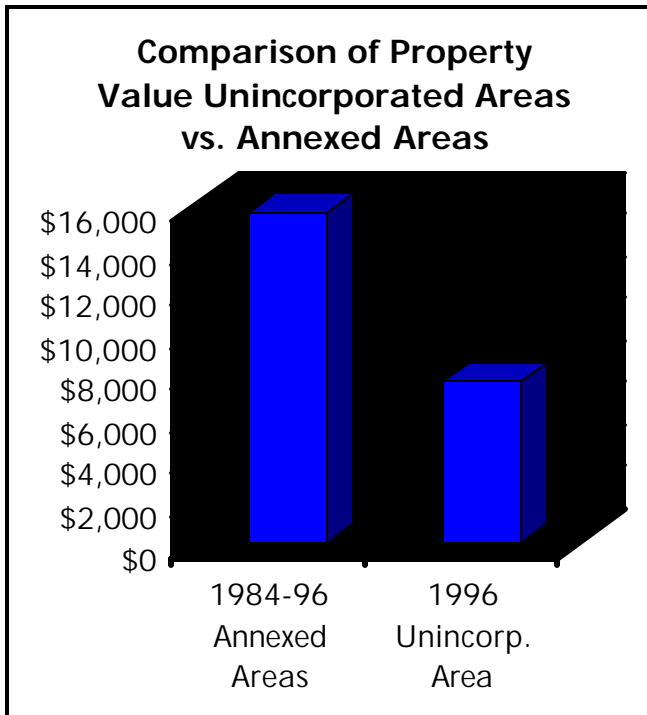
Nearly 60% of County residents live in municipalities and the rest live in unincorporated areas. Annexations and incorporations have expanded the population and size of some of the municipalities, while reducing the area and population of unincorporated St. Louis County. Today there are approximately 330,000

people living in unincorporated St. Louis County that depend upon the County for municipal-type services. On that basis, St. Louis County government is the principal local service provider for the second largest "city" in the region and the third largest in Missouri.

In the last decade, however, there has been a dramatic shift in the number of residents living in unincorporated areas, over a 20% decline. This change in population also represents a change in the tax base that pays for services. The property value in areas that have been annexed since 1984 to 1996 is approximately twice the amount as the unincorporated area in 1996.

The financial impact of these boundary changes has not been felt in the 1990's because of the following reasons:





Source: St. Louis County

- ! Overall growth of the economy
- ! Increases in state and federal funding
- ! Increased contract services
- ! Sales tax changes

However, it must be recognized that the favorable financial climate of the 1990's will not last forever. An economic downturn could impact future service delivery.

## Contracting Services

Not only does St. Louis County maintain the duality of its roles as county-wide and municipal service provider, it also enters into contracts with municipalities, school districts, and fire protection districts to deliver services, namely police protection and code enforcement. The St. Louis County Police Department offers an array of services ranging from patrol to having School Resource Officers present in the school system. Municipal and fire district contracts for services are complex, due to the variety of inspection services that may have exclusions, such as for commercial property only.

## ST. LOUIS COUNTY AS A SERVICE PROVIDER

Area	Population
St. Louis County Total Population	993,508
Unincorporated Population	324,456
Service	Population Served
Police Protection	362,228 Residents
Code Enforcement	465,633 Residents
Police Service	15 Municipalities
School Resource Officers	10 School Districts
Dispatching	15 Municipalities
Police Report Writing	8 Municipalities
Building Code	32 Municipalities
Mechanical Code	60 Municipalities
Electrical Code	71 Municipalities
Plumbing Code	67 Municipalities
Explosives Ordinance	50 Fire Districts
Property Maintenance	14 Municipalities
Fire Sprinkler Systems	31 Fire Districts
Elevator	86 Municipalities
Amusement Devices	69 Municipalities
Periodic Mechanical Inspections	58 Municipalities

# Indicators of the Need for Unincorporated Services

Four principal means of information gathering were utilized in determining critical issues which St. Louis County faces in the next several years: focus groups and a telephone survey of St. Louis County residents, a one-day retreat of St. Louis County government officials, trend analysis conducted by the St. Louis County Department of Planning, and nine community forums throughout the County to solicit comment and perspectives from St. Louis County residents. Together, these methods identified four critical issues facing St. Louis County:

- ! The County’s Role in the Region
- ! Reinvestment in Older Communities
- ! Transportation
- ! Services to Unincorporated Areas

The following discussion summarizes key points regarding the need for focused attention on the County’s delivery of services to unincorporated areas.

