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Scott County Association for Leadership & Efficiency Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

Contact:

2330 Sioux Trail NW

Prior Lake, MN 55372

www.shakopeedakota.org

In many parts of the United States, there is a long history of mistrust between Indian nations and neighboring municipalities. Officials lack an understanding of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights, leading to strained or even hostile relationships. In Scott County, tribal and nontribal government officials recognized that by working together they could stretch their scarce resources further, resulting in a win-win for all area communities. The Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency, known as SCALE, fosters intergovernmental cooperation and furthers the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community's ability to improve its citizens' quality of life.

A Lack of Trust

In the mid-1860s, Congress attempted to remove the Dakota people from their homelands in the Minnesota River Valley. Today's citizens of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) are descendants of those who resisted removal. SMSC received federal recognition in 1969 and began the process of rebuilding its government and economy. The tribal nation's lands are located 25 miles southwest of Minneapolis, within and near original reservation lands that were set aside in the 1890s in what is now the City of Prior Lake. SMSC operates numerous successful businesses, including two casinos, a hotel, a golf course, organic gardens, a natural food market, recreational facilities, and a water bottling plant. It is the largest employer in Scott County.

For years after its recognition, SMSC lacked legitimacy as a government in the eyes of its neighbors. Local officials did not understand sovereignty. Area residents were suspicious of SMSC's motives for acquiring land. Relations in the area were characterized by intergenerational racism, bitterness, and misunderstanding. In the early 1980s, SMSC had to file suit against the City of Prior Lake to affirm its citizens' rights to vote in municipal elections

and receive municipal services. Even as the Indian nation transformed from an impoverished community to an economic powerhouse, early overtures to share resources outside the community were met with distrust. SMSC needed to find a way to educate neighboring governments and build goodwill.

With a small population, the tribal government also realized that providing services exclusively for its own citizens was often inefficient and in some cases impossible. SMSC could not meet its goals without coordinating with its neighbors in Scott County on priorities such as road improvements and emergency response. Yet governments in Scott County were stretched thin trying to provide services to the approximately 135,000 people residing in the area. As Minnesota's fastest growing region, the county struggled to launch beneficial programs as it dealt with pressing needs. Area governments shared common objectives, but a tribal official notes that, "there was a general absence of communication between SMSC and Scott County on most topics."

Government without Borders

In 2003, the Scott County Administrator and the Mayor of Prior Lake proposed to address the general lack of coordination among local governments through a new organization, the Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency (SCALE). SMSC joined as an active member.

The idea of sharing information and coordinating efforts across jurisdictions proved popular, and SCALE grew to include a variety of local governmental organizations. Today, the association's members include SMSC, Scott County, seven cities, six school districts, eleven townships, and three regional entities. The full association meets for an hour and a half on the second Friday of every month. In addition, an executive committee and several sub-committees have regular meetings on specific topics such as transportation, service delivery, and communications. All members are considered equal partners, participation is voluntary and there is no membership fee to join in.

SCALE is a forum through which local governments and agencies can share information about their goals and challenges. Discussions help build relationships and generate opportunities for resource sharing. SMSC's tribal administrator explains that SCALE meetings are "more conversation-driven than agenda-driven," allowing governments to freely brainstorm innovative solutions to common problems. Often an issue is introduced during the general meeting before more specific, stakeholder-only negotiations occur. The association operates under the motto "Government without Borders: Working Together to Strengthen Each Other," with the reasoning that citizens typically do not care which entity provides a service as long as their needs are met.

The list of projects facilitated through SCALE is impressive and growing. In one of their earliest collaborations, SCALE members agreed to share the use of costly pieces of public works

equipment among jurisdictions. For example, SMSC and the City of Prior Lake jointly purchased road-paving machines, and SMSC lends its sewer cleaning truck to the City of Shakopee. Association members also identified a critical need for local emergency preparedness training options and came together to establish and fund a \$9 million SCALE Regional Public Safety Training Facility. SMSC public safety officers now spend over 800 hours training there every year. Mutual aid agreements facilitated through SCALE offer members back-up for emergencies that are too big for their own public safety departments to handle individually. New businesses have been attracted to the area through an economic development resource, “First Stop Shop,” which was initiated through SCALE. Additionally, a fiber optic network and regional road construction projects (including upgraded road connections to the reservation) increase market access and improve economic opportunities.

Of course, different governments benefit in different ways. For example, SMSC benefits from its access to a water-sharing system in case of shortages. In turn, the tribal government provides other SCALE communities with access to its Mobile Health Unit, which offers dental, diabetes, and cancer screening throughout the region. SMSC also is able to use its special relationship with the federal government to help secure regional project grants otherwise unavailable to the municipalities.

Although local residents are sometimes not aware of SCALE, the association allows governments to get more done by working together. Members provide services much more effectively than in the past, creating an almost seamless regional service area. Many improvements would not exist at all without SCALE members providing support to one another. SMSC’s tribal administrator has observed that all partners are aware that they benefit greatly from cooperation and notes, “there is a strong consensus that we do not want to return to the pre-SCALE ways of operation.” In 2013, a SCALE review estimated that in ten years the association saved its members at least \$2 million—making it a model for intergovernmental cooperation. In fact, the benefits from SCALE have been so notable that in a review of best practices the State of Minnesota Auditor urged governments in every county to set up similar inter-jurisdictional associations.

Advancing Tribal goals through New Relationships

SMCS leaders are rightly proud of the positive relationships they have built with neighboring governments through SCALE. Instead of spending costly staff time and dollars on duplicating efforts, the tribal government can direct resources towards meeting and its objectives. Although SCALE discussions are low-key and informal, they are invaluable in allowing SMSC to carry out its agenda. For example, the tribal nation successfully used its membership in the association to build awareness around the sensitive issue of taking land into trust, a re-designation central to SMSC’s economic development plans. Before SCALE, converting fee-simple parcels into trust land was a highly contentious process. Discussions within SCALE led to the establishment of an Intergovernmental Working Group that holds regular meetings on

upcoming land-into-trust applications and related land-use planning. As a result of this work, there has been less opposition to fee-to-trust planning. The conversations initiated through SCALE help ensure that neighboring governments understand and support the nation's goals.

SMSC's participation in SCALE also allows the nation to show leadership in a culturally appropriate way. A deeply held Dakota value is to share with others. As SMSC's economy improved, the tribal government was able to increase its role as a "good neighbor." Yet before relations improved through SCALE, local governments were suspicious of the nation's motives and skeptical that SMSC could make a positive impact. SCALE has helped change that notion. SCALE also provides SMSC with a forum to offer tribal perspectives and make cultural contributions that enrich the lives all area residents. For example, SMSC has worked with the Scott County Historical Society to ensure that museum displays reflect the area's rich Native history. As one tribal official has noted, "Today our neighbors have much more interest in and appreciation for SMSC's role in the larger community, which positions us to share more feely than we have in the past."

Bringing the Lessons Home

By participating as an active and equal member of the Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency, the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community has found a novel way to improve its relationships with its neighbors. In an environment where mistrust and misunderstanding of tribal sovereignty was commonplace, SCALE has enabled SMSC to create positive working relationships that benefit both tribal citizens and their neighbors. SMSC is now well known as a legitimate government partner with unique influence in the region.

Lessons:

- Active intergovernmental engagement not only improves communication and cooperation, but also can address decades of misunderstanding and mistrust.
- Intergovernmental cooperation is most likely to succeed when it is institutionalized and becomes a standard operating procedure rather than an afterthought.
- Strong partnerships make it possible for neighboring jurisdictions with shared goals to make the most of their resources.