## Telephone Survey and Focus Groups

In December 1998, Attitude Research Company (ARC) conducted a series of focus groups on behalf of St. Louis County Department of Planning. Focus groups were comprised of residents of unincorporated and incorporated areas of St. Louis County. In February 1999, ARC administered a telephone survey of 617 St. Louis County residents. Respondents were asked a series of questions about the future direction of St. Louis County and the quality of life within St. Louis County. Key comments and findings from the ARC research reveal how County residents currently view unincorporated services and how it could strengthen its position in this regard.

Overall, the survey data indicates that St. Louis County generally does a good job at delivering services. Most survey respondents are enjoying a good quality of life in St. Louis County and are satisfied with their community, neighborhood, and the services being received. The following table lists the specific results of the service delivery related questions by percentage. The percentages equal the amount of citizens who believe their public service delivery is excellent or good.

<b>UNINCORPORATED SERVICE SATISFACTION</b>	
<b>SERVICE</b>	<b>% WHO FEEL SERVICE IS EXCELLENT OR GOOD</b>
Police Protection	92.1%
County Park and Recreation Programs	82.9%
Storm Water Control	68.0%
Maintenance of Roads	64.7%
Maintenance of Subdivision Streets	62.7%
Trash Collection	62.4%
Snow Removal	59.1%
Code Enforcement	58.5%
County-wide Planning	56.4%
County Health Services	54.5%
Economic Development	46.9%
Curbside Recycling	38.6%

## Government Officials Retreat

Elected officials of St. Louis County government, department directors, and key staff met for a day of discussion and brainstorming in February, 1999 to identify key strategic planning issues from their perspectives. Officials performed a series of exercises in which group members listed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) facing St. Louis County over the next several years. After all of the issues were presented, group members voted on their top preferences. With regard to service delivery, a number of themes emerged:

- ! **Low tax burden**
- ! **Fragmentation**
- ! **Communication**
- ! **County and Municipal Relations**

The wealth of St. Louis County affords it with a low tax burden. Out of the four small discussion groups, all listed this issue as a major strength that the County can build on over the next few years.

Fragmentation causes inefficient service delivery. Participants felt that the issue of fragmentation umbrellas most issues and weakens the County overall. It is especially difficult to deal with in the context of service delivery to unincorporated areas and to municipalities.

Enhancing public relations was an issue identified by all four small groups. This issue was typically viewed as an opportunity for St. Louis County to sustain itself by being in greater touch with the citizens.

The complex relationship between St. Louis County and the 91 municipalities has been a critical issue for many years. The County officials who engaged in this retreat still place this issue at the top of the list as a potential threat that could have devastating repercussions of the efficiency and effectiveness of government in St. Louis County.

## Trend Analysis

A 1999-2001 moratorium on incorporation within the County has stabilized this part of the environment temporarily. Many unincorporated County citizens believe that incorporating to achieve better distribution of services would result in higher taxes and an extra layer of government, though this is not a unanimous feeling. It appears that the status of unincorporated areas is not likely to change during the 2000 strategic plan period. This may change under the new boundary commission after 2001.

## Community Forums

Nine community forums were held throughout St. Louis County in April 1999, to solicit discussion and ideas from County residents. Like the government officials retreat, each forum included a brainstorming session on the strengths, weaknesses opportunities, and threats (SWOT) facing St. Louis County. The SWOT exercise led to the identification of critical issues, as participants voted for their top concerns.

The critical issues identified by residents at the community forums reinforced the telephone survey results and the County government officials SWOT analysis conducted at the retreat. Citizens recognized that service delivery is an important issue that deals with many different levels of County Government. The critical issues emulating from the community forums dealing with service delivery include:

- ! **Parks, recreation, and open spaces.** An issue usually associated with land use and urban sprawl, the residents of St. Louis County held high regard for the parks they frequent.
- ! **Government Services.** Citizens listed snow removal, code enforcement, trash collection, and storm water drainage control as some of the chief services that need improvement in their neighborhoods.
- ! **Quality of housing.** Residents pointed out that there is a lack of code enforcement, causing properties to deteriorate and property values to decline in both unincorporated areas and some municipalities.

- ! **Communication.** Residents felt there was insufficient communication from County government. The residents that attended the community forums thought there should be more opportunities to actively participate in St. Louis County Government sponsored open meetings. Many residents also felt that other communicative devices, such as a newsletter, would be helpful.
- ! **Police Protection.** The service most residents endorsed as being the best provided by St. Louis County was police protection. A continued commitment to crime and drug prevention by the St. Louis County police department is of utmost importance to County residents.
- ! **Strong tax base.** Many residents believe the County is wealthy now with a slight chance of a recession lingering in the future; nonetheless, the County should use its strong tax base to finance enhancement to its service delivery capabilities.

# The County's Involvement in Delivery of Unincorporated Services

St. Louis County is in an unusual service delivery position for two reasons. First, it provides services like both a County and a city. Second, it contains within it an unusually large number of municipalities. Before we consider how St. Louis County can further enhance its service delivery to unincorporated areas, it is necessary to examine how the County has provided unincorporated services up to the present time.

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## St. Louis County's Dual Role

St. Louis County is in an unusual position as a service provider. A dichotomy exists in the delivery of services to the citizens of St. Louis County, as the County plays different roles for different segments of the population. On one hand, every County in the State of Missouri is required to provide a minimum level of service to the citizens residing within that County. Examples of these services include recording deeds, assessing property values, and collecting revenues.

In addition to the state mandates, citizens have put additional requirements on the County through the County's home-rule charter. St. Louis County is an urban first-class County that operates under its own home-rule charter. In taking on the additional responsibilities of a first-class home-rule charter County, St. Louis County has also taken on functions that cause the County to exceed state minimum service requirements and provide more enhanced functions, as a municipality would. Some of these services, like recreation programs, are provided to all citizens of the County, while others, like non-arterial street maintenance, are provided primarily to citizens of the County's unincorporated areas.

In serving residents of the unincorporated areas, the County utilizes the tools that a municipality would. The County taxes the utilities of its unincorporated

**In serving residents of the unincorporated areas, St. Louis County utilizes the tools that a municipality would.**

citizens and participates in the Countywide municipal sales tax pool. These revenues are vital to the County.

## The Role of Municipalities

The plethora of municipalities located within St. Louis County numbers in the 90s; dozens of other political jurisdictions overlap these boundaries in the form of service districts that support single functions like schools, junior colleges, sewers, libraries, and fire protection. It is a large and complex system with a variety of players. Some cities like Florissant and Wildwood take in large populations or large land areas, while others, like Country Life Acres and Champ, take in very small territory and only a handful of people. Municipalities provide both benefits and costs to St. Louis County.

Some municipalities in St. Louis County are economically and politically stable communities that greatly enhance the lives of citizens. These municipalities provide citizens with services that would otherwise be the County's responsibility. Some municipalities contract with the County for service provision. Others create their own service delivery mechanisms. When municipalities maintain stable communities and good property values, it is of benefit to the entire County. However, the high standard of service delivery maintained by certain municipalities raises the expectations of citizens regarding the County's own service delivery.

However, some municipalities struggle with problems far too complex for the often-skeletal government that exists. Communities such as

## Current State of Service Delivery

Wellston grapple with high unemployment, major disinvestment, and dysfunctional political systems. These communities, while not without potential, rely heavily on the County for assistance with planning, economic development, and other service provision. Other struggling communities that should be relying on the County for services do not, thereby maintaining an undesirable environment by not fully utilizing the resources available.

Furthermore, municipalities have incorporated or annexed large residential areas in the County and captured some very significant revenue-producing centers. When this occurs, as it did in the 1980s with the incorporation of Chesterfield and Maryland Heights, the County loses the utility tax revenues from those residents, has a smaller claim on the Countywide sales tax pool, and with the incorporation of revenue producers like Chesterfield Mall and Westport Plaza, shrinks as a point-of-sale center. While incorporation theoretically leads to a smaller service area for the County, the revenue reduction logically exceeds the service consumption in that geography. This leaves the County with fewer revenue sources to serve other areas (incorporated and unincorporated) that face significant problems. Attempts have been made to stabilize this valuable funding stream.

Municipalities bring value to the County, and play an important role in the lives of citizens. However, the large number of municipalities also impedes efficient and effective delivery of various County services. Some cities rely on the County for services, while others that could benefit from partnering with the County choose not to do so.

The current state of service delivery in St. Louis County is favorable, with room for improvement. Service delivery happens at two levels: systems levels (preparing to deliver the service) and at street level (actually delivering the service to citizens). An argument can be made that the County does both well, but at the same time has need for improvement in both areas. However, the service delivery environment in which the County operates is elaborate and unpredictable. Simple service provision such as street maintenance can become quite complex and involve multiple overlapping jurisdictions.

**Municipalities have incorporated or annexed large residential areas in the County and captured some very significant revenue-producing centers.**

# Best Practices From Around the Country: Government Service Delivery Initiatives

To make improvements in the service delivery to unincorporated areas, St. Louis County can utilize the benchmarking process. Comprised of three levels of action, the benchmarking process can help the County analyze its current performance in service delivery, help it discover regional or national best practices, and can cause the County to execute the initiatives developed in its five- year strategic plan. Although there were only limited requests for increased service delivery and management, the County must pro-actively deal with the service delivery issue so that current damaging trends can be alleviated before they become too difficult to change efficiently and effectively.

## The Benchmarking Process

Changes in County service delivery should be done methodically through a standardized process. The benchmarking process is an effective and sustainable method of doing this. The County should make a commitment to benchmarking, and invest the time and effort into doing it well, since benchmarking has proven quite successful in public, private, and nonprofit sectors alike. The benchmarking process consists of three general steps. First, the existing state of service delivery by St. Louis County must be measured. Second, a best practice for each service delivery area needs to be identified at a definable level. Third, and most importantly, a commitment must be made to model the best practice locally.

### ! Establishing Performance Benchmarks

St. Louis County already has the kernel of a benchmarking practice in its budgeting process through performance indicators. However, some areas (County Clerk, County Auditor, Miscellaneous Offices) have minimally-defined performance indicators or lists them as not applicable. Every department and division will need to review the budgetary performance indicators used in the budgeting process to ensure that these indicators completely reflect the department's or division's responsibility, not simply measuring for measurement's sake. Indicators should measure outcomes, not merely output. Once deemed reliable, these performance indicators can be used as the County's service delivery benchmark and a measure

of improvement over time.

### ! Identifying Best Practices

Best practices are subjective to the extent that the County may choose as broad or as narrow of a best practice as it desires, based on the performance indicator(s) it wishes to enhance. The County could select an entire system to model, such as emulating the award-winning government of the City of Phoenix, or select a departmental system to model, such as emulating the policing techniques of New York City, or select a very specific tool or technique to model, such as emulating the customer service hotline of the City of St. Louis. The level of best practice needs to be chosen up front, as well as the level of effort that will go into identifying that best practice (distance researching, on-site researching, targeted sample size, etc.).

### ! Modeling Best Practices

It is critically important that leaders of County government commit to actually implementing identified changes, tracking progress over time, and adjusting behavior accordingly. Studies and measures serve an important purpose, but must be used to achieve a desired outcome. Several County officials at the strategic planning retreat identified professional government as a strength of the County. Given this appreciation for professional standards, a proposal to adopt a benchmarking process philosophy is appropriate.

### ! Benchmarking Summary

Maintaining the status quo would not completely meet

the expectations of the County residents or the County officials. Steps need to be taken, but whether those steps include existing service enhancement or expansion into new service areas has yet to be determined.

It is very important that County government select its choices based on the big picture. County government should be viewed as a system in which each component affects the others, and all work under the unified guidance of a core mission managed by an effective CEO.

It is not enough to measure performance indicators. Performance must be measured for the purpose of continuous improvement over time. Best practices must be sought and modeled. Indicators should be appropriate to show when successful change has been accomplished. Every department should be conscious of its role and obligation.

The benchmarking process is a philosophy. It requires adoption by top leaders of the organization and a universal application across the organization. St. Louis County has not yet adopted this philosophy, and should strongly consider doing so.

## Best Practices

### ! County-to-Citizen Communication

#### , Newsletter

In Ocean City, Maryland, the community recently received national recognition for its community newsletter, which was honored because of its ability to effectively carry out specific communication goals.

#### , Website

The joint City of Indianapolis-Marion County website, [www.ci.indianapolis.in.us/services.html](http://www.ci.indianapolis.in.us/services.html), provides a comprehensive index of services, as well as on-line access to dozens of County and municipal services. This should serve as an example of linking both County and central city services.

### , Marketing / Public Relations Plan

The St. Louis County Department of Parks and Recreation is working on a marketing and public relations plan that could serve as a prototype for the rest of County government. A Countywide publicity function could be formed within the County Executive's office, or could be contracted to a private firm.

### ! Intra-Governmental Communication

A committee of County employees is currently studying this problem; the committee may want to look at the Board of Public Service (BPS) model used by the City of St. Louis; the BPS as it functions formally is not appropriate for St. Louis County, but the informal communication link does provide an example of how disparate departments (such as Health, Community Development, and the Airport) come together to discuss the impact of public works projects from different points of view.

### ! Inter-Governmental Communication

A committee of County employees is currently studying the problem of inter-governmental communication. Although many innovative urban areas have addressed this type of problem with solutions, most are not feasible for St. Louis County to implement in the next five years.

Currently, in St. Louis County, there are two existing local forums for government representatives, the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council (EWGCC) and the St. Louis County Municipal League. EWGCC has a multi-County, bi-state membership, but could offer a forum that is already staffed and funded. The St. Louis County Municipal League also is a potential forum theoretically, in that it has a strong membership base of the communities in the County, and since the City of St. Louis joined the Municipal League, there is more chance for coordination with the central city. The shortfall of these forums is that service districts are missing from their membership, and successful coordination cannot occur without representation from school, sewer, and fire protection districts at a minimum.

### **! Citizen-To-County Communication-The Citizens Service Bureau**

The Citizens Service Bureau of City of St. Louis (CSB) has been established as the “front door” for citizens needing assistance with local government; a single phone number has been established for the office, and this number is published on business cards that are distributed to every employee working in the field; when citizens raise issues directly to employees on a job site, or when those employees make a mistake (or excel in service!) involving citizens, the card can be handed out on-the-spot as a course of action; the feature of this system that makes it work well is that those who answer the main phone number are authorized to write a work order for any department in order to start an investigation of the problem and its solution; this program has been so successful that some departments now include a set number of CSB work orders in their annual budgets and give the CSB even more authority to dispatch workers to problem sites.

### **! Citizen-To-County Communication-Seamless Service Delivery**

Seamless Service Delivery by the City of Phoenix, Arizona brings about a well-coordinated delivery of service to citizens. Seamless service is a philosophy that builds in customer feedback and includes the core values of being dedicated to serving customers, learning, changing, and improving, working as a team, and focusing on results. Seamless service requires that employees work together, listen to residents, and provide the services citizens need.

### **! Budgeting**

The County needs to pursue budgeting efficiencies through make/buy decision-making. When faced with a service need, the County needs the appropriate data on hand to determine if it should “make” the service or “buy” the service.

Where the County chooses to make the service, it should identify its cost per unit at a level of quality, and should also identify excess capacity in that process. The County should begin to contract that capacity out to municipalities. This is the approach of the City of Brea, California, that was honored by the ICMA as a national best practice.

Where the County chooses to buy the service, it should have already defined its own cost per unit at a given level of quality. Here, larger municipalities could be a resource for the County. The County has an existing practice that basically does this in the form of purchased emergency medical services for Elmwood Park, an unincorporated area of St. Louis County that is not served by a fire district. The County reimburses responding service providers on a per-incident basis.

# Defining St. Louis County's Role in Unincorporated Service Delivery

Three possible courses of action can be taken for each of the issues associated with unincorporated service delivery. One course of action is to maintain the status quo of services. Although most County residents are satisfied with their services, it is difficult to justify the status quo, because it is difficult to conclude that improvements cannot be made. The County might be perceived as being unresponsive since some problems with the service delivery package were raised. Another option is increasing existing services. Some services seem underutilized due to a lack of awareness of their existence. However, cost could be an issue, and enhancing existing services might involve revising managing structures rather than building them. The third option is expanding into new areas of service. However, additional services such as surveys or newsletters could increase costs. Solutions to the unincorporated service issues will be explored in more detail in this section.

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There are potential improvements that can be made system-wide that will improve the capacity of the County to function better. This issue paper is restricted to discussion of systemic level improvements that will affect all County services, but individual departments are encouraged to utilize the benchmarking process in specific technical service delivery areas.

## County-to-Citizen Communication

### **! Citizens are unaware of the services available to them.**

Because of the number of governments providing services in St. Louis County, citizens are often confused as to what entity provides what service. Because of the confusion, citizens cannot make informed decisions about service provision. Improved communication from County to citizen is one way to clarify the services provided by St. Louis County. Currently, communication from County government to its citizens is project-driven and often in a compacted form, such as an insert with property tax statements. St. Louis County should consider establishing and producing a County newsletter with a minimum content quantity and targeted distribution and consider adding this to the County's website.

### **! Citizens are often unaware they are receiving a service provided by St.**

## **Louis County.**

Although the County marks its service areas with signage, markings are not coordinated or easily overlooked. Establishing some kind of "County government working for you" publicity effort using a multi-media approach would be beneficial. The County should also take advantage of newsletter opportunities, media relationships, municipal communications, and strong signage to build awareness of its service areas among citizens.

### **! There is no established point or procedure for citizen complaints.**

Functionally, citizens "go it alone" and the County is largely reactive in its approach to complaints. A phenomenon common to all levels of government is legislative involvement in citizen complaints. Even though all County residents are served by a council representative and many have additional representation on municipal councils that can act on the citizen's behalf, some legislators, especially those serving large pockets of unincorporated citizens, do not have appropriate levels of staffing to be operating at a high level of customer service. Additionally, only seven St. Louis County Council members, with a very uneven distribution of unincorporated residents, can have problems serving a population of about one million citizens and addressing citizen complaints.

Currently, a citizen advocate exists within the County Executive's office to handle public complaints. When the advocate receives a complaint, it is then

forwarded to the proper department, and that department must respond within a given time frame.

St. Louis County should be proactive in its citizen-to-County communication by actively soliciting feedback and establishing a clear “front door” for citizen input within a defined time frame, and with defined performance indicators. The County may also want to consider increasing staff for County Council representatives serving large unincorporated areas, since citizen needs would be higher than incorporated areas.

## Intra-governmental Communication

### ! Poor coordination between County departments.

Government operations can be so large that multiple County efforts may be occurring in a single area without knowledge of each other. This misses potential efficiencies between departments and can create a confusing environment for citizens. Coordination occurs to the extent that it is necessary to carry out specific duties; there is no established mechanism that requires or facilitates ongoing coordination. Establishing some mechanism, body, or practice that is dedicated to coordinating service delivery, perhaps defined by common service delivery geography should be evaluated. This entity should have targeted times for exchange of information and provide two-way communication with defined uses of input and feedback.

## Inter-governmental Communication

### ! Poor coordination between County and other service providers

Again, coordination between departments and agencies occurs to the extent that it is necessary to carry out specific duties; there is no endorsed mechanism that requires or facilitates ongoing coordination. The County would benefit by establishing some mechanism, body, or practice that

is dedicated to coordinating service delivery, perhaps defined geographically. This entity should have targeted times for exchange of information and provide two-way communications with defined uses of input and feedback.

## Budgeting

### ! The County lacks a reliable measurement of service delivery cost per unit, and is unable to measure cost of service delivery to unincorporated County residents.

The County budgets by department, without distinguishing between service areas. Although attempts are made to determine unit cost of service delivery, there is question as to how accurate this is. It would be advantageous for St. Louis County to define service delivery costs, both generally and in unincorporated areas.

## Take Action

St. Louis County faces many issues that are not serious now, but if left unchecked, could cause some dysfunction in service delivery at a future point. In order to make significant improvements for our customers, changes must be made at the systems level using a proven methodology such as a benchmarking practice.

The County is encouraged to consider adopting a benchmarking philosophy, and to institute systemic change that will allow departments to have better interface with their customers. Further, the County should take advantage of opportunities to be visible to citizens and make known to them what services are available.

The positive fact is that the communication and budgeting problems that face St. Louis County are manageable and relatively affordable to correct. Improvements are needed in the delivery of services, and not necessarily to the service provided. St. Louis County would be wise to consider improvements to the service delivery system now, while times are good for

the County, rather than finding itself in a reactionary mode as the City of St. Louis did in the 1970s and 1980s. Improving service delivery now may be one of the tools that keeps St. Louis County from experiencing in the early 2000s what the City of St. Louis experienced in the 1950s.

In order to improve, the County needs to empower itself to do so. The 2000-2004 St. Louis County Strategic Plan offers a great opportunity to put in place systems that will allow the various departments of County government ways to implement immediate, long-term, and continuous improvements for the citizens of St. Louis County.

# References and Resources

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